

The Hyborian Review

Volume 3, Number 9.

September 30, 1998

Laboring, I tell ya...

Great REH Quotes

From *Selected Letters, 1923-1930*, a snip from Howard's correspondence with Tevis Clyde Smith in 1928 (p. 39)

I finally got back my rhymes from the Scroll. Scutto surprised me after all. I expected tirades of righteousness, howls of orthodox wrath, scathing rebukes and trenchant remarks about the general absence of merit of my slop, but his criticism was as follows, to say: "While excellent in many respects, they lack rhythm --"! Can you beat that? And he sent me a dinky little pamphlet entitled "Rhythmic and Natural Accents," with a lot of primer stuff in it. Heh heh heh! The poor fish. Well, it's a new experience -- I've had plenty of criticism before, but nobody ever told me my verse was unrhythmic. Ah well -- I know the reason -- two reasons -- some of my rhyme was too intricate and complicated for his blunt musical -- or rather unmusical -- ear to catch -- and the rest was too brutal for him, and he didn't have the guts to say so. He couldn't have published it, consistently, with the policy of the magazine. It would have been letting loose a wolf in a sheep fold. A lot of old maids, artistic businessmen -- heh heh heh -- budding feminine sweet-singers and gooey-gooey jinglers that smear their mush and saccharine over the pages of his juvenile abortion would leap convulsively clean out of their drawers with pure horror had they come upon my serpents coiled between the pages.



Reprint info - See page 4.

The Slithering Shadow -- Part 2 of 3

A Review in three parts, By Garret Romaine

The Slithering Shadow, copyright 1933 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, September 1933.

This issue marks part 2 of the investigation into *The Slithering Shadow* -- or *Xuthal of the Dusk*, Howard's original title. While not considered a strong Conan story, due no doubt to the epic quality of much of the rest of the collection, *Shadow* does provide some keen insights into why even a weak Howard story is a compelling read.

We looked at the way *Xuthal* served as a precursor to *Red Nails* in Part 1. This issue, we'll explore the utter epicenter of Howard's force -- his basic belief in the lessons of history, that civilizations ultimately crumble and the barbarians at the gate gain entry. In his letters, his stories, and his conversations, Howard continually reiterated this theme. And even in this lesser Conan tale, the pattern is repeated.

Howard continually injected a piece of himself between the lines of his work. The demons of his soul required daily battle -- he never let himself forget what it was that propelled him forward, no matter how grim and discomfiting the message might be. So let's look at the central tenet to his tales -- man's deep-rooted barbarism, always lurking beneath a thin veneer of civilization.

We'll start with the barbarian within us all, then discuss the ideal that Howard had in his own mind. From there, we'll look at Howard's fascination with the lessons of the oil boom, and apply that to his perfect pessimism. We only have four pages, so let's go...

The Barbarian Within

Whenever things go bad and men become afraid, truly in fear for their lives, predictable changes occur. The back of the neck reddens; the pulse quickens. Instincts take over.

It happens in battle, in bar fights, and even behind the wheel while careening down the freeway.

Bob Howard noted these reactions and gave them voice. As early as 1925, in a letter to Tevis Clyde Smith, Howard wrote "The subconscious mind controls us more than we think. It is vague, illusive, hazy, yet powerful. It is controlled by, and yet controls, the conscious mind. It is the part of the mind which can never be destroyed, which retains vanished thoughts and impressions...Primitive instincts are stronger in us." (*Letters, 1923-1930*, Necronomicon Press, page 4)

That last crisp sentence tells all. Over and over again, Howard returned to that theme. Lurking under our skin is our fear, our hate, and our pride. We are the mob that attacks the distinguished scientist; we are the industrialist who pushes aside the aboriginal tribe to harvest the timber or glean gold from the gravels. Our greed, and our lust, lie in check most of the time, but given slight provocation, the genie gets out again and again. We who are civilized, who extend our pinkie while sipping bourbon -- we are not so far removed from the howling horde. Howard saw that, and warned us over and over again how fragile it all can be.

