

# Invictus

This is a Poem 'Invictus' (Unconquered, Undefeated) by William Henley. Nelson Mandela was inspired by the poem, and had it written on a scrap of paper in his prison cell while he was incarcerated for 27 years on Robben Island.

## 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.

"Invictus" is a short [Victorian poem](#) by the [English](#) poet [William Ernest Henley](#) (1849-1903). It was first published in 1875 in a book called *Book of Verses*, where it was number four in several poems called *Life and Death (Echoes)*. It originally had no title. ...

## Background

At the age of 12, 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. [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. NB

- In the 1942 film *Casablanca*, Captain Renault, an 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.

(These notes are from from Wikipedia)

- 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.
- [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) mentions that this is one of his favorite poems in the 1958 play *Sunrise at Campobello* (Act 2, Scene 2). Later, in the same scene, his friend and advisor, [Louis Howe](#), reads the entire poem aloud as a tribute to Roosevelt.
- 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.
- In a Union Bank of Switzerland advertisement Alan Bates recites the poem.<sup>[9]</sup>
- While incarcerated on [Robben Island](#) prison, [Nelson Mandela](#) recited the poem to other prisoners and was empowered by its message of self-mastery.<sup>[10][11]</sup> In the movie *Invictus*, Mandela gives the captain of the national [South African](#) rugby team the poem to inspire him to lead his team to a [Rugby World Cup](#) win, telling him how it inspired him in prison. In reality, as opposed to the movie, Mandela gave the captain, [Francois Pineaar](#), a copy of "The Man in the Arena" passage from President of the United States [Theodore Roosevelt's](#) speech *Citizenship in a Republic* instead.<sup>[12]</sup>
- The poem was used as the title of one of the final episodes of the 1987-1989 television series *Beauty and the Beast*.
- The poem was used in a voice-over by Lucas Scott in the hit television series *One Tree Hill*.
- The American Heavy Metal band [Virgin Steele](#) take influence from the poem for their 1998 release *Invictus*. In the song of the same name, many of the lyrics take influence from the poem.<sup>[13][14]</sup>
- The Greek black-metal band Necromantia used the entire poem lyrics in their song "Invictus" in their album IV: Malice released in 2000.<sup>[15]</sup>
- Canadian poet and singer-songwriter [Leonard Cohen](#) recited the poem as an introduction to his own song "The Darkness", during a couple of shows on his 2010 world tour, most notably at his [State Kremlin Palace](#) show on 7 October.<sup>[16][17]</sup>
- The last stanza of 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".
- 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](#).<sup>[18]</sup>
- The [Burmese](#) opposition leader and [Nobel Peace](#) laureate [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) stated, "This poem had inspired my father, Aung San, and his contemporaries during the independent struggle, as it also seemed to have inspired freedom fighters in other places at other times."<sup>[19]</sup>
- The Oklahoma City bomber [Timothy McVeigh](#) quoted the poem in its entirety as his final (written) statement.<sup>[20][21]</sup>
- In the 2012 game *Mass Effect 3* the second stanza of the poem is cited by one of the main characters: Ashley Williams, lieutenant-commander of the Alliance
- Tennis player [Andre Agassi](#) quoted the poem in his autobiography, *Open*.