

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 bludgeoning 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.

You probably didn't catch all of this 18th century poem, some of it's foreign language, although, as poetry goes, you might have caught a certain feeling emanating from it. If anything, the last two lines are both recognizable and sum up the poem Invictus which means Unconquered in Latin.

I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

The author, William Hensley, had a very good reason to pen these words.

Since the age of 12 he suffered from tuberculosis of the bone, an infection that culminated in the doctors cutting off his right leg just below the knee.

He was 17 when the surgery took place.

Soon after the infection showed up in his left foot.
Doctors being doctors they decided that since cutting off the
right leg worked then it made sense to cut of his left foot.
Taking matters into his own hands Hensley decided to enlist
the help of one Joseph Lister who was able to clear up the
infection and save his right foot.
Lying in the hospital after this ordeal Hensley put pen to paper
and wrote Inviticus.

He'd made it through 5 years of serious suffering, his teen
years gone.
He'd survived a dangerous operation, as far as the mid 1800's
where concerned.
He'd defied the doctors and taken control of the situation,
saving his right foot.
He was, as the title of his poem indicated, unconquered.

William Hensley would have fit in well in 2017.
A 150 years after he wrote this poem we are truly the masters
of our fate and the captains of our souls in many ways.
We're no longer tossed about by all the infections and diseases
that a man like William had to contend with.
Today more people die of obesity in our world than starvation.
The problem is no longer lack of proper medicine or lack of
food it's our own inability, our lack of will to properly
distribute what we have to those who don't have.

We're in control of so many things that were once out of our
control or worse controlled us.

Its no wonder Hensley's very modern sounding poem is full of
the word "I" and variations of it.

My unconquerable soul
I have not winced nor cried aloud.

My head is bloody, but unbowed.
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

He's the main actor in life's drama and why shouldn't he be.
He's the one who spent 5 years in and out of the hospital.
He's the one who went through his right leg being sawed off.
He survived.
He is unconquered.

The tone of Hensley's life is very similar to King David's
David was also unconquered, the most famous king that Israel
would ever see.

As a young boy he single handedly defeated the giant Goliath
with his slingshot.
He survived Saul's attempts to kill him and become the king of
Israel.
He has every reason to cry out:

I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

He's in control
And yet David's poem, Psalm 16, has a very different tone than
Inviticus.

Protect me O God, for in you I take refuge.
I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord, I have no good apart from
you."

You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
In your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Can you hear the difference?

The words I and my are definitely present, because king David is part of this drama, we're a part of it.

But there's so much more than just I or my, there is you and your.

In Hensley's poem there is only himself.

In David's poem there is another, one outside himself, something beyond I and my.

David is drawn beyond the boundaries of his own being to something greater than himself.

It's God; the LORD who is David's safety;
who is the only one that goodness comes from;
who shows the path of life and whose mere presence means
joy and pleasure.

What a difference between a world that is only I and my, and one that includes you and your?

Of course even though Hensley fails to acknowledge anything outside himself in his poem, those forces are still acting on him.

As I mentioned earlier, after his first amputation an infection developed in his left foot and the doctors attempted to cut it off as well.

What I didn't mention was the unlikely circumstance that led Joseph Lister to discover the antiseptic that saved Hensley's foot.

The antiseptic in question is carbolic acid also known as Phenol.

Lister had initially suspected its usefulness when he saw it sprayed on fields that were irrigated with sewage waste.

Somehow the carbolic acid reacted with the bacteria in the sewage and took away a significant amount of smell. This led him to wonder if this compound could be used to treat bacterial infections in humans.

Later on Lister observed that cows safely grazed upon the fields where carbolic acid was used and this led him to believe that the chemical could safely be used as an antiseptic in humans.

Hensley's foot was saved because of this.

Like Hensley, any of us who make a good decision or two easily proclaim:

I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

We invoke Invictus – Unconquered.

Of course the truth is much more complex. The good that comes into our lives is a symphony of actions playing behind the scenes, orchestrated in ways that we cannot comprehend.

Even before Hensley enlisted Joseph Lister's help carbolic acid was being poured on sewage ridden fields.

The good was already in motion.

The path of life was already being cleared.

The safe place already prepared.

Hensley's inability to acknowledge more than himself didn't stand in the way of the LORD.

God is the master of our fate.

God is the captain of our soul.

Amen.