



# INVICTUS

William Ernest Henley

"**Invictus**" is a short Victorian poem by the English poet William Ernest Henley (1849–1903).

## Text

*Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.*

## Background

At the age of 12, William Henley contracted tuberculosis of the bone. A few years later, the disease progressed to his foot, and physicians announced that the only way to save his life was to amputate directly below the knee. It was amputated when he was 17.

Immediately after the amputation, he received news that another operation would have to be done on his other leg. However, he decided to enlist the help of a different doctor named Joseph Lister. Under Lister's care he was able to keep his other leg by undergoing intensive surgery on his remaining foot. While recovering from this surgery in the infirmary, he was moved to write the words of **Invictus**. This period of his life, coupled with the reality of an impoverished childhood, plays a major role in the meaning behind the poem; it is also the prime reason for this poem's existence.

Stoicism inspired him to write this poem. Despite his disability, he survived with one foot intact and led an active life until his death at the age of 53.

## Relation with Nelson Mandela

Invictus acted as a very strong message to the South African Leader, Nelson Mandela. Mandela was so inspired by this poem that he wrote it on a piece of scratch paper and kept it in his prison cell while he was incarcerated for 27 years. The movie *Invictus* presented more information on Mandela's thoughts of Henley's poem, as the movie is based on his life. Mandela even admitted that he probably would not have made it through the long years in prison if it weren't for the words of this English poet. Mandela was eventually released and then elected as South Africa's first post-Apartheid president.

## Influence

In the 1942 film *Casablanca*, Captain Renault, a corrupt official played by Claude Rains recites the last two lines of the poem when talking to Rick Blaine, played by Humphrey Bogart, referring to his power in Casablanca.

The poem was used by Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) to inspire Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) in the *30 Rock* episode "Everything Sunny All the Time Always".

In the 1945 film *Kings Row*, Parris Mitchell, a psychiatrist played by Robert Cummings, recites the first two stanzas of "Invictus" to his friend Drake McHugh, played by Ronald Reagan, before revealing to Drake that his legs were unnecessarily amputated by a cruel doctor.

Novelist Jeffrey Archer quoted the poem in the first volume of his *A Prison Diary* series 'Hell' which recounted his time inside HMP Belmarsh.

The line "bloody, but unbowed" was the Daily Mirror's headline the day after the 7 July 2005 London bombings.

The fourth stanza was quoted by Lachesis to Zane in Piers Anthony's novel *On a Pale Horse*, the first of his Incarnations of Immortality series.

While incarcerated on Robben Island prison, Nelson Mandela recited the poem to other prisoners and was empowered by its message of self mastery.

The poem was used in a voice-over by Lucas Scott in the hit television series *One Tree Hill*.