

## Question 2

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

In the following excerpt from Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, a crowd of British soldiers, angered by a lack of air support while on the beach at Dunkirk, vent their frustration on a member of the Royal Air Force whose misfortune it is to be present. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-crafted essay, show how the author uses literary elements and techniques to make a statement about the impact of war upon moral consciousness, be it that of a group or an individual.

...“Where were you when they killed my mate?”  
 A globule of spittle hit the back of the man’s  
 head and fell behind his ear. Turner moved round  
 to get a view. He saw first the gray-blue of a  
 jacket, and then the mute apprehension in the  
 man’s face. He was a wiry little fellow with thick,  
 unclean lenses in his glasses which magnified his  
 frightened stare. He looked like a filing clerk, or  
 a telephone operator, perhaps from a headquarters  
 long ago dispersed. But he was in the RAF<sup>1</sup> and  
 the Tommies<sup>2</sup> held him accountable. He turned  
 slowly, gazing at the circle of his interrogators. He  
 had no answers to their questions, and he made no  
 attempt to deny his responsibility for the absence  
 of Spitfires and Hurricanes<sup>3</sup> over the beach. His  
 right hand clutched his cap so hard his knuckles  
 trembled. An artilleryman standing by the door  
 gave him a hard push so that he stumbled across  
 the ring into the chest of a soldier who sent him  
 back with a casual punch to the head. There was  
 a hum of approval. Everyone had suffered, and  
 now someone was going to pay.  
 “So where’s the R.A.F.?”  
 A hand whipped out and slapped the man’s  
 face, knocking his glasses to the floor. The sound  
 of the blow was precise as a whip crack. It was a  
 signal for a new stage, a new level of engagement.  
 His naked eyes shrank to fluttering little dots as  
 he went down to grope around his feet. That was  
 a mistake. A kick from a steel-capped army boot  
 caught him on the backside, lifting him an inch  
 or two. There were chuckles all around. A sense  
 of something tasty about to happen was spreading  
 across the bar and drawing more soldiers in. As  
 the crowd swelled around the circle, any remain-  
 ing sense of individual responsibility fell away.  
 A swaggering recklessness was taking hold. A  
 cheer went up as someone stubbed his cigarette

on the fellow’s head. They laughed at his comic  
 yelp. They hated him and he deserved everything  
 that was coming his way. He was answerable for  
 the Luftwaffe’s<sup>4</sup> freedom of the skies, for every  
 Stuka<sup>5</sup> attack, every dead friend. His slight frame  
 contained every cause of an army’s defeat. Turner  
 assumed there was nothing he could do to help  
 the man without risking a lynching himself. But  
 it was impossible to do nothing. Unpleasantly  
 excited, he strained forward. Now, a tripping  
 Welsh accent proposed the question.

“Where’s the R.A.F.?”  
 It was eerie that the man had not shouted  
 for help, or pleaded, or protested his innocence.  
 His silence seemed like collusion in his fate. Was  
 he so dim that it had not occurred to him that he  
 might be about to die? Sensibly, he had folded his  
 glasses into his pocket. Without them his face was  
 empty. Like a mole in bright light, he peered about  
 at his tormentors, his lips parted, more in disbelief  
 than in an attempt to form a word. Because he  
 could not see it coming, he took a blow to the  
 face full-on. It was a fist this time. As his head  
 flipped back, another boot cracked into his shin  
 and a little sporting cheer went up, with some  
 uneven applause, as though for a decent catch in  
 the slips of the village green. It was madness to go  
 to the man’s defense, it was loathsome not to. At  
 the same time, Turner understood the exhilaration  
 among the tormentors and the insidious way it  
 could claim him. He himself could do something  
 outrageous with his bowie knife and earn the  
 love of a hundred men. To distance the thought  
 he made himself count the two or three soldiers  
 in the circle he reckoned bigger or stronger than  
 himself. But the real danger came from the mob  
 itself, its righteous state of mind. It would not be  
 denied its pleasures...

<sup>1</sup> The Royal Air Force.

<sup>2</sup> British infantrymen.

<sup>3</sup> British fighter planes.

<sup>4</sup> The German Air Force.

<sup>5</sup> A German fighter plane.

**Précis and Explication of Free-Response Question 2:  
From Ian McEwan's *Atonement***

Several decades ago an AP English Literature open question began with the claim that “no scene of violence exists for its own sake,” the implication being that there is an aesthetic purpose for every scene of violence that appears in a work of literature. This passage from Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement* features just such a scene, one in which an innocent member of the Royal Air Force is beset by a crowd of soldiers who are angered by the lack of air support they had received on the beach at Dunkirk. Driven by a sense of abandonment, the frustrated soldiers beat and abuse the defenseless man, making him a convenient scapegoat for the Royal Air Force’s failure to protect them. Upon finishing the passage, students were asked to “show how the author uses literary elements and techniques to make a statement about the impact of war upon moral consciousness, be it that of a group or an individual.” In framing their response, students were encouraged to consider literary elements and techniques.

