

# The Hyborian Review

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**Back in black...**

## Great REH Quotes

From *Selected Letters, 1923-1930*, a clip from Howard's correspondence with Tevis Clyde Smith, dated circa November 1928 (p. 22)

I reckon some of my parodies nauseate you, as they would any decent man but few things are safe at my hand, and as for decency, I haven't laid any claim to it -- not for years, anyway. I'll likely end up writing erotic books and bootlegging literature. Since plunging so completely, I take a sadistic pleasure in saying things likely to shock people...I am so damned fed up on things in general that I don't give a curse what they think about me, and even give myself a worse name than I deserve -- if such a thing is possible. I'm on the hell road figuratively -- and literally if there's a literal hell, but I'm not going to try to fool myself. I know I'm rotten from the foundations up, and I'm not going to either seek or give excuses. I've got a distorted viewpoint on life, and I know how wrong and erroneous it is, but I'm too lazy to change. I've got the makings of a great writer in me but I'll never be one because I'm too erratic and lazy to really try and keep on trying.



Reprint info - See page 4.

## Howard and the Dark Side: *Shadows in the Moonlight - Part 2 of 2*

By John Romaine and Garret Romaine

*Shadows in the Moonlight* is Copyright 1934 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, April, 1934.

Even his most ardent supporters and die-hard fans have to admit that Howard had a dark side. Put aside the fact of his early death from suicide, which is surely a sign of a bone-deep dark streak. Even without that evidence, you know from reading just a paragraph or two of his work that Howard drew upon a well-spring of creativity which poured forth as much from his cocky self-assurance as it erupted from his demon-infested dreams. The power of his prose stemmed from his all-consuming passion, and he seemed to suffer greatly when his well ran dry. But passion, and its creative spark, is no governable force. It can't be parsed out and planned for. Thus Howard's work has a sometimes crazed frenzy that now, seventy and eighty years later, seems to ensure that the body of his work will withstand the tests of time. Glenn Lord himself,

*The Hyborian Review* vol. 5, number 2

May 2000

writing for the jacket of *Always Comes Evening*, a compilation of Howard's poetry, said (or at least approved of saying) this:

Like much of his fiction, Robert E. Howard's poetry is macabre, often horrific -- yet it was written with great energy and conviction, as one glance inside this book will demonstrate. *Always Comes Evening* is a record of darkness. It is a testimony to one man's haunted imagination, a glimpse into nightmare worlds of beauty, terror and depravity.

In this essay, we'll look at Howard's dark side, with an eye toward showing how, when harnessed, it propelled even his purplest and most commercial prose to great heights. We'll look at his penchant for bloodshed, his continual theme of civilized cruelty, and talk about the way Conan seemed to bring out the best in Howard more often than not.

Page 1 of 4

### **Three Levels of Menace**

In this story, Howard weaves three increasingly dangerous threads into a complete and complex yarn. The almost bumbling pirate band, normally a cause for fear among the out-numbered or out-gunned, is superseded by the mysterious ape-beast in the shadows. Fearsome, legendary and almost man-like (see previous issue) this menace, in turn, is trumped by the brooding statues that come to life under the moonlit night.

Yet after the frothing, berserker revenge exacted by Conan on Shah Amurath in the story's start, Conan becomes more subdued as the story unfolds. Howard seemed to sense he had tread to the very line of his character's strength, and after gutting the Shah, Howard took great pains to return his barbarian to a more presentable persona.

Howard recognized the dilemma early. In *A Touch of Trivia*, a whimsical little autobiography he penned for the "line-faced scrivener" who would someday scan his life for clues to his writing, Howard observed the danger of guts and gore:

"One problem in writing bloody literature is to present it in such a manner as to avoid a suggestion of cheap blood-and-thunder melodrama--which is what some people will always call action, regardless of how realistic and true it is. So many people never have any action in their own placid lives, and therefore can't believe it exists anywhere or in any age. Another problem is how far you can go without shocking the readers into distaste for your stuff--and therefore cutting down sales. I've always held myself down in writing action stories; I never let my stories be as bloody and brutal as the ages and the incidents I was trying to depict actually were. I think sometimes I'll let myself go--possibly in a yarn of the Middle Ages--and see if I can sell the thing. I don't know how much slaughter and butchery the readers will endure. Their capacity for grisly details seems unlimited, when the cruelty is the torturing of some naked girl....The torture of a naked writhing wretch, utterly helpless--and especially when of the feminine sex amid voluptuous surroundings--seems to excite keen pleasure in some people who have a distaste for wholesale butchery in the heat and fury of a battlefield. (*The Last Celt*, p. 51-52)

In *Shadows in the Moonlight*, the heroine Olivia is merely threatened with a thorough ravishing at the hands of the pirate band. It's enough to send her into delirium, of course, but nothing like the lesbian sado-masochism Howard would write of later in *Red Nails* or *The Slithering Shadow*.

Yet the formulaic routine of, say, *The Devil in Iron*, is not present in this story. Howard builds his pace well, unleashes the supernatural theme at just the right moment, and when the man-ape and the statues have been conquered, dealing with the captancy of the pirate band seems calm and carefree.

