

Conan

Illusion and Reality

by L. Sprague de Camp

Forty-five years ago, Robert Ervin Howard was making a fair but not fancy living as a mass-production pulp writer. No one would be more surprised than he to learn his books are selling in the millions today and have been translated into six or more foreign languages. In the field of fantasy, only J.R.R. Tolkien has outsold Howard. His most popular character, Conan the Cimmerian, appears in many paperbacks, in comic books, and in a syndicated newspaper comic strip. He is to be the hero of at least one motion picture. The publication of the Conan paperbacks touched off the Howard boom, and although as a consequence of this boom most of Howard's other writings have also been reprinted, the Conan stories have far outdistanced the rest of his tales in popularity, notwithstanding the fact that they comprise less than ten per cent of his total output.

During the dozen years of his literary life, Howard was very productive. He had over 160 stories published in his lifetime, and he left eighty to a hundred more unpublished as well as many fragments. But he was more than simply a voluminous writer. In the field of popular adventure fiction, his work has shown a staying power and a capacity for arousing enthusiasm far beyond that of any of his contemporary colleagues, save Edgar Rice Burroughs.

To assay a writer's work, we must consider his background, the times he lived in, and the market he wrote for. Howard flourished at the height of the pulp era, between the two World Wars. Then there were hundreds of magazines printed on cheap wood-pulp paper: Western stories, adventure stories, war stories, sea stories, flying stories, detective stories, horror stories, and so on.

The pulp-paper magazines had certain requirements. Save for the love-story and confessions magazines, they catered to a heavily male readership. They featured fast action; simple, two-dimensional characters; and a plain, straightforward narrative style. Above all, they were meant to entertain, *not* to express the writer's soul, to show off his cleverness, to educate, convert, or uplift the reader, or to expose shameful conditions in (say) the alarm-clock industry.

Some critics have deplored the violence of Howard's stories and the emotional immaturity of his characters. But violent and immature heroes were normal pulp-magazine fare, to which nobody objected at

the time. Although drenched in gore, the magazines were extremely wary of profanity, let alone obscenity. *Adventure Magazine*, an aristocrat of the pulps, even printed "My God!" as "My _____!" As for sex, the pulps were as prissy as anything a maiden great-aunt could desire. One could read them for years without suspecting that babies were not, after all, delivered by the stork.



Cover art for *Conan: The Sword of Skelos* courtesy of Bantam Books. Bob Larkin, artist.

Howard's markets were exceedingly formula-ridden. For instance, most magazine stories of that time were what we should now call "racist." Writers used ethnic stereotypes as their stock in trade. They and their readers assumed that Scots were thrifty, Irishmen funny, Germans arrogant, Jews avaricious, Negroes childish, Latins lecherous, and Orientals sinister. The white man's burden and the incompetence of so-called "natives" to run their own affairs were taken for granted.

One may ask: To the extent that Howard followed these formulas, was he consciously adapting his fiction to the demands of his market, or was he simply doing what came

naturally, so that his stories just happened to fit that market's requirements? I know of no way to answer that question; perhaps both factors entered into the result.

Howard did get many ideas from the adventure pulps of his time, notably *Adventure Magazine* itself. There he was influenced by such regulars as Harold Lamb, Talbot Mundy, Arthur D. Howden Smith, and H. Bedford-Jones. His library held books by and his work shows the influence of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Rudyard Kipling, and Jack London.

While Howard tried many times to break into the high-class pulps, such as *Adventure*, *Short Stories*, and *Blue Book*, his only success was with *Argosy*, to which he sold half a dozen stories. In these magazines he was competing with such finished writers as Lamb and Mundy. Lacking their experience and polish, his work was not up to their standards. Had he lived longer and matured further, both as a writer and as a human being, Howard might well have achieved his aim.

Howard early acquired certain lasting interests, which appear and reappear in his fiction and verse. One, for instance, was reincarnation. This he probably got from his father, who despite his Protestant Fundamentalist background also dabbled in oriental religious philosophy.

Howard also believed in romantic primitivism: the doctrine that primitives are noble savages, whereas civilized men are decadent or degenerate. As one of Howard's characters put it: "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind... Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph."

Note, however, that although Howard's heroes Kull and Conan are barbarians, of the approximately thirty stories about them that Howard completed, all but a very few are laid within or on the borders of some civilized land. Civilization, you see, provides so many more threads to be woven into an interesting story than the monotonous, limited life of a true unspoiled primitive.

