

Evolution and Redemption: Analyzing Robert E. Howard's "People of the Dark"

By Ståle Gismervik, December 20, 2024

Robert E. Howard's "**People of the Dark**" is a tale that explores themes of reincarnation, redemption, and primal survival. Through its various iterations, the story evolved significantly in scope and complexity. The first draft, while rich in Howard's signature action and atmosphere, is incomplete, missing its first seven pages and ending abruptly on page 14. The second draft presents the complete narrative across 20 pages, adding depth and a dual narrative framework that intertwines past and present. Comparing these drafts with the final published version reveals Howard's growing mastery in blending visceral action with thematic richness, creating a haunting and resonant tale.

The published version of "**People of the Dark**" introduces further refinements and modifications to the narrative, tone, and thematic presentation of the story compared to the two drafts. Here's a comprehensive comparison and analysis, incorporating the published version with the drafts:

1. Narrative Frame and Structure

- **Draft 1:** A straightforward narrative set in a historical timeframe, focusing entirely on Conan's actions and experiences in the cavern.
- **Draft 2:** Introduces the reincarnation theme and dual narrative, blending the ancient past (Conan) with the present (John O'Brien). It transitions between the two timelines, creating a layered narrative structure.
- **Published Version:** Maintains the reincarnation framework but enhances the transitions between past and present. The narrative arc is smoother, integrating John O'Brien's reflections with the action-packed memories of Conan. The ending introduces a significant addition: John saves Brent and Eleanor from the monstrous remnant of the Children, which symbolically resolves Conan's ancient debt.

2. Thematic Depth

- **Draft 1:** Primarily an action-adventure story with themes of survival, tribal enmity, and forbidden love.
- **Draft 2:** Expands to explore fate, reincarnation, and cosmic justice. The protagonists' past lives (Conan, Tamera, Vertorix) are tied to their present selves (John, Eleanor, Brent).
- **Published Version:** Builds on the reincarnation theme with heightened emotional resonance. The addition of the final encounter with the lone surviving Child of the Night deepens the themes of retribution and redemption. John O'Brien's decisive act of saving Brent and Eleanor is a symbolic closure of Conan's guilt and aggression from the past.

3. Setting and Atmosphere

- **Draft 1:** Vivid descriptions of the cavern, tunnels, and ancient horrors, but limited world-building outside of Conan's immediate experience.
- **Draft 2:** Enriches the setting with pseudo-anthropological details about the Children of the Night and their ties to folklore. The caverns are described as part of a vast, interconnected subterranean network, adding historical depth.
- **Published Version:** Polishes the descriptions and amplifies the ominous atmosphere. The cavern's lore is intricately tied to the mythos of the Little People, blending Celtic and prehistoric elements. The depiction of the final creature emphasizes the horror of evolutionary degradation and time's erosive power.

4. Character Development

Conan/John O'Brien:

- **Draft 1:** Conan is a primal, action-driven protagonist with minimal introspection.
- **Draft 2:** John O'Brien inherits Conan's memories, and his journey reflects a progression from primal instinct to moral resolution. He ultimately relinquishes his claim to Eleanor, showcasing emotional growth.
- **Published Version:** Refines John O'Brien's character arc, making him more reflective and humane. His decisive action against the creature demonstrates courage and selflessness, cementing his redemption and fulfilling Conan's unspoken moral debt.

Tamera/Eleanor and Vertorix/Brent:

- **Draft 1:** Tamera and Vertorix serve as narrative devices to propel Conan's journey and illustrate the stakes.
- **Draft 2:** They are more fully realized, embodying the themes of love and sacrifice. Their tragic deaths are integral to the story's emotional impact.
- **Published Version:** Elevates their modern counterparts, Brent and Eleanor, who survive and are given closure. Eleanor's love for Brent resolves the emotional tension, completing the reincarnation arc.

The Children of the Night:

- **Draft 1:** Portrayed as monstrous, primitive enemies. Their anthropological context is hinted at but undeveloped.
- **Draft 2:** Provides detailed pseudo-scientific and mythological background, emphasizing their role as vestiges of a prehistoric world.
- **Published Version:** Adds psychological depth and horror by introducing the lone survivor, a grotesque remnant of the race. Its death symbolizes the end of an ancient cycle of violence and vengeance.

5. Stilistikk Choices

- **Draft 1:** Fast-paced and action-heavy, with minimal reflection or thematic exploration.
- **Draft 2:** Slower-paced, allowing for rich descriptions, introspection, and philosophical musings. It balances action with context.
- **Published Version:** Maintains a balance between pace and atmosphere, blending vivid action with polished prose. The addition of dialogue and sensory details heightens tension and immersion.

6. Key Additions in the Published Version

1. Final Confrontation with the Creature:

- The inclusion of the last surviving Child of the Night is a significant departure from the drafts. Its appearance underscores the horror of evolutionary regression and provides a climactic resolution.
- John O'Brien's act of saving Brent and Eleanor is a redemptive moment, tying the story's themes together.

2. Expanded Lore and Mythos:

- The published version further develops the connection between the Children of the Night, Celtic folklore, and prehistoric anthropology.
- The gradual evolution (or devolution) of the Children into serpent-like beings is more detailed, adding a chilling sense of biological and cultural decay.

3. Modern Framework and Reflections:

- The published version enhances the dual narrative, juxtaposing Conan's primal aggression with John O'Brien's reflective humanity.
- Eleanor's mystical recollections of past lives deepen the story's emotional and thematic resonance.

4. Refined Dialogue and Interactions:

- The interactions between Brent and Eleanor are expanded, providing greater emotional weight to their survival and relationship.

Conclusion

The published version of "**People of the Dark**" is a masterful refinement that transforms the story from a straightforward action-adventure into a layered narrative of redemption, reincarnation, and cosmic justice. By weaving together primal action, historical depth, and modern introspection, Howard creates a tale that resonates on both visceral and intellectual levels. The final resolution — John O'Brien's selfless act — ties the narrative threads together, offering a satisfying conclusion to a story that spans centuries.