### **Dark Dreams, Dark Tales**

In *The Annotated Guide to Robert E. Howard's Sword and Sorcery*, Robert Weinberg calls *Shadows in the Moonlight* "a perfect example of the dream-weaving done by Howard." (p. 112) Howard relied on his dreams for much of his inspiration, as he told H.P. Lovecraft in his February 11, 1936 letter:

Long narrative dreams are fairly common with me, and sometimes my dream personality is in no way connected with my actual personality. I have been a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Englishman, a prehistoric man, a blue-coated United States cavalryman campaigning against the Sioux in the years following the Civil War, a yellow-haired Italian of the Renaissance, a Norman nobleman of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, a weird-eyed flowing-bearded Gothic fighting-man, a bare-footed Irish kern of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, an Indian, a Serb in baggy trousers fighting Turks with a curved saber, a prize-fighter, and I've wandered all up and down the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a trapper, a westward-bound emigrant, a bar-tender, a hunter, an Indian-fighter, a trail-driver, cowboy -- once I was John Wesley Hardin! (*Selected Letters*, p. 73)

Sometimes, Howard would awake and write up his dreams, but other times they went into his fountain to be recycled when they bubbled back up again. Like a giant wheel, his fantasies continually convinced him of the one common thread to most of his thoughts -- the towers of civilization will come down, again and again, as we weaken ourselves within the walls of our petty world.

In her book *One Who Walked Alone*, Novalyne Price talked often with Robert E. Howard about his writing. In a telling conversation with him while they were still dating, the talk turned to Shakespeare, how he was unlettered and yet wrote compelling stories about people and their problems. Howard joked that, because Shakespeare was unlettered, he probably didn't even write those great works, and because Howard was unlettered, he, too, would be forgotten.

"Baloney," [Price] said scornfully. "Let me tell you what's going to happen to all these things you're writing. Someday, people will begin taking one of your stories apart. Like the one you say is coming out in *Weird Tales* -- the one you like about the Picts--" [*Beyond the Black River*]  
"Yeah," Bob said. "The triumph of a dog and the barbarian."

"Someday, some biographer will come along, and when he reads that story, he'll say, 'Who was this Robert E. Howard? He couldn't have written these stories. Why he was not college bred! Remember, when he went to Howard Payne, all he did was sit around writing yarns, trying to break into *Weird Tales*. He didn't even try to get a college degree! But isn't it written somewhere that he dated a school teacher who dreamed of being a writer?'"

Bob was listening with a big grin on his face.

"He'll say: 'That school teacher wrote those yarns, every single one of them. Wrote 'em and didn't have nightmares at all.'" (p. 204)

Nightmares? Howard never referred to them as nightmares. Glenn Lord continues the dream quote from Howard thusly:

I have lived in the Southwest all my life, yet most of my dreams are laid in cold, giant lands of icy wastes and gloomy skies, and of wild, wind-swept fens and wildernesses over which sweep great sea-winds, and which are inhabited by shock-headed savages with light fierce eyes. I am never, in these dreams of ancient times, a civilized man. Always I am the barbarian, the skin-clad, tousle-haired, light-eyed wild man, armed with a rude axe or sword, fighting the elements and wild beasts, or grappling with armored hosts marching with the tread of civilized discipline from fallow fruitful lands and walled cities. (*The Last Celt*, p. 73-74)

### **Howard the Poet**

It sometimes comes as a shock to newly indoctrinated Conan fans that the bronzed barbarian was not penned by Roy Thomas, Barry Windsor-Smith, or even L. Sprague deCamp -- that Robert E. Howard was his creator. These new fans are in the happy position of discovering that not only did Howard write volumes of stories with other heroes, he also authored piles of poetry as well.

Howard's poetry is not always pretty. Most likely, that has to do with the dark well of despair it occasionally uses as its source. Sometimes the meter jumps and the rhythm fails. Howard joked with one of his correspondents that an editor had returned one of his works with a small pamphlet on Rhythms and Natural Accents, which he ignored.

That the prose was brutal, dark and horrific, there is little doubt. Consider this sample, taken from *Always Comes Evening* (p. 80):

### **The Road of Azrael**

Towers reel as they burst asunder,  
Streets run red in the butchered town;

*The Hyborian Review* vol. 5, number 2

Standards fall and the lines go under,  
And the iron horsemen ride me down.  
Out of the strangling dusts that blind me  
Let me ride for my hour is nigh,  
From the walls that stifle, the hoofs that grind me,  
To the sun and the desert wind to die.

In truth, this is one of the tamer efforts. Howard's poetry drips with death, despair, and darkness. Or, consider this effort (p. 49):

### **Lines Written in the Realization That I Must Die**

The Black Door gapes and the Black Wall rises;  
Twilight gasps in the grip of Night.  
Paper and dust are the gems man prizes --  
Torches toss in my waning sight.

