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Comparative Essay
EXEMPLAR

A Greatness of Character in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*

The greatness of a man is often measured in how he responds to the circumstances that life thrusts upon him. Contemporary culture seems obsessed with providing audiences with examples of such people who, despite the adversity of their lives, still rise above. Tolkein conceived Frodo Baggins, Rowling has given Harry Potter, and Nolan has reinvented Batman. But perhaps no one is more capable of showing triumph over struggles than William Shakespeare. In both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, for example, the title characters find themselves with nearly impossible moral dilemmas and are forced to decide what the correct choice will be. Both Hamlet and Macbeth are similar in that they are somewhat unwillingly thrust into these situations, are both driven by a deep motivation, and are then forced to deal with the consequences of their actions. Yet, despite these similarities, it is only Hamlet who is able to truly demonstrate honour and greatness amidst his trials. Whereas Macbeth is often manipulated and driven by greed—and thus, is forced to deal with a guilty conscience—Hamlet is in control of his actions, is largely driven by the love for his father, and therefore dies with a clear heart and a clean conscience. Their deaths show the ultimate human struggle of trying to live up to the standards thrust upon the greatest of men.

Both Hamlet and Macbeth are strong men: respectively, one is a loved prince and the other is a decorated military hero. However, they are not so great that they are beyond the manipulation of others. Hamlet, for instance, is asked by his dead father's ghost to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25). The ghost's plea is particularly problematic because Hamlet is not really given a choice to resist. After the ghost obtains Hamlet's unwavering pledge—forcing him

to “swear” by it, three times, no less—Hamlet recognizes the impossibility of *not* acting. He admits, “O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right” (1.5.190), thereby accepting his task, but quite unwillingly. Macbeth also finds himself manipulated by those around him: first by the three witches, and then by his scheming wife. The witches seem to delight in Macbeth’s demise—casting spells to slow his progress—while Lady Macbeth seems orgasmically driven by the possibility of being Queen. Under both pressures, Macbeth caves. When Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth to “screw [his] courage to the stick place” (1.7.65), Macbeth surrenders to her demands. He comments that “false face must hide what the false heart doth know” (1.7.82), fully admitting that he is acting without his own consent. Macbeth is simply unwilling—or, more likely—unable to stop external pressures from forcing his hand. Hamlet, however, while pressured, only acts of his own accord. While the ghost’s pressuring causes Hamlet to delay, that delay is not out of weakness, but out of his awareness that such a task as revenge must not be taken at the behest of someone else. Thus, Hamlet tests to make sure “the spirit [he has] seen [is not] the devil” (2.2.560), that he has “grounds more relative” (2.2.565-6), and that when his “thoughts be bloody” (4.4.65) they will be of great worth. Unlike Macbeth who is ultimately a pawn of the witches and Lady Macbeth’s scheming, Hamlet always acts with self-confidence and surefootedness, thus showing his greatness of character.

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Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth* Toronto: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Toronto: Thomas Nelson, 2003.