



NANYANG JUNIOR COLLEGE
JC2 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION 2021

8807/2

GENERAL PAPER

PAPER 2:

Monday 30 August 2021

INSERT

1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This insert consists of 3 printed pages.

David Vincent considers how solitude is both a blessing and a curse.

- 1 The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, argued that thanks to the gift of language, man is destined to be a social and political animal. Yet the human instinct to socialise has always been balanced by an urge to withdraw into solitude. A few hermits make their lives in isolation, but many ordinary folks believe society is only tolerable if punctuated by frequent spells on their own. “There are many modern thinkers who emphasise the individual’s dependence upon society,” John Cowper Powys, a writer and advocate of solitude, observed. “It is, on the contrary, only the cultivation of interior solitude, among crowded lives, that makes society endurable.” 5

- 2 Industrial society brought a spate of solitary hobbies within reach by boosting living standards and enlarging personal space. Women, with a little time on their hands, took up pastimes that had once been necessities, such as cooking, dressmaking and embroidery. Men tried pigeon-breeding and stamp-collecting. People of both sexes took on jigsaw puzzles and, from the 1920s, crosswords. The cult of solitude also encouraged less healthy habits. Charles Kingsley, a British historian and novelist, regarded tobacco as the ideal accompaniment to the solitary life—‘a lone man’s companion, a bachelor’s friend, a hungry man’s food, a sad man’s cordial, a wakeful man’s sleep, and a chilly man’s fire’. 10
15

- 3 Healthy or otherwise, these hobbies united a nation that was divided by class. Britain’s allotment movement¹ meant that, by 1910, half a million working-class men could enjoy the pleasures of gardening. Such activities also married sociability with solitude. Smokers shared their solitary vice in dedicated rooms in clubs and pubs. Fishing encouraged people to collaborate on being alone. 20

- 4 Yet the more civilisation has advanced, the further people have had to go to achieve that sensation of solitude. And the more sophisticated civilisation has become, the more people have been willing to use its fruits to escape the enforced sociability that has mostly been humanity’s lot. In 1900, just 5% of households comprised one person. Today a quarter do in America, along with a third in Britain and perhaps half in Sweden. Sometimes the solo life is a choice: people use their money to dump an unsatisfactory partner. Sometimes it is a tragedy: in Britain, a million older people say they routinely suffer from loneliness. Most feel unable to admit their plight to friends and relatives. 25
30

- 5 This points to the paradox that solitude can be both a blessing and a curse. However, when solitude is not a matter of choice, loneliness and its pernicious effects set in: you can feel lonely in a crowd—indeed loneliness is at its darkest when you are surrounded by people having fun—but they overlap. Unwanted solitude can lead to the most miserable sort of loneliness. “I’d like to meet,” C.S. Lewis, Irish-born scholar and novelist, wrote to a friend after his wife died, “for I am—Oh God that I were not—very free now. One doesn’t realise in early life that the price of freedom is loneliness. To be happy is to be tied.” 35

- 6 This anxiety over involuntary solitude has become a big political issue, particularly in northern European and Anglo-Saxon countries, where the breakdown of the family has gone furthest. In 2016, the BBC released a television documentary on ‘the age of loneliness’. In 2017, Vivek Murthy, America’s surgeon general, declared an ‘epidemic of loneliness’. In 2018, Theresa May appointed Britain’s first ‘Minister for Loneliness’, declaring that ‘up to a fifth of United Kingdom adults feel lonely most or all of the time’. 40

¹ This refers to the provision or rental of small pieces of land so that people can grow their own fruit, vegetables, and flowers.

- 7 Given its power to break the spirit, involuntary solitude has inevitably been used as a punishment. Pentonville, Britain's first model prison built on utilitarian principles, confined all prisoners in solitary cells, though it dropped the face masks that they were supposed to wear to stop them from communicating with one another during meals. The most extreme use of solitary confinement was in a wing of a state prison in Auburn, New York, where inmates were confined in total solitude, with no exercise and no human contact of any kind. 45 50
- 8 The history of solitude is thus partly a history of extremes—of people who have willingly sat on top of pillars for decades (Saint Simeon Stylites² sat on top of a pillar in order to be closer to heaven and the patient hermit expired without descending from his column), and of prison reformers who aim to use loneliness to break men's souls. But it is also a history of the quest for balance. Modern technology has made it both easier and harder to get the balance right. On the one hand, it has introduced 'networked solitude'. Just as Saint Jerome³ squatted in his cave surrounded by his library, modern hermits sit in their flats gorging on downloaded books and films or chatting with friends across the world. On the other hand, it has made it more difficult to enjoy the benefits of solitude. Distraction is always one click away. And the same technology that allows the solitary individual to engage remotely with society also allows society to engage remotely—and sometimes secretly—with the individual. Giant companies watch over you, whether you are alone or in a crowd. 55 60
- 9 There is also something disturbing about the way the boundaries between solitude and sociability are blurring. Visit a gym and you see sweaty individuals performing private workouts in public. On a train, many of your fellow passengers will be insulated by headphones. Those ubiquitous devices are double-edged: they can fill your head with babble or, thanks to noise-cancelling, leave you in silence. As the two categories mingle, so the quest for balance becomes more intense. 65 70
- 10 In 2020, the pandemic lockdown has put the question of solitude at the heart of politics. Social distancing has been a tragedy for those living and, in some cases, dying alone. But for others, it has proved a strange blessing. Overworked people have been able to take a break from the treadmill of commuting. Many have picked up long-abandoned hobbies, such as tending the garden or playing bridge. Indeed, solitude is both one of mankind's greatest blessings and greatest curses. Now, thanks to a virus that has been carried across the world by human sociability, more people than ever are getting the chance to experience both. 75

² Saint Simeon Stylites was a Syrian Christian hermit and the first known pillar hermit. He achieved notability for living 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar near Aleppo.

³ Saint Jerome, a Latin theologian and historian, sought solitude for his studies and joined a colony of Christian hermits in the desert for a period of time.