Invictus
By William Ernest Henley
1875

William Ernest Henley (1849-1903) was an English poet, critic, and editor. The following poem, published in 1875, is his best known work, which he wrote just after the amputation of his foot due to tuberculosis. As you read, take notes on the poem’s form and how it contributes to the tone of the speaker.

[1] 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.

[5] 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,

[15] I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

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1. a disease caused by bacterial infection
2. Unconquerable (adjective): unable to be defeated
3. fierce, cruel, or terrible
4. beatings
5. Wrath (noun): violent anger
6. Loom (verb): to appear in a large, strange, or frightening form
7. Menace (noun): a threat
8. narrow (archaic)
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes a central theme of the text?
   A. Identity is important to building self-confidence.
   B. Independence means refusing to follow anyone else’s rules or laws.
   C. Resilience is the ability to keep going and to refuse to give up.
   D. Sacrifice is necessary to make someone a hero.

2. How does the poem’s use of darkness in its imagery contribute to the text’s overall meaning?
   A. The poem describes night covering the earth from “pole to pole” (line 2), suggesting that the speaker’s outlook on the world is very bleak and hopeless.
   B. The poem describes “night” (line 1) covering the speaker, symbolic of the adversity and/or suffering he faces.
   C. The poem describes “the Horror of the shade” (line 10), suggesting that the speaker’s hard times are only temporary.
   D. The poem describes a dark “place of wrath and tears” (line 9), implying that the speaker is overcome by his depression.

3. PART A: Given the context of the poem, what does the title word “Invictus” most likely mean?
   A. Careless
   B. Lucky
   C. Unfortunate
   D. Undefeated

4. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “I thank whatever gods may be / For my unconquerable soul.” (Lines 3-4)
   B. “In the fell clutch of circumstance / ....Under the bludgeonings of chance” (Lines 5-7)
   C. “Beyond this place of wrath and tears / Looms but the Horror of the shade” (Lines 9-10)
   D. “It matters not how strait the gate, / How charged with punishments the scroll” (Lines 13-14)
5. How does the poem's rhyme scheme and meter develop the tone?
Discussion Questions

 Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How do you think the author would feel about receiving help from others? Cite the text in your answer.

2. In the context of this poem, how does a person overcome adversity? Cite evidence from this poem, your own experience, and other literature or art in your answer.

3. Do you think it is a good thing or a bad thing to rely on others in the face of adversity?

4. Can we ever truly be independent? Explain your answer.

5. There seems to be some tension in this text: the author claims to control his own life, yet he is subjected to the cruelty of chance and feels threatened by the future. Discuss this tension. According to the author, how can we be the “master of our fate” when there are circumstances beyond our control?

6. Do you believe that people can truly be “the master of [their] fate”? Is there really no such thing as destiny? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.