



YISHUN INNOVA JUNIOR COLLEGE
JC2 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION
in preparation for General Certificate of Education Advanced Level
Higher 1

CANDIDATE
NAME

CLASS

INDEX
NUMBER

GENERAL PAPER

8807/02

Paper 2

19th August 2021

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1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passages for Paper 2.

This document consists of **3** printed pages and **1** blank page.

Passage 1. *Scott Stoner considers the importance of memories.*

- 1 In the *Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* by Umberto Eco, a 59-year-old rare book dealer named Yambo suffers a stroke and is unable to recall any of his personal experiences – what it feels like to brush his teeth or who he is married to. In a desperate attempt to recall his lost memories, he returns to his childhood home only to suffer a severe sense of displacement. Yambo compares that unsettling feeling to ‘revisiting a world you have never seen before: like coming home, after a long journey, to someone else’s house’. Indeed, our memories make us who we are. Without memories, we are nameless faces in a fleeting crowd, stripped of individuality, and unable to connect to others and our environment. 5
- 2 While memories are fallible in accurately capturing past events, this imperfection is precisely what gives us our individuality. Our memories are filtered and distilled from pure reality into a personal brew that is formulated by our own unique physiologies and emotional backgrounds. They are our personal (and highly subjective) interpretations of the past upon which we spin whole narratives and create whole universes – separate from but still tethered to the actual universe. This is what makes us unique. Yet, this is also why a loss in memory is acutely unsettling. Like Yambo, without our personal memories, we feel like we are returning to a house we never had a chance to decorate and a space we never resided in. 10 15
- 3 Memories are not just personal. They are frequently forged and crystallised through interactions with others. It is this collective social memory that is integral in shaping cultural and communal identity. It is little wonder that cultures across the world strive to enshrine memories in formal ways such as history books, commemorative plaques, monuments and statues. Some even resort to alternative means like ballads, chants, verses and dance to escape the limitations of such formal recordings to preserve the visceral aspects of their culture. This archival obsession extends to preserving the most commonplace of objects. At the Jewish Museum in Berlin, such objects provide the most vivid records of lived lives. For the National Museum of African American History in Washington, many of its artefacts are humble objects, arising from lives lived in poverty and the museum built this collection through public call-outs rather than through participating in expensive auctions. While highly inconspicuous, the objects chart an important (and often hidden) history of slavery and its aftermath. This is why communities have gone to such lengths to curate memory repositories – the fundamental belief is that memories of the past will go a long way to informing who we are today. 20 25 30
- 4 Memories are also crucial as they provide psychological respite and reassurance, especially in times of crisis. We can look to happier times to give us strength, and will ourselves to push through the obstacles and restore the better days. Beyond that, memories establish a connection between past and present that continually reminds individuals that they do not merely exist in the now but are part of something larger. Individuals are reminded that they are heirs to the institutions and narratives that their ancestors worked hard to establish; they are also protectors - shaping, sustaining, and developing the culture and environment that will be passed down to the future generations. For tragedy-struck communities, this connection forged by memories elevates their sense of purpose and motivates them to forge ahead bravely. When a major earthquake and tsunami struck the Tohoku region of Japan in 2011, efforts were made to rescue a single pine tree (the sole survivor of 70, 000 trees that once dotted the coast of Rikuzentakata City). While the forest will not recover within this generation, the pine tree is carefully preserved for posterity in memory of what things were like before. For the locals, the pine tree is no longer a simple tree but a historical symbol, connecting the devastated community with the flourishing land before the 2011 tragedy. It also keeps the memory of the coastal forest intact to inspire locals to rebuild the land to its former glory. 35 40 45
- 5 Whether as a personal compass to make sense of our surroundings and give direction to our lives, or as an anchor for entire communities and nations, memories hold societies together. It is our enhanced capacity for memory that separates us from all other living creatures; it allows us to make sense of our world and make connections the same way we cannot count beyond a number if we cannot remember what came before. 50

Passage 2. *David Rieff considers the importance of forgetting.*

- 1 During the Bosnian war in 1993, an American reporter famously labelled that war was ‘in large measure a slaughter fuelled by the inability to forget’. He was also known to carry around copies of two poems written by Wisława Szymborska – ‘The End and the Beginning’ and ‘Reality Demands’. The two poems, increasingly creased and faded, were a reminder for him of the ethical imperative of forgetting so that life can go on – as it must. Forgetting, perhaps is counterintuitive for most societies today who venerate the necessity of remembering. We have been taught that the remembering of the past and the memorialising of collective historical memory is one of humanity’s highest moral obligations. But what if this is wrong (at least part of the time)? What if collective historical memory, as it is employed by communities and nations, has far too often led to war rather than peace, to resentment rather than reconciliation, and to the determination to exact revenge rather than offer forgiveness for injuries both real and imagined?

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- 2 Of course, the prescription is not moral amnesia. To be wholly without memory would be to be without a world. It is also not fair to stop groups from memorialising their dead and acknowledging their fallen war heroes. Forgetting can do injustice to the past but too much remembering does an injustice to the present. While it is impossible to state with confidence which is worse, forgetting or remembering, the latter seems to have become a far greater risk than the former especially when people throughout the world are obsessed by a new cult of memory. Furthermore, given humanity’s tendency towards aggression, forgetting may be the only safe response. Forgetting should be a cause for relief rather than disapproval.

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- 3 To remember all the aggression and other moral catastrophes is to remember how little remembering does to change who we are and what we are capable of. The inability to forget can be actively dangerous. We only have to look to countries like Ireland, the United States, Australia and countless others, turning up example after example of historical memory being manipulated into ideology and insidiously crafted into slogans and battle cries. Historical memory often times can be the birth of further conflict and hatred. Even if the foray into the past to retrieve and commemorate a nation’s past is driven by leaders with no malicious intentions, and done simply to ‘foster national unity and patriotism’, things are never that innocent. Every nation’s historical memory is inevitably filled with conflicts and consequently, sufferings. Accordingly, these episodes are painful and emotional. Meddling with the past can unknowingly stir unpleasant memories and feelings, and when this occurs, responses become angry and ungoverned by logic. Needless things may be said that cannot be retracted.

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- 4 Furthermore, what many national leaders do not realise is that creating national cohesion by recalling common struggles and conflicts can create an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative. The perpetrator, aggressor, wrong-doer, whether they be an individual, community within the nation, or another nation, will be cast in a bad light (ironically) to foster solidarity. This is not to suggest that there is an easy solution. However, at least, let there be no turning of a blind eye to the high price societies have paid and are continuing to pay for the solace of remembrance. Is it not conceivable that were our societies to expend even a fraction of the energy on forgetting that they now do on remembering, then peace in some of the worst places in the world might be a step closer?

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- 5 As for the poet Wisława Szymborska, she was born in 1923 and lived through Poland’s agonies under Germans and Russians alike. For her generation, the soil of the nation’s countryside and the paving stones of its cities were drenched in blood, suffused with tragic, unbearable, and destructive memories. Yet, even for her, everything must end, including mourning. In ‘Reality Demands’, she writes that ‘Reality demands we also state the following: life goes on’. Life goes on. This is a lesson we must learn, otherwise, the blood never dries, and, long after the quarrel has stopped making any sense, the memory of the grudge endures.

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