Not Your Father's Noble Savage

Howard's barbarians were always clean of limb, fierce in aspect and pure in motivation. They were the heroes, the resolute warriors who endured pain and privation but came out ahead. But let Howard tell of it, in a classic letter to H. P. Lovecraft in 1932:

I didn't say barbarism was superior to civilization. For the world as a whole, civilization, even in decaying form, is undoubtedly better for people as a whole. I have no idyllic view of barbarism -- as near as I can learn it's a grim, bloody, ferocious and loveless condition. I have no patience with the depiction of the barbarian of any race as a stately, god-like child of Nature, endowed with strange wisdom and speaking in measured and sonorous phrases. Bah! My conception of a barbarian is very different. He had neither stability nor undue dignity. He was ferocious, brutal and frequently squalid. He was haunted by dim and shadowy fears; he committed horrible crimes for strange monstrous reasons. As a race he hardly ever exhibited the steadfast courage often shown by civilized men. He was childish and terrible in his wrath, bloody and treacherous. As an individual he lived under the shadow of the war-chief and the shaman, each of whom might bring him to a bloody end because of a whim, a dream, a leaf floating on the wind. His religion was generally one of dooms and shadows,

his gods were awful and abominable. They bade him mutilate himself or slaughter his children, and he obeyed because of fears too primordial for any civilized man to comprehend. His life was often a bondage of tabus [and] sharp sword-edges, between which he walked shuddering. He had no mental freedom, as civilized men understands it, and very little personal freedom, being bound to his clan, his tribe, his chief. Dreams and shadows haunted and maddened him. Simplicity of the primitive? To my mind the barbarian's problems were as complex in their way as modern man's -- possibly more so. He moved through life motivated mainly by whims, his or another's. In war he was unstable; the blowing of a leaf might send him plunging into an hysteria of blood-lust against terrific odds, or cause him to flee in blind panic when another stroke could have won the battle. But he was lithe and strong as a panther, and the full joy of strenuous physical exertion was his. The day and night were his book, wherein he read of all things than run or walk or crawl or fly. Trees and grass and moss-covered rocks and birds and beasts and clouds were alive to him, and partook of his kinship. The wind blew his hair and he looked with naked eyes into the sun. Often he starved, but when he feasted, it was with a mighty gusto, and the juices of food and strong drink were stinging wine to his palate. Oh, I know I can never make myself clear; I've never seen anyone who had any sympathy whatever with my point of view, nor do I want any. I'm not ashamed of it. I would not choose to plunge into such a life now; it would be the sheerest of hells to me, unfitted as I am for such an existence. But I do say that if I had the choice of another existence, to be born into it and raised in it, knowing no other, I'd choose such an existence as I've just sought to depict. There's no question of the relative merits of barbarism here involved. It's just my own personal opinion and choice. (*Letters, 1931-1936*, Necronomicon Press, page 35)

Having read that, now you can appreciate one of the early lines in *The Slithering Shadow*:

"Endowed with all the barbarian's ferocious love of life and instinct to life, Conan the Cimmerian yet knew that he had reached the end of his trail. He had not come to the limits of his endurance, but he knew another day under the merciless sun in those waterless wastes would bring him down." (*Conan the Adventurer*, page 104)

A fatalist, but not in denial. Then, when he spies a city in the shimmering heat waves of the desert, he reverses course and is back in form:

"The chance for life had lent fresh vigor and resilience to the Cimmerian's steely thews. He strode out across the sandy waste as if he had just begun the journey. A barbarian of barbarians, the vitality and endurance of the wild were his, granting him survival where civilized men would have perished." (*Adventurer*, page 105)

Those two passages alone reinforce why *The Slithering Shadow* is an interesting story. Howard wrote for the best reason of all -- because he couldn't "not write." He burned with a passion for this one idea, to warn us, to and even though he once told Novalyne Price "all great writers either have a great cause or a great love, and I have neither," he was being a bit modest. His central theme has to be the paradox of the superior barbarian, of the eternally impending implosion of civilization and the barbarian in us all.