Being of partly Irish ancestry (although less so than he liked to vaunt), Howard developed an intense interest in the Celts, and also a general fascination with the races of man. The theories on which he based his racial speculations, I need hardly say, are no longer considered valid.

Still another thread in Howard's skein of thought was that of the Little People—the belief that the Picts were dark, dwarfish

aborigines living in Britain before the Celts arrived. This idea, no longer taken seriously in the anthropological sciences, arose from a medieval history of Norway, which described the Picts as small folk living in holes in the ground, much like Tolkien's Hobbits.

Most of Howard's heroes are notably sexless. King Kull, we are told several times, was not interested in women. Some of this attitude may be traced to the conventions of the period, but there may be more to the story than that. Around 1933, Howard's characters began to show a more normal interest in the other sex. It may not be a coincidence that in the next year he began regularly dating a young lady.

Another recurring theme is a character motivated by pure hatred — not Conan so much as some of Howard's lesser heroes like Turlogh O'Brien and Cormac Fitzgeoffrey. They hate almost everybody. Howard himself was obsessed by hatreds of people who had once offended him, such as employers who had fired him.

Along with the theme of implacable hatred goes that of universal destruction. Many stories end with the entire cast, save one or two, dead. In one of his last stories he kills off absolutely everybody, leaving none to tell the tale. A psychologist could plausibly argue that such plots foreshadow Howard's own end.

From Boxing to Conan

Robert E. Howard's writing falls into three periods: his boxing period, his fantasy period, and his Western period. Stories of these kinds formed most of his output during these periods, although he wrote in all these genres throughout his career. He also wrote detective stories and tales of historical and oriental adventure.

Howard's boxing period occurred in the late twenties, his fantasy period in the early thirties, and his Western period in the middle thirties, although these periods broadly overlapped. (From 1934 to his death, Howard's production of Westerns rose steeply, until they became his main product. As with his boxing stories, his Westerns fall into two classes, serious and humorous. The serious ones are merely competent hack work — undistinguished standard pulp fare. But his burlesque Westerns, like his burlesque boxing stories, showed that Howard had a lively sense of humor of a broad, slapstick kind. During his last months, Howard spoke of giving up fantasy altogether in favor of Westerns. He hoped, he said, to write "serious" Westerns, presumably like those that later brought success to A. B. Guthrie, author of *The Big Sky*.) His fantasy output, including a couple of attempts at science fiction, formed the largest single part of his writings. He wrote about as many imaginative tales as he did Westerns and boxing stories combined.

Although he sold fantasies every year from 1925 on, his biggest production in this field began in 1931 and '32, when his boxing stories tapered off. At this time, most of the Solomon Kane and King Kull stories were behind him.

While Howard sold only three of the ten Kull stories he completed, they revealed the direction his imagination was taking. The

Kull stories showed the possibilities of a completely imaginary milieu, which the writer can make as dramatic as he likes without having to worry about the correctness of geography, climate, fauna, flora, costume, custom, and technology. In his historical stories he was always tripping over such details, for instance by equipping a horseman of the Roman Empire with stirrups. These errors can be blamed on the extreme intellectual isolation in which he lived, without wide travel, professional contacts, or access to big-city and university libraries.

In 1932, Howard rewrote an unsold Kull story, "By this Axe I Rule!" For background, he thought out a detailed pseudo-geography and pseudo-history of an imagined era, the Hyborian Age, between the sinking of Atlantis and the start of recorded history. For his hero he chose a familiar Celtic name, Conan, which he had used before. He added a supernatural element, which the original story lacked. The result was "The Phoenix on the Sword," and Howard was off to the races.



Cover art for *Conan: The Liberator* courtesy of Bantam Books. Bob Larkin, artist.

Conan is a development of Kull, but Conan is a more completely realized character. Actually Howard had more in common with Kull, who is given to mystical broodings on the meaning of it all, than with Conan, who is portrayed as a pure extrovert. Howard said that Conan was a combination of people he had known, and that Conan stalked into his mind and took over his career.

Conan is an obvious idealization of what Howard thought he would have liked to be: a wandering, irresponsible, hell-raising adventurer, devoted to wine, women, and strife. For all his mighty thews, Howard was nothing like that himself. Save for a hot temper and a chivalrous attitude towards women, Howard and Conan were as different as black and white. Howard was upright, moral, conscientious, courteous, compassionate, shy, sensitive, introverted, and — though he denied it — intellectual. He

did not attribute many of these qualities to Conan.

Howard, the Writer

The main reasons for the wide appeal of Howard's fiction are, I think, his vivid sense of pace and action and the strong feeling of personal involvement in his plots. As Lovecraft said, he put himself into all his stories.

