Invictus

POEM TEXT

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

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

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

13 It matters not how strait the gate,
14   How charged with punishments the scroll,
15 I am the master of my fate,
16   I am the captain of my soul.

SUMMARY

The speaker begins by emerging from a metaphorical night that lies on top of the speaker like a physical thing. This night, which seems to fill the whole world, is as dark as Hell. Despite this darkness, the speaker feels gratitude towards any god or gods that may exist for granting unshakeable resilience.

Looking back on life's past challenges, which constrained the speaker like a giant fist, the speaker remembers never showing discomfort or complaining. Going even further, the speaker compares life's unexpected mishaps to being beaten with a heavy implement. The speaker was damaged by this beating, yet that fact did not decrease the speaker's pride or resolve.

Now the speaker looks beyond the present of anger and sadness to the future. Unfortunately, the future's only certainty is death, which hangs over the present like a terrifying shadow. However, the speaker once again affirms that the threat of inevitable suffering does not, and never will, frighten the speaker.

The speaker doesn't care how challenging life becomes, alluding to a biblical passage in which a narrow gate represents extreme difficulty. Nor does the speaker care how many

horrible events lie in the book of fate. The speaker controls the course of their own inner life. Like a ship's captain, the speaker remains in charge of their inner life's unconquerable element: the soul.

THEMES

SUFFERING AND RESILIENCE

"Invictus" is above all a poem about resilience in the face of suffering. This resilience comes from the courage to embrace life and refuse despair. In addition to its proud statement of the speaker's current bravery, the poem is also a balm against any future instances of adversity; it's ultimately an assertion of the boundless strength of the human spirit.

The poem has a repetitive structure that emphasizes the recurring nature of adversity and the constancy of inner strength. Note how each stanza opens with a description of adversity and ends with an affirmation of emotional fortitude. The first stanza, for instance, begins with the prepositional phrase "out of" as the speaker emerges from the darkness of suffering that "covers" the speaker. This stanza then closes with an assertion of the speaker's "unconquerable soul." That is, the speaker's resilience remains untouched by life's difficulties.

The second stanza takes a similar form, now turning to physical bludgeoning as a metaphor for life's unpredictable difficulties. Though "bloodied," the speaker doesn't bow to these difficulties and instead faces them head on. The third and fourth stanzas consider future challenges that lie "Beyond this place," but again reaffirm that the speaker remains "unafraid" and self-possessed as "the master of my fate."

Not only does the speaker emphasize personal strength in the face of hardship, but the poem specifically refuses to *complain* about life's seemingly relentless adversities. Despite all that the speaker has faced, this person has "not winced nor cried aloud." The poem doesn't whine or languish in sadness, but rather states the speaker's philosophy in an assertive manner meant to rouse and inspire. This is especially clear in the poem's famous last two lines. Here, the speaker takes on the authority of "master" and "captain," as well as the pride and glory associated with these terms. This use of "captain" also ties into the title of the poem ("invictus" means "unconquerable") as a word related to the military, creating an aura of military valor. That is, the poem acts like a rallying cry made to inspire oneself, rather than as a lamentation about the difficulties of life.

Though the poem speaks proudly of past and present adversity, it also declares that all *future* challenges will be met with the

same resilience. It this way, the poem articulates the speaker's belief in a lifelong philosophy of courage. Note first how the poem almost always speaks in the present tense. In doing so, it affirms the vivacity and presence of the speaker, who has not given up on life: "My head *is* bloodied, but unbowed." Yet As long as death "looms" in the future, there will always be challenges. And indeed, the second half of the poem asserts courage against "the menace of the years," or future difficulties.

In the third stanza, the speaker notably uses the future tense to claim power over the future, saying the years "*shall find* me unafraid." Here, the poem's only use of a non-present tense emphasizes how the speaker's strength won't be diminished over time. Finally, in the fourth stanza, after speculating on what lies in store, the poem ends on a final [anaphora](#) of "I am" that reiterates the speaker's resolve. This "am" treats that resolve as a stable part of the speaker's identity. Having given repeated affirmations of resilience, the speaker remains unshaken by past and future, knowing that inner courage will always serve as a fortification against trouble.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 4-16

🔀 FREE WILL VS. FATE

The speaker's pride in persevering through difficult times pits free will against fate. Free will is the idea that people can choose their own actions and thoughts, rather than being controlled by fate. Though the opposing ideas of free will and fate conflict throughout the poem, the speaker ultimately insists upon a middle ground, in which individuals freely choose their emotional *responses* to life's inevitable constraints.

The challenges that the speaker describes don't come from specific sources, like people or even identifiable events. Rather, the poem depicts an individual person caught within vast and abstract sources of suffering. Note how the poem begins with images of "night" in the first line and "the pit," or Hell, in the second. As [metaphors](#), these two lines treat personal suffering as vague and cosmic in scope. This night of suffering covers the speaker, acting as a limitation, and is the first suggestion of fate—or inevitable hardship beyond the speaker's control—in the poem.

Next, "the fell clutch of circumstance" makes a blatant statement of fate as the poem's central conflict. Again, as with "covers" in the previous stanza, "clutch" treats the individual speaker as a person caught within broad, vague difficulties. Here, circumstance has become vaguely personified as a malicious god that has the speaker within its grip, both echoing and contrasting with the benevolent "whatever gods may be"

from the previous stanza. Finally, death—the last "punishment" on the "scroll" of fate—always looms as a certainty. It lies "Beyond this place of wrath and tears" as the "Horror of the shade." Essentially, the speaker can't expect anything from life beyond an eventual death; fate isn't obligated to dole out happiness.

Yet, despite such facts as the certainty of death, the speaker believes in the ability to control one's *response* to adversity. This in turn leads to a sense of inner freedom even as the speaker can't control things like "the fell clutch of circumstance" nor the "bludgeonings of chance." When the speaker says, "I have *not* winced *nor* cried aloud," and "My head is bloody, *but un*bowed," this emphasizes the temptation of doing exactly those things: wincing, crying out, bowing one's head. The speaker makes a conscious *choice* not to do those things.

The final usage of "master" and "captain" again gestures at the idea of freedom. We define masters and captains by their ability—and responsibility—to choose. Yet the full phrases "master of my fate" and "captain of my soul" create some ambiguity. Up until now, the word "fate" was implied in words like "circumstance" as a cosmic force for suffering and death. How can the speaker control fate, after spending the whole poem describing the impossibility of doing so? The phrase "captain of my soul" helps point us in a new direction by seeing fate in terms of the speaker's internal life. One can choose what happens within one's own mind and in that way control the "fate" of one's emotional life.

"Invictus" doesn't find clear answers to the nature of fate or the possibility of acting freely. It does, however, assert that we all have mastery over own interior lives, which provides resilience against whatever forces seek to control us.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 3
- Lines 4-16

😐 AGNOSTICISM

"Invictus" places the speaker's reponse to adversity within the context of God's uncertain existence. This uncertainty about God, a view known as agnosticism, contrasts with the speaker's faith in self-empowerment.