The Inspiration of the Oil Booms

People write best from what they know, and Howard was no exception. His Texas was in the grip of a rending transition from western outposts separated by great distances, to a modern Gomorrah rocked by oil field booms. Howard saw it and hated it, as he related to H.P. Lovecraft in late 1930:

I've seen towns leap into being overnight and become deserted almost as quick. I've seen old farmers, bent with toil and ignorant of the feel of ten dollars at a time, become millionaires in a week, by the way of oil gushers. And I've seen them blow every cent of it and die paupers. I've seen whole towns debauched by an oil boom and boys and girls go to the devil wholesale. I've seen promising youths turn from respectable citizens to dope fiends, drunkards, gamblers and gangsters in a matter of months. (*Letters, 1923-1930*, page 70.)

In the months that followed, Howard reiterated his stance on the matter to Lovecraft in a pair of letters. First this:

... doubtless the world will eventually, as you say, sink back into barbarism -- if any humans are left alive after the next war. And since the inevitable goal of all civilization seems to be decadence, it seems hardly worthwhile to struggle up the long road from barbarism in the first place. (*Letters*, page 78)

Howard saw the decadence of the Roaring 20s, the absence of respect for authority, and the frontier mentality all rolled into one. He witnessed the booze, the broads, the brawling - and he never forgot. In the next letter to Lovecraft, Howard captured the spirit in this paragraph:

Glamor and filth! That's an oil boom. When I was a kid I worked in the tailoring business just as one terrific boom was dwindling out, and harlots used to give me dresses to be cleaned -- sometimes they'd be in a mess from the wearer having been drunk and in the gutter. Beautiful silk and lace, delicate of texture and workmanship, but disgustingly soiled -- such dresses always symbolized boom days and nights to me -- shimmering, tantalizing, alluring things, bright as dreams, but stained with nameless filth. (*Letters*, page 82)

In earlier Conan stories, Howard captured the essence of the lawless frontier town in his description of Shadizar the Wicked and The Maul. He frequently separated cities into quarters where the rich and powerful barricaded themselves from the thieves and murderers. The squalor and filth of the common quarters were always well-captured by Howard. His Hyborian taverns were in effect Texas border saloons.

But in Xuthal, the city-state Conan stumbles upon with Natala clinging to him, Howard eschews the normal bawdy atmosphere for a sedate, if no less decadent, environment. As detailed last issue, the citizens are advanced scientists, but they consume narcotic elixirs and dream all day, despite the fact that a shadowy form periodically consumes one of them.

Howard, through Conan, expresses his disdain for such civilized sloth and meek acceptance of their fate. Says the barbarian: "By Crom, I'd like to see a priest try to drag a Cimmerian to the altar! There'd be blood spilt, but not as the priest intended!" (*Adventurer*, page 119)

Howard Vs. Civilization

In the first issue of *The New Howard Reader*, on page 14, Joe Marek reprints a curious little short story Howard penned entitled *The Supreme Moment*. In the yarn, an orphaned boy teaches himself science and by coincidence one day holds the key to an antidote to a fungus about to destroy the world. Five eminent representatives of "civilization" implore the bitter man to save the race and divulge the formula for the fungus killer. Instead, the man blows his brains out in front of them.

Disturbing is hardly the word for this story. "Fear is the greatest tyrant of them all," Howard writes in the small yarn, describing the motivation of the emissaries. They are prepared to torture, to beg, to cajole, to purchase -- all to no avail. For this self-made man, cast aside by society, vilified by fellow scientists, threatened by mobs and mayhem at several stages during his career, cares not for his race, his creed, or his world.

Just as Howard would end his life with a pistol shot, so does the scientist, denying the world the fruits of his greatness, if you will.