He also developed a highly individual style. Although his early stories were written in simple, straightforward prose that was indistinguishable from the style of scores of his contemporaries, around 1928 he began to develop a cadenced prose. He had been composing verse for years, and now he began to use some of the elements of verse in his stories. These included rhythm, alliteration, and the use of many color words, as in this sentence: "Palm trees and orange groves smiled in the sun, and the gorgeous purple and gold and crimson towers of castles and cities reflected the golden light."

For adjectives of color, Howard often uses the name of some jewel, such as ruby, amethyst, or emerald. (He liked to include a huge gem in his stories.) On the whole, though, he was sparing of adjectives. The vividness of his narrative depends less on descriptive modifiers than on personification: that is, treating inanimate things and impersonal forces as if they were living beings, as when he wrote: "the slim boat leaped and staggered," or "between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities."

A sense of fast-moving action is perhaps the greatest talent accorded the born storyteller. Howard achieved this quality by the use of very active verbs and by starting his story off with a bang, in accordance with the pulp maxim: "Shoot the sheriff in the first paragraph." Thus he begins one story: "Hoofs drummed down the street that sloped to the wharfs. The folk that yelled and scattered had only a fleeting glimpse of a mailed figure on a black stallion, a wide scarlet cloak floating out in the wind." By 1932 or 1933, Howard had fully developed the style that makes much of his later work so hypnotically vivid.

We can agree that Robert Howard had a great natural talent for writing action and adventure stories. Like the rest of us, he also had his limitations. His stories contain many errors of fact resulting from inadequate research; inconsistencies caused by haste; unconvincing atmosphere, due to writing about places he had never been; weakness in languages, knowing no modern non-English tongue beyond a few words of Spanish; crude use of dialect; repetition of certain plot elements — like the battle with the giant snake, over and over; and overuse of coincidence. He was at his best when he followed his original ideas, as in the Conan stories, and at his worst when he consciously imitated other writers, such as Sax Rohmer in *Skull-Face*, Burroughs and London in *Almuric*, and Lovecraft in "The Children of the Night."

Still, considering his difficulties, his achievement is amazing. His foremost obstacle was his extreme isolation. He was even more of a recluse and bookworm than

Lovecraft. This was partly a result of where he lived and partly his own unsocial nature, which, aside from sporting events, urged him to flee any crowd of more than three or four people.

Howard also worked under severe — in fact fatal — psychological handicaps, which stemmed from his family situation. Lastly, we must remember his youth. He died at an age when many writers are normally just getting into their stride.

Yet, there is still the problem of why Howard's work has enjoyed such a stunning revival, when the tales of many of his contemporaries — some of them more skillful writers and more traveled and experienced men than Howard — still molder forgotten in the crumbling files of old magazines. What magic button in his readers did Howard push?

Conan, the Noble Savage?

First, let's face the fact that Howard's popularity stems from just one set of stories: the Conan stories. Their publication started the Howard revival; their sales have far exceeded those of all the other Howard collections put together. We can be sure that Howard's non-Conan stories would never have been reprinted had not the Conan stories touched off the Howard boom in the first place.

The popularity of the Conan stories is related in part to the times we live in. During the Second World War, it looked for a while as if fantasy had become a casualty of the machine age. The revival of fantasy began in the 1950's and 60's with the publication of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. By then, much of the reading public had grown tired of anti-heroes, of sociological tracts thinly disguised as fiction, and of experimental narrative forms that leave the reader wondering who did what with what to whom.

The Conan stories not only rose on the forward slope of the wave of revival of fantasy, they were also fantasy of a particular kind. For one thing, they took the place of the old lost-city story, which had been a staple of adventure fiction for half a century. Most of the Tarzan novels, for example, have the hero discover a lost city inhabited by ancient Romans, or Atlanteans, or ape-men left over from the Pleistocene. The airplane, alas, has ruined the lost-city story, since practically every square kilometer of the earth's surface has been, if not explored on foot, at least overflown and photographed; there is no place left where such a lost city could hide. So, to recapture the glamor of such a glittering fictive metropolis, we have to put it in the prehistoric past.

Then, too, Howard exploited his romantic primitivism to the hilt, by making his hero a stalwart barbarian who strides through the civilized world, knocking the decadent-cultured weaklings over like bowling pins.