The first stanza uses both the words "gods" and "soul," immediately suggesting that the speaker wants to, in some way, engage with religion. Yet each engagement comes with uncertainty. For instance, rather than saying "God," as would a traditionally Christian speaker in this context, the speaker says "whatever gods may be." Not only does this throw God's existence into doubt, it also raises the possibility of other non-Christian divinities. Were the speaker to say instead, "I thank

God / For my unconquerable soul," we might have classified this poem, at least at the beginning, as a prayer or a devotional poem. That said, even as it is, the poem retains some aura of prayer.

In contrast to evoking divine goodness, this first stanza also has the religious imagery of Hell—"the pit." The darkness of night and Hell represents the difficulty of understanding the forces that cause one's suffering. As the speaker emerges "Out of" this darkness, it is not *God* that becomes clear, but the *speaker's* own inner strength. This would ultimately suggest a rejection of religion as a source of guidance and fortitude in the face of suffering.

Further engaging with Christianity, the poem contains a biblical allusion in its final stanza. The phrase "strait the gate" comes from Matthew 7:14 in the *King James Bible*: "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." This quote more specifically comes from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, where he details the rigors of living a virtuous Christian life. Here, however, the speaker treats that difficulty not as an eventual good, but as another evil presented by fate—another potential hardship to overcome. Thus, Christianity deeply informs the poem while the speaker remains skeptical of it.

On the other hand, the speaker's use of the word "soul" suggests a bolder and less uncertain attitude. The speaker professes unshakeable faith in the soul. However, the poem still leaves us with a limited vision of what that word actually *means*. After passing through spiritual uncertainty in the first three lines, the speaker lands on the "unconquerable soul." In contrast to the "pit" of suffering, the soul becomes a core of strength, that which chooses life over despair. Yet, unlike Christianity, the poem does not assure us of the soul's immortality. The "Horror" of death, which always "looms" over the speaker, offers no such promises.

At the end of the poem the soul remains uncorrupted. Yet now the speaker has become the soul's "captain," not simply relying on it but also in charge of it. This shift, though subtle, is still a shift. On one hand, it raises the poem's valorous tone to an even greater intensity. On the other hand, this shift creates ambiguity about the nature of the soul. If you can "captain" your soul, that means you are also somehow *separate* from it. Rather than making choices, the soul becomes passive at the end of the poem; now, the speaker makes choices *for* the soul. So while the speaker retains faith in the soul, the soul's exact nature remains unclear.

"Invictus" thus invokes Christian ideas of fate and suffering while refusing to commit to Christianity. The poem even subtly increases uncertainty about the nature of inner strength and the soul. Its faith in that strength, however, never wavers.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 13-16

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Out of the night that covers me,

The first line of "Invictus" begins the poem in the midst of adversity, an opening that the following stanzas will imitate in some way. It begins with a dramatic—if somewhat conventional—metaphor, comparing suffering to night. But the speaker doesn't stop there with this comparison. Going one step further, night becomes a substance that "covers" the speaker, like tar perhaps. By nesting a metaphor within a metaphor, the poem establishes that it's going to operate on a highly figurative level.

That doesn't mean the poem won't use more concrete imagery—far from it, as this line actively engages the body by depicting darkness as a substance that physically touches the speaker. As a quick biographical aside, Henley's physical body was an important element of his public persona and in his personal life. When he was a child, he lost his left leg to tuberculosis of the bone. However, as an adult his physical robustness and zest for life inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's character Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*. Furthermore, during the writing of "Invictus," Henley was undergoing an experimental medical treatment for tuberculosis of the bone, and was in danger of losing his other leg. It's no wonder, then, that bodily suffering runs as an undercurrent in "Invictus." However, we aren't meant to read such instances of physical harm *literally*, but rather take them as representing the kind of intense agonies that life can throw at us.

This first line is also dramatic in that it both establishes the poem's meter and switches up that meter. In fact, this happens in the very first syllable. The poem uses iambic tetrameter, or an eight syllable line of four iambs, following a repeating pattern of unstressed-**stressed** syllables (da DUM). However, the very first foot of the poem is a trochee (stressed-unstressed; DA dum) followed by a return to regular iambic meter:

> **Out** of | the **night** | that **cov-** | ers **me**,

This means that the poem begins on an authoritatively stressed syllable. We immediately become aware of the speaker's willfulness (who won't even be constrained by meter for one line!). We are also taken by the force of this "out," which emerges from silence just as the speaker emerges from the night of suffering.

This metrical switch-up also creates a space of two unstressed syllables between "Out" and "night," so that when the second stress *does* come with the word "night," it seems to hit extra hard. Thus we're left with an opposition between "**Out** of" and "the **night**," which mimics the opposition between the speaker's willfulness and the constraining forces of suffering (literally constraining, if we think of Henley bedridden in the hospital).

Finally, the first line ends on the stressed word "me," which will also become its first rhyming word. This places an emphasis on the first person that will continue throughout the poem.

LINE 2

Black as the pit from pole to pole,

Line 2, like the first line, starts with a [trochee](link) rather than [iamb](link). Here, though, the line's initial stress serves to emphasize the word "black" and therefore the darkness of "the pit":

Black as | the **pit** | from **pole** | to **pole**,

This pit is a reference to Hell, a realm of utmost suffering that lies physically beneath the living Earth, just like a pit. Further grounding us in the geography of Hell, the speaker says its darkness spreads "from pole to pole." The poles here are like the North and South Poles of Earth—that is, they're the two ends of the axis that the world revolves around. All this to say that the suffering covering the speaker does not stop where the body ends, but spreads out across an entire world.

In this line, the speaker also invokes Hell as a [simile](link). The cover of night is as dark "as the pit." But also remember that the poem has already used night as a [metaphor](link) for suffering. Then the poem compared that night to a covering. So Hell actually becomes the third step in suffering's metaphorical transformation. As readers, we're not necessarily even meant to take much notice of this. The poem starts out on such an intensely figurative level that it's not really too surprising when it phases in out and out of different metaphors. Furthermore, as we noted in Line 1, though the language offers a high level of drama, it's also pretty conventional. We can regard the comparison of suffering=night=darkness=hell as fairly standard. Instead, the poem stirs us through other techniques, such as varying its meter.

The poem also uses [alliteration](link) to dramatic effect. Here, it uses the "p" sound three times in "**p**it from **p**ole to **p**ole," all on stressed syllables. Using alliteration on stressed syllables emphasizes those syllables even more. The emphasis is made all the stronger when combined with the repetition of "pole." Additionally, the long /o/ sound of "pole," plus the liquid /l/, makes the sound of the word itself feel elongated. Say "pole to pole" out loud and you'll see how long that phrase lingers in your mouth—especially in contrast with the sharp /t/ of pi**t**, which precedes it. This reflects the immensity of the suffering from which the poem's speaker emerges.

LINES 3-4

I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

Having invoked the immensity of life's adversity, the speaker takes on a more uplifting tone in the final two lines of the first [stanza](link). The decisive word that creates this tone is "unconquerable." First off, the Latin word of the title, "invictus" translates to "unconquerable." The fourth line thus concludes the stanza by echoing the title. Cementing the theme of resilience, this word also treats that resilience as a kind of military valor. That is, "conquer" usually applies to instances of war, while in the poem war happens symbolically as a struggle between the soul and adversity. As we shall see, this military resonance gets taken up again in the final stanza.

