Question 3

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

"It is curious—curious that physical courage should be so common in the world, and moral courage so rare."

—Mark Twain, *Mark Twain in Eruption*

Oftentimes in literature a character is called upon to show courage in a moral rather than physical way. This may involve resisting an oppressive ideology, advocating for an individual or social cause, or refusing to succumb to the pressure to do something immoral despite the negative consequences of doing so.

Choosing from your own reading or from the list of titles provided below, select a novel or play in which a character displays moral courage. Then, in a well-crafted essay, explain the nature of that courage, what it resists or defends, and to what degree it proves effective or futile as to the character's fortunes. Connect the character's display of moral courage to the meaning of the work as a whole and avoid merely summarizing the plot.

Please make certain that your response to the prompt contains a thesis that is supported by evidence from the work you have chosen and that the connection between your thesis and evidence is clear.

The Scarlet Letter
King Lear
Brave New World
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
A Tale of Two Cities
To Kill a Mockingbird
Inherit the Wind
Farenheit 451
Cry, the Beloved Country
A Doll House
Heart of Darkness
Antigone
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
1984
Billy Budd
The Things They Carried
The Grapes of Wrath
The Jungle
The Awakening
The Power and the Glory
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Murder in the Cathedral
Catch-22
The House of Mirth
1984
The Crucible
The Stranger
Montana, 1948

Précis and Explication of Free-Response Question 3: A Character Who Displays Moral Courage

Free-Response Question 3 involved a character who is "called upon to show courage in a moral rather than physical way" by "resisting an oppressive ideology, advocating for an individual or social cause, or refusing to succumb to the pressure to do something immoral despite the negative consequences of doing so." Students were asked to select a novel or play in which a character displays such moral courage, then, in a well-crafted essay, "to explain the nature of that courage, what it resists or defends, and to what degree the character's moral courage proves effective or futile as to the character's fortunes."

Clearly, there are many novels or plays in which a character, major or minor, displays such moral courage. One might choose to look at Jim Casy's fight against the corporate interests who deny laborers a living wage in *The Grapes of Wrath*, all in the pursuit of profit. Or one could look at Antigone's defiance of Creon's edict against burying the body of her brother, Polyneices, in Sophocles' tragedy. One might consider Randle P. McMurphy's stalwart fight against the oppressive Nurse Ratched in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, or Cordelia's brave stance against Lear's foolish vanity despite forfeiting her share of the kingdom. For sake of variety, however, this explication will utilize the character and actions of Guy Montag in Ray Bradbury's *Farenheit 451*.

Montag, the novel's protagonist, is a 'firemen:' not the traditional public servant who extinguishes fires but an agent of the government who incinerates books as a means of keeping the population in ignorance. Montag, whom the reader later discovers has been secretly hoarding books though he is as yet unaware of their significance, encounters a young neighbor named Clarisse, whose nonconformity and passion stand in stark contrast to Mildred, his wife, who immerses herself in an artificial world of big-screen soap-operas, sedatives, and 'ear buds,' an equivalent of our personal audio. Clarisse's curiosity and spirit intrigue Montag, and he is puzzled when she suddenly disappears from the neighborhood, run over by a car as he later discovers.

The futuristic world of Bradbury's novel has many of the same features as Orwell's *1984*. These include an oppressive and intrusive government and a vague but constant omnipresence of war, with bombers periodically roaring overhead. Though Montag is bothered by Clarisse's disappearance and by his wife's diurnal escapism, his major epiphany does not occur until his fire company is called to the house of a woman who is suspected of owning books. As his colleagues spray the hidden hoard that they find with kerosene as a prelude to setting it ablaze, Montag encourages the woman to exit the premises, only to hear her cite a mysterious line—*"Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as, I trust, shall never be put out!"* She then strikes a match and torches herself and her collection. Montag, who prior to this woman's martyrdom has stolen yet another book from the residence, is both puzzled and intrigued by her defiant action, suspecting there must be something extremely valuable in books to make someone sacrifice her life for them. His subsequent disquietude leads him to call in sick, resulting in his superior, Captain Beatty, paying him a visit. Beatty at first appears solicitous, willingly sharing with Montag the history behind the current ban on literature. He even goes so far as to explain the meaning of the woman's dying utterance, telling Montag it was uttered by the churchman Nicholas Lattimer in 1555 to a fellow martyr as they were both about to be burnt at the stake. Though he cavalierly dismisses Montag's 'illness' as a natural phenomenon that all firemen experience at some moment or another, and encourages him to take some time to get over it, Beatty has Montag squarely in his sights.

Though Montag's surreptitious theft of numerous books may be seen as courageous, given the intolerant, 'Big Brother' nature of his society, his moral courage truly begins to emerge when he searches for and contacts Faber, a professor he had once met in a park. When he clandestinely meets Faber at his apartment, Faber begins to introduce him to a hidden underworld of literacy: rare copies of treasured texts that Faber and intellectuals like him have been memorizing against the dire probability that the last remaining copies of these classics may be destroyed. Fueled by this new knowledge, Montag begins to propose a scheme to rebel against this totalitarian society by planting books in firehouses and calling in alarms, hoping to "hoist them with their own petard" as Hamlet might have it. Given an ear-piece by which he can communicate with Faber, Montag goes boldly forth, determined to undermine the oppressive system. Overly emboldened, he foolishly begins to read aloud to Mildred, even when she is in the company of others, an effrontery that prompts his wife, who is horrified by this heresy, to turn him in. Ironically, Montag is at the fire station when the call comes in and is flabbergasted when the engine arrives at his own residence. Facing both the destruction of

his books and the likely forfeiture of his life, Montag strikes a blow against the system by turning the nozzle of his flame-thrower on Beatty and killing him.

This act of moral courage results in his being pursued as a criminal by the Mechanical Hound, a futuristic invention with sophisticated surveillance and tracking ability. Advised by Faber to follow the old railroad tracks out of the city, Montag immerses himself in the river to throw off the senses of the Hound, then follows Faber's counsel. Eventually he stumbles upon what appears to be a group of hobos but who are really a community of intellectuals who have each memorized by heart the entirety of an important text. They are aware of Montag's action and status and welcome him into their group, pleased by the fact that he can remember parts of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Shortly after his joining them, they watch from a distance as the city is destroyed in a nuclear fireball, a cataclysmic macrocosm of the book-burning that Montag himself once helped carry out. The book concludes with Montag and his new cohorts readying themselves for the enormous task of rebuilding the world through the knowledge they have rescued from the conflagration. As they start out, one of the men recalls the phoenix, the mythical bird that burns itself to death and then is reborn from its ashes. This is an appropriate symbol for the terrible destruction that humanity has wreaked but must now undo.

Ultimately, Montag's moral courage seems stronger than that of Winston Smith in Orwell's *1984*, who when confronted with his greatest fear—rats—shouts "Do it to, Julia!" Montag not only engages in intellectual rebellion but assumes at least part of the onus of rebuilding the nuclear-ravaged world. His moral courage is rooted in the knowledge that what the government is doing—be it book burning, spying on people, or eliminating them altogether—is wrong, and the actions he subsequently takes in the novel are brave, defiant and ultimately hopeful ones.