Here is another puzzle. When someone wants to disparage something — say, capital punishment or bad table manners — he calls it "barbarous." Even Howard used the word in this pejorative sense, as when he spoke of the "barbarous accent" with which Conan uttered Nemedian or Zamorian. If barbarism is bad, why should we make heroes of barbarians?

Some of the barbarophilia comes from the "noble savage" concept of the Romantic Era, which ran approximately from 1790 to 1840. In 1669, John Dryden coined the term "noble savage." In the following century, that weepy Swiss philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, popularized the concept, although he had never known any savages, noble or otherwise.



Cover art for *Conan: The Swordsman* courtesy of Bantam Books. Darrel Greene, artist.

In 1791, a disciple of Rousseau, the French novelist Francois de Chateaubriand, came as a youth to America to see the noble savage in his native haunts. In the Mohawk Valley of upstate New York, he was enchanted by the forest primeval until he heard music coming from a shed. Inside, he found a score of Iroquois men and women solemnly dancing a fashionable French dance to the tune of a violin in the hands of a small, powder-wigged Frenchman. This Monsieur Violet had come to America as a soldier with Rochambeau's army in the Revolutionary War, stayed on after his discharge, and set himself up as a dancing master to the Amerinds. Chateaubriand's disillusionment did not stop him from later writing a noble-savage novel, *Atala*, which became a classic of romantic primitivism.

In the nineteenth century, the windy German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, played a similar tune with his talk of the Superman, the "great blond beast" who would appear to smash the Judaeo-Christian "slave morality" and impose proper discipline on Europe. Nietzsche was vague as to how this hero was to be created, save for the interesting suggestion that the mating of German army officers with Jewish women might produce him.

Writers like Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, and Edgar Rice Burroughs embellished the theme with such noble barbarians as Mowgli and Tarzan. Robert E. Howard, who greatly admired these writers, absorbed their romantic primitivism. It is not dead even yet,

as witness the commune movements of the so-called Counterculture of the 1960's.

The Barbarian State

The dictionary defines *barbarism* as a state between savagery — that is, hunting, fishing, and food-gathering for a living — and civilization, with its cities and metals and writing. "Barbarism" denotes a culture in which men have learned farming and stock-raising but do not yet practice them efficiently enough to produce a surplus of food to support the growth of cities. Such societies are usually illiterate, although they may have metallurgy.

This meaning has nothing to do with such virtues as honesty, kindness, or politeness. In these matters, civilized men appear on the whole to be neither better nor worse than barbarians and savages. The distinction of civilized men is that they know more than the barbarians and savages, and therefore have the power that knowledge confers. So "barbarian" has two quite different meanings. One refers to the technology of a culture; the other is used merely to show the speaker's disapproval of some person or act.

In general, real barbarian society was much more conventional and tabu-ridden than civilization. Barbarian cultures varied widely. Some were sexually permissive and promiscuous; others, like the Zulus, punished adultery with the death of both culprits. Some were peaceful; others, like the Comanches, were so obsessed with war that they thought it the only decent, manly occupation.

One reason for the ferocity of Howard's fictional barbarians is that the real barbarians he knew most about, the Comanche Indians of Texas, were one of the most warlike peoples on earth. Having just been promoted from savagery to barbarism by getting horses, they were not about to sit down and learn the techniques of dry farming when murder and robbery were so much more rewarding.

In general, however, most barbarian societies were very rigid, conformist, and resistant to change. The individuals were not at all like the adaptable, uninhibited adventurers of fiction. The reason for barbarians' conventionality is that they did not have our elaborate apparatus of laws, police, and courts to keep evildoers in order. Therefore, the force of custom had to be stronger to make any type of communal life possible. For the real-life prototypes of the fictional adventurers beloved of the pulp magazines, we must seek among civilized men like Eudoxos of Kyzikos, Marco Polo, Miguel de Cervantes, Francis Drake, and Richard Francis Burton.

Occasionally, barbarians do cast off their tribal inhibitions and act in a more Conan-like fashion, as when they live near a civilization weakened by civil war, plague, or other disorder. Then population pressure or bad weather may impel the barbarians to seek their fortunes elsewhere. If their military techniques, usually developed as a result of contact with civilization, have become the equal of their more advanced neighbors, the barbarians may conquer the civilization and set themselves over it as the ruling class.

There have been many such overthrows, as when the Aryans overran Iran and India about 1500 B. C., or the Germanic and other barbarians overthrew the West Roman Empire in the fifth century, or the Turks seized control of the Caliphate in the eleventh century, or the Mongolian nomads conquered large parts of China and India on several occasions.