Additionally, the rhyme of "me" and "be" subtly foreshadows the "I am" of the poem's final two lines. Since the poem pits the "I" against a vast world of suffering, this first rhyme hammers home the importance of inner "being." That is, the ability to say *I am this* or *I am that* becomes an important counterweight to the ways in which the world attempts to constrain us. This opposition gets expressed in the second rhyme of the poem, "pole" and "soul." Here, the first word suggests the incredible expanse of the world's suffering, while the second word zeroes in on a single individual.

The poem's characteristic use of [enjambment](link) comes into play for the first time here. The line break happens at a natural pause and serves to intuitively divide linked ideas: line 3 gestures outward as a vague and general thanking, while line 4 turns inward towards what the speaker feels thankful for—"my unconquerable soul."

These lines also introduce a complicated relationship with religion, specifically Christianity. On one hand, they reference Christian concepts like Hell, God, and the soul. However, God appears only under the catch-all phrase of "whatever gods may be," which not only throws God's existence into doubt, but opens the possibility of a polytheistic universe (one with many gods). Additionally, the intensely [metaphorical](link) nature of the poem means that we don't have to take the speaker as actually believing in Hell. Perhaps it's simply a metaphor.

A similar problem goes for soul. How literal is this word, soul, and what does it mean in the context of the poem? Whereas one of the soul's defining traits in Christianity is its immortality, here that immortality gets replaced with unconquerability. There's a tradeoff at work: assurance in a divine goodness and eternal afterlife gets replaced by self-assurance and the certainty of death.

LINES 5-6

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.

The speaker once again describes adversity. While staying in

the present tense, these lines also glance backward at the continuing challenges that have been encountered. Specifically, they bring the problem of fate and free will to the forefront of the poem.

The "fell clutch of circumstance" personifies life's events as the grip of a malicious god. The Latin root of circumstance literally means "that which stands around"—in other words, the surroundings that give rise to an event. Here, those surroundings constrict like a giant fist. That constriction also happens in the meter of the language itself with the double stress of "**fell clutch**," which slows the poem down as if also caught in a fist.

Notice again how the poem employs bodily reactions as an illustration of figurative language. While events do not *literally* squeeze the speaker, there *is* a great deal of reality to wincing and crying aloud (just think of Henley's own physical suffering in the hospital). "Wince" additionally acts as internal/slant rhyme with "circumstance".

The enjambment between these two lines is almost negligible, so much so that the line break basically takes the place of an implied comma (i.e. it's pretty close to being end stopped). Thus, the line break feels very natural, which in turn reassures us of the speaker's self-possession. We're not listening to a distraught and scattered lament, but a person making a well-ordered and carefully paced speech.

Lines 5 and 6 have a deliberately opposed relationship, with the first line describing adversity and the second asserting the speaker's strength in the face of that adversity. When talking about distressing times, the speaker carefully uses sound to represent that distress. For instance, these lines also play with the harsh sound of a hard /c/ through alliteration and consonance in the words "clutch," "circumstance," and "cried." This arguably even creates an example of cacophony, and the harsh sound of these lines mirrors the harshness of fate. Having taken on this negative feeling, the sound then also emphasizes the speaker's negative opinion of crying aloud, of showing what could be considered weakness.

This attitude represents the flip-side of the poem's interest in military-like valor: a disapproval of shows of weakness. Knowing the context of the poem is valuable here: one way that Victorians tried to compensate for the waning influence of religion at the time was with one of the forces that had helped to displace it—Darwinism. The speaker's distaste for apparent weakness subtly expresses an interest in what we now call Social Darwinism: the idea that individual people compete and succeed based on "fitness." For instance, someone who winces at medical treatment is not as fit to make it out of the hospital as a patient who remained unflinching. This is not to suggest that all the cruelties of Social Darwinism are necessarily implied in these lines, but rather to say that the speaker has incorporated some of its elements as part of a personal philosophy.

LINES 7-8

> *Under the bludgeonings of chance*
> *My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

These lines follow a structure similar to the previous two lines. In fact, they follow a structure of parallelism by both beginning with a preposition and exploring the speaker's responses to adversity. This parallelism allows the speaker to ramp up the violence even, to show how life can get even worse than we thought it could.

"Chance" now takes the place of its rhyming word, "circumstance." While circumstance might be seen as static conditions that control the course of one's life, chance is something quicker, more sudden and unexpected. It's also one syllable to circumstance's three, packing more punch in a shorter amount of time. Line 7 can either be seen as figuratively treating chance as an object that repeatedly hits the speaker until bloody, or as personification, in which chance is an evil being doing the hitting.

Either way, this comparison leads us to the poem's most vivid (yet still metaphorical) image of the body: "My head is bloody, but unbowed." Note again how the speaker uses a form of the verb *to be* to emphasize self-reliance: "My head *is* bloody, but unbowed."

The /b/ and /l/ sound creates the poem's most emphatic alliteration thus far in "**bl**udgeonings" and "**bl**oody," ramped up even more by the assonance of their subsequent /uh/ sounds. Their violence is palpable in the mouth. One could even be forgiven for thinking that the two words are somehow etymologically related, because of that repeated "bluh" sound. In reality, it's the poem playing with sound, again taking a three-syllable word and smashing it down to increase the violence. That violence, however, gets reversed in the consonance of "un**b**owed." That "un" negates the violence of the "**b**" sound and instead recalls the initial use of stress in the poem: as evidence of the speaker's inner strength.

LINES 9-10

> *Beyond this place of wrath and tears*
> *Looms but the Horror of the shade,*

Now the alliterative /b/ sound makes its final appearance in "Beyond," propelling us beyond the violence of the world into its final result: death. Of course, though, the poem has to evoke death metaphorically. "[T]his place of wrath and tears" is a reference to life, the terrible present from which we have glimpses of death.

Lines 9 and 10 are perhaps the poem's most pessimistic, because rather just saying that bad things happen, they seem to say that *only* bad things happen. In one of the poem's typical metrical switches, "Looms" get stressed, creating a trochee where there should be an iamb, as if grown heavy with the speaker's pessimism. The stress also mimics the aggressive

darkness of death.

> Looms but the Horror …

Life, then, is a place of anger and sadness. After it, comes "Horror" and "the shade." The word "but" here can be taken to mean "only"—as in, nothing can be expected after life except this horror. The shade is the darkness of death, of nothingness, echoing the references to Hell and night in the first stanza. It also faintly summons another meaning of shade as "ghost."

There are several ways to interpret what the poem suggests about life after death here. Perhaps nothingness waits for us after death, or Hell, or a miserable ghostly existence. The poem's not so concerned with saying exactly *what* the "Horror of the shade" is, as uncertainty is part of its whole point: we *can't* know what lies in store for us. The internal half rhyme between "place" and "shade" tightly knits these two lines together, which adds what might seems like a paradoxical assurance to these lines. But it's only an assurance *in uncertainty*, a confidence that nothing about death can be known.

LINES 11-12

> And yet the menace of the years
> 　　Finds and shall find me unafraid.