In a forgotten Kull snippet, *The Curse of the Golden Skull* (covered in *The Hyborian Review* vol. 3, issue 3), Howard sends an archaeologist to a small island to stumble across a decaying structure. The man begins to fantasize about his discovery and what it will do to increase his stature on campus and out lecturing. Just as he is imagining himself famous and financially fortified, a snakebite ends his career on the spot.

Yet again, Howard takes a couple potshots at society, at civilization by extension. In *Moment*, he balances the fate of the world on the unstable, bony shoulders of a bitter misfit and denies the happy ending. In *Golden Skull*, he again poises a man on the verge of fortune, then snatches the prize away. One man was bitter -- the other a fool.

Howard built fantastic civilizations, epic municipalities and sweeping empires, but they all crashed down into primitive barbarism in his yarns. Sometimes his worlds fell apart like a cheap suit with just a simple tug at a dangling thread; other times, the hammer blows of a barbarian broadsword brought the walls down. The physics of Howard's universe were simple indeed -- Rule #1: What goes up must come down.

A Perfect Pessimism

When Rusty Burke interviewed Novalyne Price (printed in *Day of the Stranger, Further Remembrances of Robert E. Howard*, Necronomicon Press) this exchange reinforced Howard's slant toward barbarism:

ELLIS: I would call him pessimistic in his view that we had reached the zenith of our civilization, and were going down. <SNIP>

BURKE: Do you think Bob saw any kind of possibility of salvation, anything that would stave off this descent into barbarism?

ELLIS: No.

BURKE: He felt it was inevitable?

ELLIS: Yes. But keep in mind that the barbarism he was talking about was cleaner than the decay and the rot that he saw civilization falling into. No, I think that, during the spring of '36, when he was so troubled, he was most pessimistic, not believing man was capable of saving himself... (page 12)

Howardian heroes were the exact opposite of the slick city sophisticate that Howard loathed. In *The Slithering Shadow*, there was this exchange between Conan and the Stygian plaything as she explained Xuthal's denizens:

THALIS: They live only for sensual joys. Dreaming or waking, their lives are filled with exotic ecstasies, beyond the ken of mortal men.

CONAN: Damned degenerates!

THALIS: It's all in the point of view.

There, at its essence, is Conan vs. Evil. He's an unlikely white knight, but effective. As Howard propels him through the Hyborian world, Conan cleans up countless nameless cults, secret societies, lost races and forgotten gods. He is Order, battling Chaos, making the world a better place not like Hercules, but for profit or to save his skin. His elemental cleanliness and barbaric purity make him a perfect foil for the rotted filth man will endure.

Even in *The Slithering Shadow*, Conan leaves behind a situation less complicated than when he found it. The god Thog is probably dead, as is the ruler of the city. What will happen to those left behind in Xuthal, as a result of Conan's visit? They'll probably just go back to their dreams.

Conclusion

There was a time when Howard despaired of the road he trod, as in this exchange when he was 22 years old:

"Year by year, day by day, hour by hour, the steel pierces my heart and my brain and I grow harder and harder and less human. Oh God, for the gift of satire and malediction to make men cringe and writhe and curse. God, for the power to sit in my study and send out spears of hate and vengeance to shatter the brains and blast the souls of men. Let it be. I'm a fool to say all this stuff, but I see that I have not yet learned the first necessary truth of life -- to lock up in the heart and the soul all truths and dreams and visions of dreams. Each time a man opens his heart he breaks his armor and weakens his battle might. (To Tevis Clyde Smith, 1928. *Letters, 1923 - 30*, page18)

One thing Bob Howard could not knowingly do -- weaken his battle might. He never stopped shouting out from his battered typewriter -- man is unstable and primitive beneath the surface, and civilization is fragile for that reason. The primitive will prevail. Not a popular message, but one worth repeating. --GR

The Hyborian Review is published monthly by Garret Romaine and distributed free via e-mail. Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net.
Back issues - <http://www.prosalg.no/~savage/conan/publications>

NEXT Issue: *The Slithering Shadow*, Part 3: The women.

finis