We know the fall of the West Roman Empire best because it is the most fully documented. It gave rise not only to historical accounts but also to a large legendary literature, as in the tales of Arthur, Sigurd and Charlemagne. From these stories, modern heroic fantasy descends through William Morris and the medieval romances that Morris imitated.

The heroes of these epics differ from real barbarian leaders. Even when the legendary heroes are based upon historical figures, they have been romanticized out of all recognition. They strike noble, self-sacrificing attitudes, go on long solitary quests, and converse with supernatural beings — none of which their real-life prototypes did. But like the real barbarian leaders, they usually come to a violent end. Bellerophon is bucked off Pegasus in flight; Siegfried is stabbed in the back; and Arthur's skull is split by his bastard son.

When Robert E. Howard wished he had been born a barbarian or a frontiersman, he had in mind this anarchic milieu, which is reflected in his stories. In thinking this state of affairs to be typical of all barbarians, he suffered the illusion of romantic primitivism. Actually, this anarchic disorder arises only rarely, in times of conquest and transition, when the barbarians are destroying or being destroyed by other societies. At such times the normal rules of conduct are suspended, and life, in Hobbes' phrase, becomes "poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Long Live the Barbarian!

What then is the attraction of barbarian heroes? The distinctive trait of the conqueror of another culture is his loss of inhibitions. The barbarian conqueror has left the toilsome, monotonous, dreary, tabu-ridden round of normal barbarian life. He has escaped the prison of his milieu but has not adopted the mores of the conquered, whom he despises because he has beaten them. He feels he can get away with anything, like a bumptious adolescent freed from his parents' control but not yet fitted into the mold of adult life.

We all carry the memories of our emotions as we were at every stage of life through which we passed. This includes the time of adolescent emancipation. Notoriously, we then tend to quarrel with our families and try out deeds of daring and self-assertion to see what we can get away with. So it is no coincidence that many heroes of sword-and-sorcery fiction behave like overgrown juvenile delinquents. Long after we have left adolescence, we still hanker for that time when, for once, we enjoyed a sense of liberation from rules and restrictions.

That feeling was, of course, mostly illusion. We soon learned that the world around us — the laws of nature, our fellow men, and our own limitations — would impose upon

us as strict a set of rules as anything our parents applied.

This illusion was especially seductive to Robert E. Howard, who in some ways never did grow up. One reason he became a self-employed writer was that he could never hold a job for long. He tried many jobs, but he so fiercely resented any sort of discipline, correction, or coercion that whenever the boss gave him one order too many or scolded him for some fault, Robert blew up, threatened to beat up the boss, and either quit or was fired.

Still, among Howard's readers, the memory of the emotions aroused by the feeling of emancipation lingers. Hence, millions enjoy, if only vicariously, the uninhibited life of the conqueror, especially the barbarian conqueror of the Siegfried type. So Conan and his colleagues are likely to continue their popularity for a long time to come.

Robert E. Howard was born in the tiny hamlet of Peaster, Texas on January 22, 1906. During his childhood, his family moved to nearby Cross Plains, where he spent the rest of his short life. As an only child with a precocious intellect, young Robert was a misfit in an oil-boom town filled with little more than cowboys, oil field laborers and drifters. He soon turned to reading as an escape from his dismal environs. He especially enjoyed reading histories, though his mother instilled in him a love of poetry and music.

Howard began writing when he was still very young, making his first professional sale to the venerable pulp magazine, *Weird Tales*, while still an adolescent. He soon became a regular contributor to *Weird Tales*, as well as breaking into other markets. Though he wrote Westerns, historical tales, sports and boxing stories, and reams of verse, he is best remembered for his creation of the "sword and sorcery" genre of fantasy.

Today Howard is most widely known for his greatest creation, Conan of Cimmeria. Conan, a mighty-thewed barbarian from the dawn of time, is but the last in a long line of similar characters which include Bran Mak Morn, Solomon Kane, and King Kull of Atlantis.

Howard, always moody and introspective, suffered from bouts of sleepwalking and bleak depressions. His father was a cold, unemotional man, and there was little love lost between him and young Robert. Howard's mother was an over-protective, overbearing woman to whom Robert was nonetheless devoted. Howard often talked of suicide, and when his mother was lying in a terminal coma, he walked out to his car, took the gun he had been carrying against imaginary "enemies" and shot himself in the head. He was 30 years old. A small line of verse was found on his beat-up typewriter after his death.

All fled, all done,

Now lift me on the pyre.

The feast is over and the lamps expire.

Marc Alan Cerasini ■ ■