

On *Invictus*

by William Ernest Henley

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In *Invictus* (meaning "unconquered") William Earnest Henley demonstrates that despite physical limitations the collective and individual human spirit is ultimately unconquerable. Henley, who was an editor, a critic, writer, and "benevolent bully" to the upcoming writers of his time, suffered crippling physical pain for most of his life and was a friend and professional associate of Robert Louis Stevenson who based the character of Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* on his handicapped, quarrelsome, and feisty friend. Henley, who was considered a good editor and domineering personality by his peers, suffered since childhood the crippling and painful results of tuberculosis. Despite (and possibly partially because of) his pain and handicap he was able to write effective poetry such as his *Invictus* of 1875.

The poem examines the interrelationship of body and soul and how the soul (or mind?) transcends physical difficulties and limitations. As the body ages through time or deteriorates through disease, the soul develops, continues, and remains independent of and, at times, transcends, human physical limitations. Though there are universal human limitations such as the inability to fly or breathe under water that are shared by all humans, there are also limitations that result from accident, mutation, and biological error such as physical handicaps and deformities, neurological conditions such as blindness and deafness, and diseases such as the tuberculosis that Mr. Henley had causing him physical pain. The body, what Shakespeare's Hamlet called the "mortal coil" and what William Butler Yeats referred to as the

"mortal dress" in his poem *Sailing to Byzantium*, ages and dies. In the same poem Yeats says "whatever is begotten, born, and dies" and "an aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick" likening an old man to a scare crow who has a deteriorating, yet still passionate heart "sick with desire and fastened to a dying animal." Though Henley does not mention specifically his painfully deteriorating physical condition, he alludes to it in the lines:

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

The verse brings to mind the human struggle against adversity and the problem of evil and the problem of undeserved suffering and pain (or the question: why do the righteous suffer?). Despite his condition Henley is able to "thank whatever gods may be for" his "unconquerable soul."

He indirectly addresses the issue of free will and determinism: do human beings determine their own destiny through free will or are they pawns in a predetermined cosmic chess game? No person, except for perhaps a masochist's pleasure in mild, temporary pain or the macho person's complex of creating and enduring needless pain, would voluntarily select physical pain if he were the captain of his fate. Yet Mr. Henley insists:

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.

Since the soul transcends physical limitation, according to William Ernest Henley, one can, despite physical handicap, be the captain of his own soul. Although life is constant compromise and resolution of conflict with fellow human beings in a societal context, one can overcome human physical limitation and be the captain of his soul and remain eternally and spiritually unconquered.