Even if the speaker has many years left ahead, those years take on "menace." That is, they become a threat. The line has a sonic unity due to the alliteration of /y/ sounds in "yet" and "years" and the assonance of the short /e/ in "yet" and "menace." This unity plays against the unity of the following line, which employs its own distinct sounds that don't appear in line 11, namely: the long "i" in "finds" and "find;" the long /a/ in "unafraid;" and the consonance and alliteration of /f/ in those three words.

Line 12 parallels line 10 by starting with the stressed verb "Finds."

> Looms but …

> Finds and …

As in the first stanza, the trochee represents the speaker's fearlessness in the face of insurmountable forces. The diacope of "Finds and shall find me" emphasizes how the speaker's fearless is both for the present and for the future. Partly due to this inversion, "shall find me" can also be read as three stressed syllables in a row. If so, the line consists of an iamb followed by a spondee, a trochee, and an iamb, making it highly irregular:

> Finds and shall find me unafraid.

These stressed syllables create a highly emphatic line. We're at

the end of the penultimate stanza here, so it makes sense that the speaker wants to ramp up the poem's intensity.

However, the most important word of all here, "unafraid," gets delayed till the last line, creating suspense as to what the "menace of the years" will "find." One reason for this delay is that the fearless speaker becomes the object of the verb, rather than its subject. The terrible future finds the *speaker*, rather than the speaker *confronting* that future. So, line 8 affirms the speaker's inner strength while also implying that the speaker's ultimately passive relationship to time.

LINES 13-14

> It matters not how strait the gate,
> 　　How charged with punishments the scroll,

Once again the poem reflects religious, and specifically Christian, ideas. "[S]trait the gate" alludes to Matthew 7:14 in the *King James Bible*: "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." Strait in this quote means narrow, and Jesus here is talking about how difficult it is to lead a virtuous life. Used in the poem, this narrowness also echoes the earlier "clutch" of circumstance, or even the way night "covers" the speaker. Throughout the poem, life has attempted to constrict and weigh down the speaker.

Yet gone are any holy overtones that would have suggested such suffering was necessary to achieve a holy life. Though "strait" gets used here as an adjective, we can also note its meaning as a noun, which is also its more modern usage. A strait is a narrow passage of water that connects two larger bodies of water. It's worth noting this nautical resonance because of line 16's use of the word "captain." In this way, the stanza lays the groundwork for its final victorious line.

Lines 13 and 14 also ramp up the poem's rhetorical energy through the use of asyndeton. This makes line 14 seem to intensify line 13, to "charge" it, building the sense of how much difficulty lies in store for the speaker. "Charged" here actually has the old meaning of *loaded up*. In other words, we're meant to imagine the scroll of fate as loaded up with punishments for the speaker. We can also think of the word's legal usage—to charge someone with a crime. This creates yet another buildup of intensity. As sonic evidence of the intensity, say the stressed word "charged" and notice how long the /ar/ sound stays in your mouth and throat, as if loading up time with its weight as well. Or look at the internal rhyme of "strait the gate," which suggests a kind of narrowing by limiting the variety of sounds.

LINES 15-16

> I am the master of my fate,
> 　　I am the captain of my soul.

These lines are poem's most famous and can be taken as a statement of the poem's philosophy. Before we get to what exactly they're saying, notice how certain rhetorical effects

contribute to the delivery of that philosophy. In fact, in some ways the bold delivery is essential to understanding that philosophy.

First off, the two lines use diacope—more specifically, anaphora—to heighten the emphasis on these lines. We've seen throughout the poem how pairs of lines work together or against each other. Here, the two lines not only work together, but they also do something unique. In their parallel grammatical construction (*I am the x of my y*) they create a kind of self-enclosed unit. They mirror each other and form a kind of identity. This in turn relates to the poem's emphasis on self-reliance.

Notice also the slant rhyme of "matters" in line 13 and "master" in line 15. Throughout the poem, the speaker has always been very careful with sound, using similarities between words to create specific transformations. Here, rather than working from the negation ("It matters not" in line 13) the speaker chooses affirmation: "I am the master of." This affirmation is part of the metaphors at work here. The first compares the relationship between the speaker and the speaker's fate to master and servant.

The second metaphor compares the speaker and the speaker's soul to captain and the captained, respectively. We could extrapolate a little here and say the soul becomes a ship of which the speaker is a captain. "Captain" also has military resonances as the title of a rank of officer. If we dig into this metaphor, we also have to extrapolate in the other direction. That is, if the part of the self that's like a ship is the soul, then what is the part of the self that's like a captain? There's not a clear answer here.

Of course, what matters for the poem's message is this: that we control our own inner lives. It matters that both of these metaphors represent control. But it's interesting to note that the poem ends on this implicit uncertainty about how exactly our selves are structured. How can one stand atop their soul like the deck of a ship? On one hand, we shouldn't be too literal with a poem's comparisons, especially a poem like "Invictus," which as we've established uses metaphors nested within metaphors.

On the other hand, if we want to understand what's at stake in a poem we have to try to inhabit its uncertainties as fully as possible. We should notice also how the consciousness of the body has fallen away by the end of the poem in favor of more abstract language. Line 1 invokes night as a physical covering, while line 16 ends on an undefinable "soul." In this way, it mimics a kind of healing process, where one becomes less aware of the body as it becomes less uncomfortable. But it also means that when we ask, *How can I stand atop my soul like the deck of a ship?* we're using the poem's own methods by placing the body within a metaphorical context. We also don't get any answer. And so the poem leaves us with an undaunted affirmation of inner strength, while also remaining vague on the nature of that

strength. After all, we have not left the darkness of unknowing, only continued to persevere through it.

⊗ SYMBOLS

THE SOUL
The soul is the most important symbol in "Invictus" and also the most ambiguous. It gets referenced twice in the poem, at the beginning and end, thereby framing the poem and emphasizing its importance. Though we can't identify the exact nature of the soul in this poem, it does possess certain important qualities. The first is given to us in the word "unconquerable." Here, the soul symbolizes whatever it is, within oneself, that cannot be defeated by life's hardships. It represents something like inner strength, or the source of inner strength.

In the context of late nineteenth-century England (when and where this poem was written), the word "soul" has Christian connotations. The poet gestures at Christianity with the phrase "whatever gods may be," while also using that phrase to undermine any certainty in religion. If religion's main competitor during this era was science, we can think of the soul as representing some core inner of strength given to one by nature, rather than God.

By the end of the poem, the soul has become something that can be "captained." Rather than simply representing a source of strength that one relies on, now it becomes something that one actively guides and controls, perhaps like a ship. This formulation increases the conceptual divide between the "I" (at the start of the line) and "my soul." So, while this final line once again affirms the power of inner strength, it also heightens the mystery of the exact *nature* of that strength. That strength, the "soul," both belongs to the speaker and is separate from the speaker.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "I thank whatever gods may be / For my unconquerable soul. "
- **Line 16:** " I am the captain of my soul. "

THE SCROLL
On an earthly level, the scroll here can be taken as the legal documentation of one's punishment for a crime. We can think of all the instances in which paper documentation seals one's fate, from ancient instances of exile to modern cases of eviction and criminal sentencing. Fate, and fatalism, is the central concept here; symbolically, the potentially punishment-filled scroll reflects the inevitable hardships of life.

