

**ST ANDREW'S JUNIOR COLLEGE**  
**JC2 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATIONS**



**GENERAL PAPER**

**8807/02**

Paper 2

**Friday, 25 August 2023**

**INSERT**

**1 hour 30 minutes**

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**READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST**

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

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*Allaya Cooks examines the nature of humour.*

- 1 The 94th Academy Awards Ceremony set the internet ablaze. Comedian and host Chris Rock made a joke about Jada Pinkett-Smith's hair loss (caused by a medical condition). Then the world watched as her husband, Oscar winner Will Smith, strode onto the stage and slapped him with the full force of fury and retribution. Of course, the public nature of the incident made it pretty compelling. What happened was unprecedented. But it struck a chord for something deeper than sensationalism. 5
- 2 Most of us know the deep discomfort that comes with being witness to a tasteless joke, or experienced the trepidation and vulnerability that comes with being the target of such humour. At its worst — caustic, corrosive — it can feel like its own form of violence. Repulsive humour affects all of us: it entraps us, giving us no good way to respond. You react, you don't react; you speak up, you don't speak up. Is there a 'right' way to recover from seeing one person hurt another? 10
- 3 The time-honoured defence to a poorly-received comment is, 'It was just a joke.' This flippant statement implies that jokes cannot be truly offensive. Yet, as comedian Trevor Noah explains, 'Just because something is a joke does not mean it cannot be something else as well.' Labelling something a 'joke' does not grant immunity, much less bestow the 'joker' with freedom from all responsibility. Words matter and have consequences. 15
- 4 Often, society puts the burden of diffusion on the target of the joke. When made the butt of an inappropriate joke, individuals feel compelled to smooth it over and keep the peace, lest someone thinks that they are thin-skinned. After all, no one wants to be branded an overly sensitive snowflake. In fact, the very cliques that are accustomed to such casual victimisation of others are often violently offended by a defensive response from the person they ridiculed. Moreover, revealing the pain of the insult can open the door to other triggers and hurt — some of which we may not fully understand. Rather than signal that we have been hit where it hurts, reveal our Achilles' heel, and risk further harm to ourselves or our loved ones, we take the joke: we act like the toxic jibe did not bother us at all. We may even laugh along, hiding the pain. It is the safest path. 20 25
- 5 For some groups, learning to react — or better yet, how to not react to a hurtful joke — is a survival skill. Often, the minority or the underrepresented in their professions deal with an onslaught of humour and microaggressions directed at their otherness. Conversely, an individual embraced by the group as the exception is expected to laugh along at jokes focused on others of the same race or background. Either way, it can make you feel exposed and vulnerable in a way that makes just showing up to the office a heroic act of bravery and self-control. 30
- 6 So should jokes be off-limits? Not at all. We need humour and laughter. Humour in professional settings helps to build camaraderie, develop trust, and defuse tensions. Even in leadership, where jocularity is shunned, humour can project congeniality and authenticity. Surprisingly, self-deprecating humour can actually work to one's advantage: research indicates that being able to laugh at oneself can help boost psychological well-being and ease the grip of negative emotions. 35
- 7 A group with mutual trust will often have inside jokes and tease each other, building a sense of cohesion and belonging. Yet, it can get tricky when we talk about teasing others. Teasing signals affection and knowing another person well, but it has to be paired with a vigilance in reading the room and paying attention to the impact on others, regardless of intent. The burden is on the joker not to cross that invisible line into emotional injury and malice. Making fun of others 40

(especially someone's appearance, gender, race, identity, or any other characteristic) does major damage to inclusiveness and psychological safety. Even at its best, the slow drip of acidic humour contributes to a hostile work environment, sapping morale. At its worst, toxic jokes in poor taste can inflict significant psychological harm and erode the foundation of safety and trust that friendships and teams are built on. 45

- 8 The lines can get blurred, however, when the social circle is defined by people who mostly think, speak, and act in the same way. When the dominant culture at work is disconnected from the broader social norms, we can lose sight of the impact of a joke. They become far removed from what is acceptable behaviour. In addition, when the stakes are high and there is pressure to be included with the dominant group, people are driven by self-preservation to make jokes at the expense of others. Poisonous humour is used as an instrument to play for reputational gains, access to networks, leadership opportunities, influence and power. When humour is used as a tool to divide — it is no laughing matter. The truth is that, in the long run, no one is a winner; the irreparable damage caused can hurt everyone involved. 50 55
- 9 Yet this vicious cycle prevails. When our own sense of belonging feels threatened, we may risk making an offensive joke if we know that it will resonate with the group. On a psychological level, we do this because it is the cheapest and easiest way to reinforce our place in society at the expense of another person — a basic instinct exercised daily, even in schools. We saw this when the idea of sexist and racist 'locker-room talk' was hotly debated across the United States, along with the pervasive idea that crude jokes and violent comments should be excused because of the setting in which they occurred. Myriad reasons were proffered: boys will be boys; it was all in jest and not in earnest; it is just a phase, a normal part of growing up... it was even Presidential, they said. But even if the intent of these off-hand, casual comments might not be malicious, their effect on the psychological safety of everyone in the room — and everyone else who may aspire to be — certainly is. When we give a workplace, bar or locker room a pass simply because they have always joked this way, it creates a culture where an ever-expanding group of people are excluded and ostracised, rippling beyond 'that one person' who could not take the joke. 60 65
- 10 Inappropriate 'comedy' has a subtle but insidious impact on trust, and the socially mediated web of expectations that underpin group dynamics. Jokes, by their nature, need context. We can only poke fun at what we can see. But making fun of someone's health, race, sexuality, or any other characteristic harms them and everyone else who might even tangentially identify. In other words, when we ridicule someone with a visible disability, the taunts extend to everyone else with a hidden or invisible condition. 70 75
- 11 The sting of hurtful jokes is something that we cannot avoid. Our first instinct may be to retreat into denial, form rival factions to trade barbs, or strike back with our fists. Instead, a more productive, enlightened response would be to work together to increase understanding, call out cruelty for what it is, and seek reconciliation. And when we inevitably make a mistake and hurt others, we should apologise with sincerity. What then of humour's place in society? Well, reports of its demise would be grossly exaggerated. Surely there is no need to be evil to be funny. For a healthy, victimless dose of laughter, how about a cat video 80

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