



English

Stage 8

Paper 2 Fiction

2025



Cambridge Lower Secondary Progression Test

Insert

Text for Section A, an extract from *The Eye of the North* by Sinéad O'Hart

For as long as she could remember, Emmeline Widget was sure that her parents did not care about her safety...

Why else, she reasoned, would they choose to live in a creaky old house where, if she wasn't dodging random bits of collapsing masonry¹ or avoiding the trick steps on the stairs, she had to be constantly on guard for booby-trapped floorboards or doors that liked to boom closed entirely by themselves? She'd lost count of the number of close calls she'd already clocked up, and so she never went anywhere inside her house – not even to the bathroom – without a torch, a ball of twine, and a short, stout stick, the latter to defend herself against whatever might come slithering up the drain.

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She'd started her fight for survival early. As a baby, she'd learned to walk mostly by avoiding the tentacles, tusks, and whip-like tongues of the various small, furry things in cages that would temporarily line the hallways after one of her parents' research trips. And she'd long ago grown used to shaking out her boots before she put them on in the morning – for, as Emmeline had learned, lots of quiet, dangerous, and very patient creatures liked to hide out in abandoned footwear.

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Outside the house wasn't much better. The grounds were overgrown to the point that Widget Manor itself was invisible unless you managed to smack right into it, and that kind of lazy groundskeeping provided a haven for all sorts of things. Even worse, a river ran at the end of their property, sweeping past with all the haughtiness of a diamond-encrusted duchess. Emmeline lived in fear of falling in, and so she never ventured outside without an inflatable life jacket (which, on its days off, doubled as a hot water bottle) and a catapult (to fight off any unexpected nasties she might find living amid the trees – or even, perhaps, the trees themselves).

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As a result of all this, Emmeline spent more time in her room reading than did most young ladies of her age. And, as will probably have become clear by now, Emmeline didn't have very many – or, indeed, any – friends. There was the household staff, comprising Watt (the butler) and Mrs Mitchell (who did everything else), but they didn't really count because they were always telling her what to do and where to go and not to put her dirty feet on that clean floor, thank you very much. Her parents were forever at work, or away, or off at conferences, or entertaining (which Emmeline hated because sometimes she'd be called upon to wear actual ribbons and smile and pretend to be something her mother called 'light-hearted', which she could never see the point of). She spent a lot of time on her own, and this, if she were to be entirely truthful, suited her fine.

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One day, then, when Emmeline came down to breakfast and found her parents absent, she didn't even blink. She just hauled her satchel up on to the chair next to her and rummaged through it for her book, glad to have a few moments of quiet reading time before she had to start ignoring the grown-ups in her life once again.

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She was so engrossed in her book – *Knots and Their Uses*, by S. G. Twitchell – that at first she ignored Watt when he slipped into the room bearing in his neatly gloved hands a small silver platter, upon which sat a white envelope. He set it down in front of Emmeline without a word. She made sure to finish right to the end of the chapter (about the fascinating complexities of constrictor knots) before looking up and noticing that she had received a piece of Very Important Correspondence.

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She fished around for her bookmark and slid it into place. Then, ever so gently, she closed the book and eased it back into the satchel. She frowned at the envelope, which was very clearly addressed to a Miss Emmeline Widget. Private and Confidential, it added.

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In the side pocket of her satchel, Emmeline always carried a pair of thick gardening gloves. She put these on, and then she picked up – with some difficulty, it has to be pointed out – her butter knife. Suitably armed, she slowly slit the envelope open, keeping it at all times directed away from her face.

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A thick sheet of creamy paper slid out on to the silver platter. Emmeline, who'd been holding her breath in case the act of opening the envelope released some sort of brain-shredding gas, spluttered as the first line of the letter caught her eye. As quickly as she could, given that she was wearing gloves more suited to cutting down brambles² than dealing with paperwork, she grabbed up the letter. She stared at the words for ages, but they stayed exactly the same. Dearest Emmeline, the letter began.

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Glossary

¹masonry: the bricks and stone used to make a building

²brambles: wild bushes with thorns

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