Due to the poem's thematic concern with fate and its ongoing engagement with religion, there's also a Christian interpretation to this symbol. This interpretation basically takes the earthly one to a cosmic scale, where God decides whether each person receives eternal damnation or eternal salvation. We can also think of the recording angel—that is, the angel who actually writes down all human events. To generalize, then, this symbol of the scroll suggests theological determinism through the permanence of writing, a book of fate that has decided the course of all our lives in advance.

We should also note this symbolic use of *writing* here, against which the poem implicitly sets up its own form of writing. Rather than encompassing all lives on a cosmic scale, as this "scroll" might, the poem refers to a single life: the speaker's. However, we can also note how the poem, like the scroll, places the speaker's individual life *within* the context of cosmic forces, again reflecting the push and pull between fate and self-determination.

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
>
> * **Line 14:** " How charged with punishments the scroll, "

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

The enjambment in "Invictus" works very intuitively. Line breaks happen at natural pauses and help establish a clear conceptual relationship between the two lines in question.

For example, look at lines 3 and 4. In line 4, the speaker introduces the act of thanking and who gets thanked (that is, the "gods"). Then line 5 details exactly *what* the speaker is thankful for (that is, their "unconquerable soul").

A similar case happens in lines 9 and 10, where line 10 serves to complete the description offered by line 9. What is "beyond" the "wrath and tears"? The looming "Horror of the shade." This use of enjambment pushes the reader to keep going in order to complete the thought, much as the speaker keeps going through uncertainty and adversity. Enjambment also creates a kind of suspension where we wait to see how the second line with not only complete the sense of the previous line, but also *intensify* it. Look, for instance, how "Horror of the shade" offers an intenser version of "this place of wrath and tears."

Other times (throughout the second stanza and particularly in lines 11 and 12) , the enjambment serves to highlight an opposition. The first line details an instance of adversity, then the second line asserts how the speaker remains undaunted by that adversity. Notice how in these instances the speaker doesn't escape that adversity. For example, line 12 begins as "the menace of the years / finds" the speaker. Or how, on the page, the speaker's "bloody" body in line 8 is literally "Under

the bludgeonings of chance" in line 7. That is, enjambment helps lyrically reflect the ways in which the speaker asserts strength *within* constraints.

> **Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**
>
> * **Lines 3-4:** "be / For"
> * **Lines 5-6:** "circumstance / I"
> * **Lines 7-8:** "chance / M"
> * **Lines 9-10:** "tears / Looms"
> * **Lines 11-12:** "years / Finds"

ANAPHORA

In the final two lines of the poem, anaphora creates a rhetorical swell, a kind of victory bell or at least a call to arms. The repetition of "I am" emphasizes the role of self-sufficiency in the speaker's unending victory over despair. Deploying it at the end of the poem allows the speaker to finish on a crescendo, a moment of triumph against all the adversity presented throughout the previous lines.

This is not just any anaphora, either: it is "I am," the specific repetition of an assertion of self. By contrast, in the poem's opening, the speaker doesn't actually appear as a subject until the end of the line, with the word "me." This "me" is also comparatively passive, having been *covered by* the night. In the poem's final moments, however, the echoing "I am" opens both of the final two lines, placing the speaker in a position of dominance.

The poem as a whole essentially repeats itself over and over: the speaker encounters adversity, yet remains undaunted. That's part of the point: neither adversity nor inner strength are going away. But in order to maintain the reader's interest, the poem has to vary its devices and increase its intensity. Anaphora thus serves as a fitting end to the poem not only because it ratchets up the intensity, but also because it summarizes the poem's repetition by being a figure of repetition itself. The phrase "I am" essentially captures what the speaker has been doing through the poem. At each instance of adversity, the speaker has reiterated the certainty of inner strength.

> **Where Anaphora appears in the poem:**
>
> * **Line 15:** "I am"
> * **Line 16:** "I am"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton occurs between lines 13 and 14. Grammatically, there should be a "nor" between these lines—i.e. the speaker is saying that *this* doesn't matter, *nor* does *that*. By skipping over the implied "nor," however, the speaker intensifies the list of challenges the poem presents in this moment. There's no time

for polite conjunctions, and the speaker, gathering strength, essentially steamrolls from one point to the next. The speaker is confident here, assertively casting off the inevitable hardships of life.

Using this device in the final stanza also helps signal the climax of the poem. This specific device is related to the use of anaphora that follows it, in that it adds variety and emphasis to the end of what has been a purposefully repetitive structure.

Asyndeton also creates the subtle illusion of acting as an appositive, so that line 14 seems to clarify line 13, whereas in reality they form a single list. However, by linking the list items together in this way, the poem makes readers more aware of how they resonate with each other. Specifically, the use of asyndeton draws attention to the shared religious undertones of these two lines. "Strait the gate" is a biblical allusion that the speaker is using to talk about how narrow or difficult one's path in life may be. (Specifically, it alludes to Matthew 7:14 in the *King James Bible*: "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.") "The scroll" then suggests the concept of fate, in that it can be interpreted as a list of hardships that will inevitably befall the speaker. Both instances use these religious undertones to suggest that life is full of adversity, and this relationship between the lines is intensified by the lack of conjunction separating them.

> **Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 13-14:** "gate, /   How"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is clear throughout nearly the entire poem. Forming phrases that mirror each other allows the speaker to capture the repetitive nature of adversity—and, in turn, to highlight the constancy of the speaker's strength in overcoming that adversity.

The most straightforward instance of parallelism occurs in lines 5 and 7:

> In the fell clutch of circumstance

and

> Under the bludgeonings of chance

Both lines follow the same grammatical structure:

> [Preposition] + the + [noun phrase] + of + [noun]

Additionally, each uses its first noun phrase ("fell clutch" and "bludgeonings") to evoke physicality and action, and its second noun to evoke abstract fate ("circumstance" and "chance"). Beginning these phrases with prepositions depicts the speaker

as *caught by* fate, dependent on it. Additionally, both "In" and "Under" mirror the night that "covers" the speaker in stanza one.

Other instances of parallelism in the poem are less exact, or phase into other poetic devices. For example, lines 13 and 14 have parallel elements in that both begin with "how" and proceed to list potential adversities in life. However, these are more specifically diacope. Lines 15 and 16 clearly offer a high degree of parallelism, in that both assert the speaker's identity. There is again a more *specific* term to describe what's going on here, though: anaphora.

In all these instances, however, parallelism conveys how each instance of adversity and resilience mirrors all the other instances of adversity and resilience. In other words, the speaker turns to parallelism to emphasize the repeated hardships of life, and to also suggest that—even if the *specifics* of these hardships are different each time—the end result is the same: the speaker will overcome whatever difficulties life tosses up.

> **Where Parallelism appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 5:** "In the fell clutch of circumstance"
> - **Line 7:** "Under the bludgeonings of chance "
> - **Lines 13-14:** "how strait the gate, /   How charged with punishments the scroll, "
> - **Lines 15-16:** "I am the master of my fate, /   I am the captain of my soul. "

ALLITERATION

"Invictus" contains many instances of alliteration. Broadly, the poem uses sound patterns like this in order to convey its considered construction. We hear a self-possessed speaker deploying sound carefully and emphatically, rather a despairing speaker throwing out sounds haphazardly. The first instance of such a use comes in line 2: "the pit from pole to pole." The percussive /p/ sound is a harsh, almost spitting way to begin the poem, suggesting a certain scorn for the darkness from which the speaker initially emerges.

