

Words of Solace

Though access to books was severely limited during his incarceration, Mandela took solace in the small amount of literature on which he could get his hands. Most famously, he is said to have kept a copy of the poem ‘Invictus’ by the English poet William Henley on a scrap of paper to inspire him in his darker moments. It is a poem that extols the strength of the human spirit even in the face of the grimmest adversity, so it is little surprise that Mandela connected so strongly with it.

‘Invictus’ first appeared in print in 1875. Though Henley was only in his mid-twenties at the time, he had suffered his fair share of hardship. Burdened by ill-health, he suffered a serious attack of tuberculosis in his youth that caused one of his legs to be amputated. It is said that he wrote these verses to demonstrate his resilience despite this setback.

Initially untitled, the poem received the name ‘Invictus’ (Latin for ‘unvanquished’) from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch when he included it in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, which he was editing. It would also go on to provide the title for a 2009 film directed by Clint Eastwood about South Africa’s victory at their home Rugby Union World Cup in 1995 – an event that symbolized for many the arrival of post-apartheid South Africa on to the world stage. In

that movie, Mandela (played by Morgan Freeman) is shown inspiring the South African side’s white captain, François Pienaar (played by Matt Damon), by giving him a copy of Henley’s words. In real life, Mandela actually presented Pienaar with the ‘Man in the Arena’ section from Theodore Roosevelt’s 1910 speech, ‘Citizenship in a Republic’.

Here is the text of Henley’s poem that Mandela so treasured:

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.