From the opening line of the passage—the accusatory question “Where were you when they killed my mate?” (line 1)—the hostile attitude of the gathering is evident. The unfortunate RAF man who has become the focal point of the mob’s antipathy, being immediately spat upon by a soldier, is innocuous looking, “a wiry little fellow with thick, unclean lenses in his glasses which magnified his frightened stare” (lines 6–8). The narrator (Turner) observes how “He looked like a filing clerk, or a telephone operator, perhaps from a headquarters long ago dispersed. But he was in the RAF and the Tommies held him accountable” (lines 8–11). The bespectacled man, whose glasses make it more likely that he is a desk clerk than a pilot, “ha[s] no answers to their questions, and he [makes] no attempt to deny his responsibility for the absence of Spitfires and Hurricanes over the beach” (lines 13–15). At the center of an angry, swelling and uncharitable mob, he is heartily shoved from one antagonist to another in what initially seems rough horseplay. However, the more belligerent members of the mob quickly escalate the violence, loudly slapping the man in the face and knocking his glasses from his face to the floor. As the narrator observes, “The sound of the blow was precise as a whip crack. It was a signal for a new stage, a new level of engagement” (lines 25–27). Perhaps tolerating this abuse in hope of avoiding further maltreatment, the man makes the mistake of dropping to the floor to recover his glasses. Now in an even more vulnerable position, the man is kicked in the pants by one of the aggressors to the hearty laughter of his accomplices in the mob. As the narrator, who appears to be a soldier on the periphery of the action and one with no desire to take part in it, relates, “A sense of something tasty about to happen was spreading across the bar and drawing more soldiers in. As the crowd swelled around the circle, any remaining sense of individual responsibility fell away. A swaggering recklessness was taking hold” (lines 32–37).

This growing animosity, this libertine feeling of being able to take out their frustrations on a singularly vulnerable individual without any fear of recrimination or reprisal, brings out the baser instincts of the mob. Like the chanting chorus of painted boys that surrounds Simon on the fire-lit beach in Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, they deride the hapless individual, one soldier going so far as to stub out his cigarette on the poor man’s head. To the mob, “...he deserved everything that was coming his way. He was answerable for the Luftwaffe’s freedom of the skies, for every Stuka attack, every dead friend. His slight frame contained every cause of an army’s defeat” (lines 40–44).

The narrator, clearly disturbed by the violent turn the action has taken but fearing that “there [is] nothing he [can] do to help the man without risking a lynching himself” (lines 45–46), feels a pressing moral compulsion to intervene but sees no clear way of doing so. He thinks it “eerie that the man had not shouted for help, or pleaded, or protested his innocence. His silence seemed like collusion in his fate. Was he so dim that it had not occurred to him that he might be about to die?” (lines 51–55). Comparing him to “a mole in bright light” (line 57), he describes how he passively takes “a blow to the face full-on” (lines 60–61), followed by a vicious kick to the shin. Turner’s moral dilemma is framed almost in Hamlet-like terms—“It was madness to go to the man’s defense, it was loathsome not to” (lines 65–66)—as he is confronted by a “to be or not to be” moment, “being” in this case meaning “being brave.” Torn between doing the moral thing and attempting to protect, even rescue the man, or “do[ing] something outrageous with his bowie knife and earn[ing] the love of a hundred men” (lines 69–71), Turner attempts to “distance the thought” by making himself “count the two or three soldiers in the circle he reckoned bigger or stronger than himself” (lines 71–74). He clearly wishes

to subdue any primal instinct to ally himself with the mob by rationalizing the senselessness of any potential intervention. That said, it is not these individuals who pose the real threat; rather, as he acknowledges, “the real danger came from the mob itself, its righteous state of mind. It would not be denied its pleasures...” (lines 74–76).

The scene from *Atonement*, minatory in nature, has any number of literary counterparts (the aforementioned scene from *Lord of the Flies*; the murder of Cinna the Poet in *Julius Caesar*; and the schoolyard fight scene in Selzer’s *Confessions of a Knife* are three that come quickly to mind). Each of these scenes provides a conduit for its author’s commentary on mob violence. This particular episode seems intended to show how easily people will seek out a convenient scapegoat for their anger and frustration. It also reveals how the faceless anonymity of a mob encourages individual members to act with impunity, often in disturbingly barbaric ways. In regard to the narrator, Turner, it explores how even people who recognize the deplorable nature of mob justice may often be too afraid to intercede or, worse still, may be tempted to contribute to that violence. Finally, it provides a microcosmic example of what Jonathan Swift so aptly labeled “man’s inhumanity to man.”

Students discussing the language of the selection might consider choice of detail (the “globule of spittle” hitting the back of the man’s head in lines 2–3; the physical abuse in lines 19–20, 24–25, 37–39, 59–61, and 61–62; the feeble and innocuous description of the victim of the violence); diction (words such as “frightened,” “clutched,” “trembled” to describe the encircled victim, and phrases such as “casual push,” “swaggering recklessness,” a “sense of something tasty” and “sporting cheer” that depict the perverse delight of the besieging mob); dialogue (the sparse but derisive interrogatives as to the absence of air cover by the R.A.F.); and tone (a sense of the author’s clear distaste for the barbaric and reprehensible conduct of the mob). Teachers desiring an interesting counterpoint to this scene need only to look at Chapter 22 in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where one man, Colonel Sherburn, routs an entire mob of righteous citizens bent on lynching him through nothing but the sheer force of his personality (though the double-barreled shotgun he is carrying and the fact that he is on the roof play a part as well).