Many other instances of alliteration overlap with consonance. The following is an especially long example:

> 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."

This example captures again how the poem uses sound to create a sense of unity. Additionally, the /b/ sounds in lines 7 and 8 carry a kind of forcefulness that mirrors the violence those lines describe. All instances of alliteration in the poem do these two things: 1) create formal unity in order to emphasize

the speaker's self-possession, and 2) mirror in some way the content of the language. In line 6, for instance, the repetition of /n/ sounds in "not" and "nor," plus the consonance of "winced," makes the speaker's negation resonate all the more strongly; the speaker decidedly has *not* flinched in the face of hardship.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "p," "p," "p"
- **Line 6:** "n," "n"
- **Line 7:** "b," "l"
- **Line 8:** "b," "l," "b," "b"
- **Line 9:** "B"
- **Line 10:** "b"
- **Line 11:** "y," "y"
- **Line 12:** "F," "f"

ASSONANCE

As with [alliteration](#), [assonance](#) in this poem emphasizes that the language has been very carefully put together. Yet whereas alliteration often has a visceral effect (as in the /b/ sounds in lines 7 and 8), assonance operates more subtly and conceptually. Some of its most evocative uses in the poem can also be classified as instances of [slant rhyme](#). Staying with 7 and 8, look at how the sound in "bludgeonings" gets taken up again by "bloody." The sonic similarity emphasizes the conceptual and causal link between these two words (bludgeoning causes one to become bloody). This use almost seems to suggest a deeper link between the two words, such as a shared etymological root. The link, however, is purely poetic. We imagine a relation because the poem has placed them together in this way.

Another similar instance is between "matters" and "master" in lines 13 and 15. The speaker transforms the weaker "it matters not" into the stronger "I am the master." The similar sounds between the two words "master" and "matter" (created through a combination of alliteration, assonance, and [consonance](#)) ensure that readers see and hear this transformation.

Other instances of more straightforward of assonance are more subtle. They don't necessarily offer broad thematic implications, but rather unify individual phrases. Look at, for instance, "clutch of circumstance" in line 5 and "yet the menace" in line 11. While less bold than instances of slant rhyme, these instances of slant rhyme do their part in exhibiting the careful craftsmanship of this poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "o," "o"
- **Line 4:** "ou"
- **Line 5:** "u," "u"
- **Line 7:** "u"

- **Line 8:** "oo," "u"
- **Line 11:** "e," "e"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "a," "ai," "a"
- **Line 15:** "a"

METAPHOR

"Invictus" operates at an intensely figurative level throughout. In fact, almost every line can be seen as [metaphorical](#). The very first line introduces readers to this fact, by treating "night" as a metaphor for suffering. As we'll see, the physicality of metaphor plays a particularly important role in the poem.

In the first two lines, the poem employs nested metaphors. In other words, a metaphor gets compared to something else, becoming a whole new metaphor in the process. This happens three times in these two lines. First, suffering gets compared to night. Then, that night gets compared to something that can physically cover the speaker, like tar. Finally, the speaker compares the darkness of this covering to Hell itself. As an added bonus, we're invited to imagine how this night-hell covering fills the world "from pole to pole." One explanation for why this nesting of metaphors doesn't become burdensome is that none of the metaphorical transformations are particularly startling. We're not surprised, for instance, to see night compared to Hell. Together, these metaphors underscore the sheer breadth of the suffering that the speaker is up against—which, in turn, makes the speaker's resolve all the more impressive.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses line parings (explored more fully in the entry on [enjambment](#)) to elaborate metaphors. So, for instance, line 7's "bludgeonings" allows the speaker to go to the extreme of using the word "bloody" while remaining purely in a metaphorical register. The speaker is not literally physically harmed here, but is instead using strongly physical figurative language to emphasize the intensity of the hardships the speaker has faced. As in the first stanza, this elaboration often involves configurations of physical space as well. For instance, in lines 9 and 10, shade represents something like the darkness of death. We can imagine life as a space (full of anger and sorrow), and then at the edge of that space a vast shadow, which represents death.

In these metaphors, as in the poem's other metaphors, physicality plays an important role. Sometimes that means invoking the speaker's body, sometimes it means playing with spatial arrangements. This weds abstract concepts like "circumstance" to easier-to-understand physical images, thus fully engrossing the reader.

The final two lines also represent important moments of metaphor. When the speaker declares "I am the captain of my soul," this implies a separation between the speaker and that soul—which here seems to be construed as something like a

ship that the speaker steers. The speaker is using metaphor here to assert a sense of personal control and freedom.

> **Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**
>
> - Lines 1-2
> - Lines 5-8
> - Lines 9-10
> - Lines 13-16

PERSONIFICATION

The personification in "Invictus" has a distinctly religious tone to it. This is partly due to the introduction of the word "gods" so early in the poem. Think, for instance, of how different Greek gods represent qualities or inventions (e.g. Zeus representing thunder or Athena representing wisdom). The poem's main use of personification occurs in the phrase "clutch of circumstance." Here, we can imagine "circumstance" as a malicious god that squeezes the speaker in its fist. We can follow that personification through and see "chance" as another god that beats the speaker; or, alternatively, as the instrument with which a god beats the speaker.

Though it's not an instance of outright personification, we can also imagine a god or gods hovering behind "the scroll" from which the speaker's challenges arise. All this to say, there's a sense that shadowy divine beings lurk behind many of the speaker's challenges in the poem. That's *not* to say that the speaker necessarily *believes* in such gods. Rather, this undercurrent of personification works to give the reader a more vivid sense of the mysterious forces at work against the speaker, divine or otherwise. This all works to establish that there are indeed certain forces beyond the speaker's control, and that the important thing is to thus turn towards inner strength to face difficulties as they arise.

> **Where Personification appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 5:** "In the fell clutch of circumstance "
> - **Line 7:** "Under the bludgeonings of chance "
> - **Line 14:** "the scroll, "

ALLUSION

The phrase "strait the gate" comes from the *New Testament*. Here's the version from the *King James Bible*: "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14). The phrase comes from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Readers of the time wouldn't have been surprised to see this famous biblical episode referenced in a poem, especially one dealing with personal adversity. The quote's *use*, however, might have surprised them. In its original context, the strait gate represents the rigorous requirements of leading a virtuous life. Here, however, the gate becomes one of the challenges that

make life *bad*. It has more in common with punishment than virtue.

The "scroll" of the next line, while not necessarily a particular allusion, could be seen as referencing the Book of Life—on which the Judeo-Christian God records the names of the virtuous—and the Book of Death (or the Book of the Dead), which records the names of the wicked. In general, it gestures at Christian beliefs that God controls what happens to us both during life and after. We've also seen how earlier lines treat life as Hell and cast doubt on the afterlife. All taken together, these lines undermine Christian beliefs even as they allude to them.

