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Ms. Graning

English II

Macbeth Essay

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the drive for power plays a central role in shaping the fate of its characters. Throughout the play, characters grapple with ambition, and this internal struggle becomes a defining feature of their actions. Some characters, like Malcolm and Macduff, demonstrate self-control despite their ambitions, while others, like Macbeth, are completely consumed by their desires and lose control of their actions. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents contrasting approaches to ambition and self-control, illustrating that while ambition is a powerful force, some individuals retain mastery over their actions, while others allow their unchecked desires to dictate their lives.

Shakespeare presents some characters as having control over their actions, despite the intense pressures of ambition. These individuals are able to harness their desires for power, allowing them to make choices based on moral reasoning rather than unchecked impulse. Malcolm, for instance, represents one of the clearest examples of moral control in the play. When he speaks with Macduff about his own virtues, he says, “But I have none: the king-becoming graces, / As justice, verity, temperance, stableness, / Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness, / Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude, / I have no relish of them” (Act 4, Scene 3). Here, Malcolm lists qualities he believes are necessary for a king, but claims he lacks them. This statement is crucial because it shows that Malcolm is deliberately weighing his potential to rule

and questioning whether he possesses the qualities that would make him a good leader. He is not driven solely by ambition; instead, he demonstrates moral self-control by rejecting the notion of power for the sake of power. His decision to test Macduff further confirms his self-control, as he doesn't act rashly in his pursuit of leadership but carefully considers the consequences of his actions. Another character who displays self-control, even when influenced by others, is Macduff. After hearing of his family's brutal murder, Macduff responds to Malcolm's encouragement by saying, "I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man" (Act 4, Scene 3). While Macduff is undoubtedly motivated by a desire for revenge, this quote reveals his awareness that he must remain true to his humanity even in the face of overwhelming loss. He does not allow his grief to entirely cloud his judgment. Instead, he approaches the situation with the dignity of a man who still values morality, showing that despite his deep anger, he is conscious of the need for control. By recognizing the importance of feeling "as a man," Macduff underscores his commitment to justice rather than blind vengeance. This demonstrates that, like Malcolm, he retains control over his actions, refusing to be consumed by his emotions, even when faced with personal devastation.

In contrast, some characters in *Macbeth* lose control over their actions, as their ambitions drive them to act without regard for moral constraints. Macbeth himself is the clearest example of a character whose unchecked ambition leads him to reckless decisions. Early in the play, as he contemplates the murder of King Duncan, Macbeth reflects, "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (Act 1, Scene 7). This line reveals Macbeth's initial attempt to control his ambition and his recognition of the need to act decisively. However, the fact that he is still debating whether to commit murder shows that he has not fully given in to his desire for power. At this point, he is conflicted and aware of the moral consequences of his actions. The

quote illustrates his struggle to maintain control, hinting that although he has the capacity to make rational decisions, his ambition threatens to overwhelm him. As Macbeth continues to wrestle with his conscience, his internal conflict dissolves when he starts to see visions, indicating the loss of his self-control. One of the most significant moments of this loss occurs when Macbeth exclaims, “Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee” (Act 2, Scene 1). This vision of a dagger leads him toward the murder of Duncan, and in this moment, Macbeth no longer exhibits the moral control he once had. The hallucination is a clear sign that his ambition has overtaken his reason, and he is now acting on impulse rather than careful deliberation. By allowing his desires to guide him, he loses his ability to make rational decisions, indicating the complete collapse of his self-control. This moment is a turning point, as Macbeth's descent into tyranny begins here, and his ability to restrain himself is permanently shattered.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare demonstrates the destructive power of unchecked ambition, as well as the value of moral self-control. Characters like Malcolm and Macduff, who retain control over their actions despite their desires for justice, contrast sharply with Macbeth, whose unrestrained ambition leads to his moral and psychological downfall. The play ultimately shows that while ambition is an inherent human trait, the ability to maintain self-control in the face of such desires is essential for avoiding destruction. Through the varying degrees of control shown by the characters, Shakespeare emphasizes that true strength lies in mastering one's impulses, rather than succumbing to them.