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Critical Analysis on William Ernest Henley's *Invictus*

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The poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley is a strong inspiring piece of literature written by the author while amid adversity. It even inspired a sports movie, which carried the same title “*Invictus*”. Henley published the poem in 1888 but it had no title. When it was later reprinted in newspapers, the poem received different titles. The titles included; *Myself*, *Clear Grit*, *Captain of My Soul*, and *Song of A Strong Soul*. When the *Oxford Book of English Verse* included the poem, the editor Arthur Quiller-Couch dubbed the fitting title “*Invictus*” which meant invincible.

In overview, *Invictus* evokes strong emotions that convey power and endurance. Henley used violent words to portray his burden and his willingness to fight them. The poem paints a picture of a once defeated man that despite all odds remains standing and ready to face whatever is to come. With only sixteen lines and four stanzas each, William Ernest Henley was able to masterfully construct an inspiring poem with graphic scenes and thought-provoking lines.

In the first and second lines of *Invictus*, Henley paints a dark scenery using the words “night”, “black” and “pit”. Taking into account that Henley wrote the poem while recovering from surgery, the dark scenery he is trying to convey might be the fear of losing his leg. He must have felt great despair knowing that he might not be able to walk normally again. The third and fourth lines give thanks to the gods for the strength they provided Henley. He thanks them for the fact that despite the hardship he endured due to tuberculosis, he is able to stride forward. The third line uses the phrase “whatever gods may be” to show that the author does not worship a specific god yet is humble enough to take into consideration that there might be a higher power.

The second stanza gives praise to Henley's strength. Showing his prowess over the hands of fate. The second stanza paints a picture of a cornered man. The lines "In the fell clutch of circumstance" and "bludgeoning of chance" might refer to the indifferent treatment of fate towards people. The terms circumstance and chance may further support this theory. The other lines show the reaction or inaction the author had while under the pressures of fate. The second stanza also paints a violent picture of a bloodied person unwilling to surrender. The lines show the gravity of his pain along with the use of the words "cried aloud" and "bloody."

The third stanza continues where the first one stopped. The first line conveys dark scenery similar to the first stanza. This time, however, Henley describes what is also within that dark scenery. A "place of wrath and tears" as he writes, suggests that within the dark scenery, which is fear, is also anger and sorrow. Henley must have felt angry knowing that he could lose a leg and he would have also felt sorrow, considering how bad his current condition is. Resting on a bed while waiting for his leg to heal, Henley might have felt sorry for himself.

The next line includes the words "horror" and "shade" continuing the dark theme of the poem. This line may infer the fears Henley has once his legs have healed. The "horror of the shade" may mean that even when his wound has healed and he was able to walk again, there is still a possibility that his condition could get worse. It symbolizes the negative thoughts he is playing on his head. An accident might cause him to lose his leg or he could catch another illness that could leave him disabled. The next line which states "the menace of the years" could simply mean that as he grows older, his body will weaken and the bad condition of his leg might return. The next line, however, states that

he is not afraid of “the menace of the years”. This is a show of strong will and endurance that is attributed to the whole poem. Henley realizes the inevitable impact of old age and comes to terms with it. Henley emphasized the word “find” by using it twice in the same line. The way Henley wrote the line sounds as if he is taking a stand, showing unmovable resolve and fearlessness.

The first two lines of the last stanza of Invictus convey relentless courage. The use of the words “gate”, “punishment” and “scroll” leads the readers to think of heaven and religion in general. Henley is saying that he does not care about getting to the gates of heaven or avoiding the punishments in hell. The last two lines “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul” end the poem with a vivid and strong statement that perfectly complements the first two lines of the last stanza. Henley could be saying that he does not care about a higher power judging him and that he will live his life the way he wants. Perhaps the “punishment” in the scrolls was referring to his injured leg and having found a way to salvage it, he felt that he had full control of his life. That he is the master of his fate.

The Invictus poem is a deeply written piece with violent scenes and dark themes. William Henley was recovering from a leg surgery while he was writing Invictus and his current state might have had a great impact on the meaning of the poem. One thing is clear though, the poem is about transcending hardships and relentless courage. It is about taking responsibility for one's own life and accepting the consequences of our actions. Since if there is no higher power to judge and affect us, we only have ourselves to count on.

Reference

Poetry Foundation (n.d.). William Ernest Henley.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-ernest-henley>

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