> **Where Allusion appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 13:** "It matters not how strait the gate, "
> - **Line 14:** "the scroll, "

DIACOPE

Diacope gets deployed near the end of the poem as a means of heightening the poem's intensity. Each instance of diacope offers a unique moment of emphasis. In line 2, the repetition of "pole" underscores the vast nature of the suffering from which the speaker emerges. Later, in line 12, "finds and shall find" creates drama by unexpectedly varying the tense of the verb: the speaker could just as well have said, "Shall always find me unafraid." This, however, would have created a normal line of iambic tetrameter ("Shall always find me unafraid"). Instead, "Finds and shall find me unafraid" has an exciting rearrangement of stress that parallels the phrase's rearrangement of tenses. The speaker places equal emphasis on present and future to emphasize the interplay between the two and the constancy of inner strength.

The next instance of diacope in lines 13 and 14, "how strait the gate, / How charged with punishments," verges on anaphora. The following repetition of "I am" in lines 15 and 16 makes good on that promise. Seen all together, diacope offers a steady progression of repetitions. These repetitions mirror the repetitive struggle between adversity and resilience that recurs throughout the poem. The poem progresses towards the most realized instance of diacope in the final lines. We can thus see how those lines fully embody the poems' philosophy of self-sufficiency.

> **Where Diacope appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 2:** "pole," "pole"
> - **Line 12:** "Finds," "find"
> - **Line 13:** "how"
> - **Line 14:** "How"
> - **Line 15:** "I am"
> - **Line 16:** "I am "

CONSONANCE

Consonance plays a similar role to alliteration in the poem, though it is often more subtle. Like assonance, consonance often serves to unify a line and emphasize the care with which the speaker crafted that line. Look, for instance, at "clutch of circumstance" in line 5. Notice too how the following line picks up that hard /c/ sound in "cried." The harshness of these sounds creates a moment of cacophony, capturing how life's discord attacks the speaker incessantly. At the same time, this repetition of sound serves to bind these two thematically linked lines together. The /b/ sounds in lines 7 and 8 serve a similar role.

Even more subtly, look at how the hard /c/ repeats throughout the first stanza in "covers," "black," "thank," and "unconquerable." A similar effect occurs throughout the final stanza with /s/ and /m/ sounds. It's easy to miss these repetitions, because their job isn't to stand out so much as hold the poem together on an almost subconscious level. They all employ a subtle, unifying music in order to convey the speaker's self-possession and carefulness.

> **Where Consonance appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 1:** "c"
> - **Line 2:** "ck"
> - **Line 3:** "k"
> - **Line 4:** "c," "qu"
> - **Line 5:** "c," "c," "c"
> - **Line 6:** "c"
> - **Line 7:** "b"
> - **Line 8:** "b," "b," "b"
> - **Line 12:** "F," "f," "f"
> - **Line 13:** "m," "s," "s"
> - **Line 14:** "m," "s," "s"
> - **Line 15:** "m," "m," "s"
> - **Line 16:** "m," "s"

🗐 VOCABULARY

Invictus ( ) - The Latin translation of "unconquerable." Originally, this poem was an untitled section in a longer poem. The title was added later when the poem was reproduced on its own. In this way, the title can be thought of as a "translation" of the poem as a whole.

Pit (Line 2) - Hell—specifically, Hell as a place of darkness and suffering that lies beneath the Earth as a physical pit, an immense cavern.

Pole (Line 2) - The imaginary ends of an axis. Think of the North and South Poles, the two extreme points of the axis the Earth rotates around. Here, this word evokes the global expanse of Hell and night.

Fell (Line 5) - Dangerous, evil, ferocious. "Fell" is also etymologically related to the word "felon." The "clutch" here thus becomes deadly, unstoppable. By extension, we can associate these qualities with circumstance as well, which becomes like a villainous god.

Circumstance (Line 5) - We can think of "circumstance" as the material conditions of one's life. Its Latin root means "that which stands around"—the surroundings that have an effect on what happens to you. It's not quite as big as fate and not quite as random as chance. For readers of the time it may have evoked, for instance, the difference between someone born to factory workers versus someone born to bankers. We can also apply it to Henley's life, seeing his tuberculosis and subsequent medical struggle as circumstance.

Wrath (Line 9) - "Wrath" means anger, with a slightly archaic slant to it. It's meant to be more poetic than simply saying "anger." It also has religious connotations, as in "the wrath of God," which connect it to the poem's religious concerns.

Shade (Line 10) - "Shade" has its usual meaning of darkness, while summoning the poem's previous association of darkness with Hell. Here it's meant to represent a literal Hell, or at least some kind of horrible darkness that lies on the other side of death. "Shade" also can refer to a ghost, again suggesting some sort of looming presence with which the speaker must grapple.

Menace (Line 11) - A threat. Here, future years become a threat because their only certainties are suffering and death.

Strait (Line 13) - This is from a biblical allusion to Matthew 7:14: "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." Strait here means narrow, evoking a gate that is difficult to pass through. Strait also can refer to narrow passages of water. This secondary, nautical meaning has echoes of the soul-as-ship metaphor that the later word "captain" implies.

Gate (Line 13) - This is part of a biblical allusion to Matthew 7:14: "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." Within this context, the gate evokes a narrow passageway that is difficult to pass through, just like the requirements of leading a virtuous life. In a broader Christian context, it also references St. Peter's Gate, the entrance to Heaven, through which only the good may pass.

Scroll (Line 14) - The use of "scroll" evokes many different instances of the more general idea of a "book of fate." In Christianity, God has a Book of Life that contains the names of all the virtuous souls, and a contrasting Book of Death with all sinners. There's a similar tradition related to St. Peter's Gate, where St. Peter looks up each soul's name in a book before granting or denying access to Heaven.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Invictus" consists of four rhymed quatrain stanzas. There is no single standard use for [quatrains](#) in English—they have been used widely and evoke a large range of emotions and experiences. In the case of this poem, quatrains create a sense of stability. The structure emphasizes order and repetition. The poem contains four stanzas with four stresses per line, further adding to that sense of order. Each stanza also finishes with a period, a clear [end-stop](#), causing each one to act as a self-contained unit. This allows each stanza to repeat the poem's central structure of describing adversity and then invoking personal strength. The stanzas build on one another by offering variations on this theme. The self-enclosure of the stanzas also mimics the self-sufficiency that acts as the poem's main philosophy.

METER

"Invictus" follows a relatively straightforward [iambic tetrameter](#). The poem basically follows this meter consistently, except for a few careful variations, which matches the speaker's self-possession. The meter doesn't jump all over the place with expressive twitchiness, but marches steadily forward. However, the willful speaker won't be held down by meter when the time comes to make a point.

The first line displays both these qualities:

> **Out** of | the **night** | that **cov-** | ers **me,**

The poem employs a [trochee](#) for emphasis at the beginning, to capture the feeling of the speaker emerging from night. A similar thing happens with line 2, perhaps stressing the intensity of the suffering from which the speaker emerges:

> **Black** as | the **pit** | from **pole** | to **pole,**

After that, however, rather than continuing to vary the meter, the poem falls back into a carefully-controlled iambic pattern. It's also worth noting the four stresses of each line mirror the four lines of the stanza and four stanzas of the poem, thus adding to the poem's overall feeling of stability.