Drums of glory are lost in the ages,  
Bare feet fail on a broken trail --  
Let my name fade from the printed pages;  
Dreams and visions are growing pale.  
Twilight gathers and none can save me.  
Well and well, for I would not stay;

Let me speak through the stone you gave me;  
He never could say what he wished to say.  
Why should I shrink from the sign of leaving?  
My brain is wrapped in a darkened cloud;  
Now in the Night are sisters weaving  
For me a shroud.

Towers shake and the stars reel under,  
Skulls are heaped in the Devil's fane;  
My feet are wrapped in a rolling thunder,  
Jets of agony lance my brain.

What of the world I leave forever?  
Phantom forms in a fading sight --  
Carry me out on the ebon river  
Into the Night.

Powerful stuff! Howard had no illusions about the quality per se; he knew his limitations. There's a sequence from *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* where he admits as much:

"I think your poetry is alright, but your prose is rotten," said Clive bluntly.

"I know it," answered Steve imperturbably. "But I don't write poetry -- I'm a rhymer, and I rhyme for pleasure. I'll never amount to anything in the line of verse, but I'll be a great prose writer someday..." (p.110)

Howard, of course, was Steve Costigan in this book, and Clyde Smith was reincarnated as Clive Hilton. Numerous other examples of Howard's low opinion of his own poetry can be found; but just as many can be uncovered attesting to the power of his dark imagination.

In a sometimes dull and dreary book entitled *Dark Valley Destiny*, L. Sprague deCamp attempts to psychoanalyze and philosophize on Howard's "fixation" with his mother. It's a shame, because some of the passages in this book are actually worth quoting.

E. Hoffman Price reported to Lovecraft that some people considered Howard "freakish, uncouth...provincial in some respects." Despite this judgement, Price felt great affection for Howard and added that Bob was "a courtly, gracious, kindly, and hospitable person." Still, Price recognized the complexity of Howard's personality, which he described as all light and shadow, deeply ambivalent, paranoid on occasion, full of dreamings and broodings. This very complexity was a challenge to Price, who was still trying to sort it out eighteen years later. (p. 10)

Later, deCamp notes that Howard didn't fit in well with his fellow Cross Plains townfolk, and rightly so:

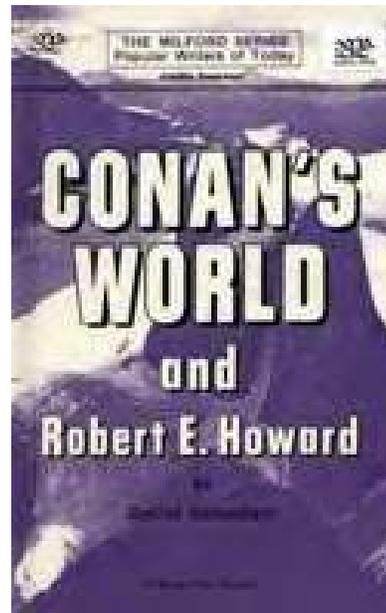
And who can blame the good people of Cross Plains for their lack of understanding? Howard himself did not fully realize the extent of his innovations. He was not only the first person in West Texas to earn his living as a writer; he was also the first American writer to develop a new genre of literature -- a genre that has come to be closely associated with his name: heroic fantasy. Only now, after fifty years of relative obscurity, are the best of his works receiving worldwide attention. The heroic sweep of his narratives, the vividness of his imagery, and his ability to convey mood, magic and the mystery mark his writing as exceptional. (p. 11)

Was Howard "too dark" for his own good? That's like asking if he was too much of a genius. Was van Gogh too sensitive? Was Poe too scary? Those of us with one-tenth the talent of an author like Robert E. Howard would give our right thumb to dream his dreams and see his visions. We see his nightly travel of heroic trails as a godsend -- a wellspring of tales to tell. And his consistency, his warning about civilization and its penchant for crumbling -- wouldn't that be splendid to have a guiding light?

But would we be willing to pay the price that Howard paid -- the thin skin, the mistrust, the outright scorn of common folk? Would we suffer those arrows of torment and fear as well as he did?

And what would we be thinking when fools such as Darrell Schweitzer write crap such as his hack job,

*Conan's World and Robert E. Howard*. Nearsighted, unoriginal, poorly researched, contradictory, and unscholarly, Schweitzer's opinion of Howard was almost trite: "thrilling action, vivid description, and sometimes first-rate fantastic invention, but not much else."



*Ugly cover, bad writing, and sloppy scholarship. Avoid this book at all costs. - GR*

Not much else? That's like saying Hemingway wrote pretty good dialogue, but not much else.

It isn't the purpose of this essay to use valuable time in disproving the fallacies that Howard was insane, unbalanced, suffered from a dual personality, or was clinically depressed. We're not doctors, and we don't play one on TV. Instead, we've drifted into this realm to offer up a glimpse of why *Shadows in the Moonlight* is a pretty good yarn. For, like most of his best work, it not only succeeds on the basic level -- a hero at work -- it also reveals much about the writer himself, and his beliefs. In order to understand a writer as complex as Robert E. Howard, those revelations can only help.

— **GR & JR**

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NEXT Issue: ???

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