The most metrically intense moment comes in line 12:

> **Finds** and | **shall find** | me un- | a**fraid.**

Here, the extra stresses—which create a [spondee](#) in the second [foot](#), followed by another trochee in the third—serve to emphasize the speaker's willful attitude towards time. This line could also arguably be scanned as follows, with a spondee followed by an iamb:

> **Finds** and | **shall find** | me un- | a**fraid.**

In either case, though, the emphasis on "shall find" suggests the intensity of the speaker's faith in their own inner strength; it's not a question of whether or not "menace of the years" will find the speaker again—it *will*, and the speaker *will* boldly face it head on.

After this, the poem returns to its stability. In another moment of intensity, the final two lines both begin with trochees:

> **I** am | the **mast-** | er **of** | my **fate,**
> **I** am | the **cap-** | tain **of** | my **soul.**

This, however, only serves to mirror the poem's opening stress. Thus, the poem ends by emphasizing the speaker's willfulness, self-possession, and carefulness.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem employs an ABAB rhyme scheme in each [stanza](#). The rhyme scheme for the entire poem can be stated as follows:

> ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH

The poem never deviates from this rhyme scheme, again emphasizing its stability and the speaker's steadfast strength. It does, however, employ an [internal rhyme](#) and some [internal slant rhymes](#).

The poem's internal rhyme comes in the first sentence of the last stanza in the phrase "strait the gate." With this rhyme of words that come one almost immediately after the other, sound seems to limit itself, as if narrowing like the gate it describes.

The pome also contains slant rhymes in the words "winced" and "circumstance"/"chance"; in "bludgeonings" and "bloody"; in "place" and "shade"/"unafraid"; and in "matters" and "master." All these subtle rhymes work to show transformations and evolutions between these words. For instance, in the second stanza, "bludgeonings" leads to one becoming "bloody." This transformation parallels the same stanza's use of "winced" as the result of "circumstance" (though of course the speaker also rises above that result).

Next, in the third stanza, "place" (which represents life) sets the scene for the rhyming words "shade" and "unafraid, each of which modifies the "place." "[S]hade" introduces the darkness of death that surrounds the place of life, and "unafraid" states that this darkness cannot daunt the speaker. Then, in the fourth stanza, the speaker's fearlessness becomes further intensified as "matters" transforms into "master." This transformation replaces negation ("It matters *not*") with affirmation ("I *am* the master"), while also switching from the third person ("It") to the first person ("I"), further emphasizing the speaker's self-control.

Using these internal rhymes while being faithful to the overall rhyme scheme again emphasizes the speaker's self-control, on one hand, and expressiveness on the other.

👤 SPEAKER

The poem offers very few hints as to the speaker's identity. In some sense it's meant to be general enough to apply to anybody's life, which has contributed to its enduring popularity; this is a poem meant to be able to inspire anyone.

One reason we might relate the poem to Henley's own life is its consciousness of the body, as is clear in line 6. After all, Henley wrote the poem while undergoing treatment for tuberculosis of the bone. To assume Henley himself is the speaker of the poem isn't necessary, however, and the poem always uses the body in a highly [metaphorical](#) manner.

We can also sense that this speaker has been impacted by Christianity yet no longer has certainty in it. Apart from this, the speaker could be anyone who repeatedly affirms personal resilience in the face of incredible adversity.

Ultimately, the speaker asserts a philosophy of self-sufficiency and a kind of inner free will, regardless of the events fate throws at us. This philosophy comes to define the speaker.

🌐 SETTING

"Invictus" has no clear setting because almost all of it is meant to be taken [metaphorically](#). However, its language does create metaphorical or psychological spaces that the poem passes through. Look at, for instance, the night/hell that the poem comes out of in the first stanza, which becomes as big as a world. This hell "Looms" again in the third stanza, this time as a literal Hell in the distance. In these instances, the space of the poem becomes quite large, even cosmic in scope.

At other times, space constricts to encompass only the speaker's body, as in the "clutch of circumstance" or the "strait" gate. These changes in scale emphasize the many ways we can confront adversity in our lives. Sometimes it seems like the whole universe conspires against us, other times it's our own bodies. We can apply many different specific situations to these spaces, because they're metaphorical images, not literal ones; in other words, this is a poem that seeks to offer a sense of inspiration and resolve that applies to many different settings.

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Henley's work emerged during a time when writers were grappling with how individuals make meaning in a world where God's existence is uncertain. After publishing in *In Hospital*, the book that "Invictus" comes from, Henley would go on to have a long and influential literary career in London. Among his oldest friends in this scene was Robert Louis Stevenson. An editor introduced the two writers while Henley was in the hospital undergoing treatment for tuberculosis of the bone. Henley had already lost one leg to the disease as a child, and Stevenson acknowledged Henley as the inspiration for his character Long John Silver in the book *[Treasure Island](#)*.

The values of the literary scene that Henley helped foster can be seen in both *Treasure Island* and "Invictus." Both affirm life, adventure, and the indomitable human spirit. They don't shy away from suffering, nor do they treat suffering as an excuse to turn away from life. Henley and his circle regarded themselves in opposition to the decadence of writers like Algernon Charles Swinburne and Oscar Wilde. Rather than languishing in apathy, excess, artificiality, and contemplations of death, Henley and his fellow writers affirmed life at all costs. For them, this compensated for a world without God.

Though *In Hospital* does contain some poems written in an early form of [free verse](#), Henley's poetry is not generally regarded as formally radical. Rather, his poems helped established a new mood and tone for English writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Henley wrote Invictus almost 20 years after Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*. In the intervening years, science had thoroughly shaken the foundations of Christianity. Many philosophies emerged to replace it. One such theory is Social Darwinism, a theory that coincides with the rise of capitalism and seeks to apply evolutionary theory to human beings. The Romantic Era, which preceded Henley's, believed that individuals could find meaning in their lives by turning to nature.

Without subscribing to any specific theory, Henley's poetry can be seen as engaging with these questions, testing out a way to evaluate individual lives without reference to God. For instance, although "Invictus" makes reference to Christianity, science was just as important in Henley's life. During his time in the hospital, his remaining leg would have been amputated as well, had he not insisted upon a doctor who would perform the latest form of treatment. Thus we see Henley engaging with the major forces of his time: religion, science, and the individual.

📚 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [More Poems by Henley](#) — More of Henleys's poems available at poets.org. [(https://poets.org/poet/william-ernest-henley)](https://poets.org/poet/william-ernest-henley)

- [Morgan Freeman Reading "Invictus"](#) — As a political prisonor, Nelson Mandela recited "Invictus" to other prisoners as a message of self-empowerment. Clint Eastwood references Mandela's experience in this scene from his 2009 movie of the same name. [(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FozhZHuAcCs)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FozhZHuAcCs)

- **Henley's Life and Times** — For more information about Henley's life and the intellectual currents of his day, check out this 1945 literary biography by Jerome Hamilton Buckley. (https://books.google.com/books/about/William_Ernest_Henley.html?id=8f5ZngEACAAJ&source=kp_book_description)

- **Portraits of Henley** — These portraits from the National Portrait Gallery in London testify to other artists fascination with Henley. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp02133/william-ernest-henley)

- **A Biography of Henley** — A short biography of Henley from Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Ernest-Henley)

💬 HOW TO CITE

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