

The Hyborian Review

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Where did the word 'onomatopoeia' come from, anyway?

Great REH Quotes

From *The God in the Bowl*, originally published in Space Science Fiction for September, 1952. This is from my Grant edition. It's a great piece of dialogue.

Conan has been caught inside the museum of Kallian Publico, moments after the watchman stumbled over the master's strangled corpse. If Conan is not the murderer, why is he here? He will not answer the question; just then, a guard appears with a lisping young aristocrat.

"Release that gentleman, you bungling fool!" swore the prefect. "Don't you know Aztrias Petanius, the nephew of the city's governor?"

The abashed guard fell away and the foppish young nobleman brushed his embroidered sleeve fastidiously.

"Save your apologies, good Dionus," he lisped affectedly. "All in the line of duty, I know. I was returning from a late revel and walking to rid my brain of the wine fumes. What have we here? By Mitra, is it murder?"

"Murder it is, my lord," answered the prefect. "But we have a suspect who, though Demetrio seems to have doubts on the matter, will doubtless go to the stake for it."

"A vicious looking brute," murmured the young aristocrat. "How can any doubt his guilt? Never before have I seen such a villainous countenance."

"Yes, you have, you scented dog," snarled the Cimmerian, "when you hired me to steal the Zamorian goblet for you. Revels, eh? Bah! You were waiting in the shadows for me to hand you the goblet. I would not have revealed your name if you had given me fair words. Now tell these dogs that you saw me climb the wall after the watchman made the last round, so that they'll know I didn't have time to kill this fat swine before Arus entered and found the body."

Dear Howard Fan:

Each year Project Pride commemorates Robert E. Howard on the Saturday in June closest to his death. This year on June 14 we will host an Open House at the Howard House from 2:00 PM to 5:00 PM. We do hope that you will come.

Those that did attend last year's Howard Day celebration will be pleased to see the many improvements made in the house in 1996. Wallpaper replaces paneling, rugs replace carpet, and mementos which had belonged to the Howards have been added. In 1997 the bathroom has been enlarged and upgraded. The House looks good!

We promise also to have on display Howard's original manuscripts, first editions and original "Weird Tales". Last year we had hoped to have a preview showing of "The Whole Wide World", the film based on Novalyne Price Ellis' "One Who Walked Alone", screenplay by Michael Meyers. As it turned out we had only clips from the film to view. This year, however, Meyers says he will come with the full-length film. See it if you can. It is a beautiful story.

So, though we have scaled down from last year's activities, we look forward to a good day of renewing friendships with the Howard fans who have been to Cross Plains before and of meeting new (to us) fans.

Let us hear from you.

Sincerely,
Betty R. Loving,
Howard House hostess

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Story Review, Part 2

by Garret H. Romaine

The Tower of the Elephant

Author: Robert Ervin Howard

Donald M. Grant; 1975. Art: Richard Robertson

Last issue, Howard's ability to spin a yarn was the central issue. This time, it will be his ability to craft words that takes center stage.

First, I went through my limited library to compile some comments from other writers about Howard's wordcraft. Thanks to the book buyers at Powell's Book Store in Portland, Oregon, I found plenty from the old Amra series, now collected in the companion books *The Blade of Conan* and *The Spell of Conan*. I also found an introduction to *The Dark Man*, by August Derleth.



First, Derleth in turn quoted H.P. Lovecraft, who called Howard "a genuine artist" who was "almost alone in his ability to create real emotions of spectral fear and dread suspense."

Then Derleth said of Howard, "Most of his work flowed from his typewriter with ease -- much to be published unchanged..." If you've seen the movie *Amadeus*, you'll recognize the signs of genius in that statement. In lumping Howard and Lovecraft together, Derleth wrote, "A small, but devoted following keeps the names of such authors very much alive, and this fact in itself is tribute to the creative skill which each possessed."

I guess that means us. Consider this to be my monthly devotional!

Reading further, I found another nugget about *Editing Conan*, by L. Sprague de Camp first in *Amra* no. 48, c. 1969, then reprinted in *Blade*. He quotes the first paragraph from *The Hour of the Dragon* (Conan the Conqueror):

The long tapers flickered, sending black shadows wavering across the walls, and the velvet tapestries rippled. Yet there was no wind in the chamber. Four men stood about the ebony table on which lay the green sarcophagus that gleamed like carven jade. In the upraised right hand of each man a curious black candle burned with a weird greenish light. Outside was night and a lost wind moaning among the black trees.

Wrote de Camp: "It would be hard to beat that paragraph as an example of describing a scene and setting a mood for a story in vivid yet straightforward, economical prose. The best style...is that of which the reader is entirely unaware while he is reading. To puzzle him by deliberate obscurities is to slow him down and to risk shattering the all-important spell of illusion that the writer has sought to cast upon him."

Apparently Poul Anderson never read that part. Continued de Camp: "Howard also concocted ingenious plots, with the action following with reasonably tight logic from the basic assumptions and the loose ends neatly tied up. He was a devotee of the "well-wrought tale" as opposed to the "slice of life" school of fiction. Stories of either kind have their legitimate functions; but for pure, escapist entertainment -- which the Conan stories are patently meant to be -- narratives of the former type are more suitable."

Last, in *The Art of Robert E. Howard* by Poul Anderson, reprinted from *Amra* No. 1, copyright 1959 by G. H. Scithers in *The Blade of Conan*, there was this gem:

Here, then, is a point at which Conan rings true. He grows. He starts as a larcenous young soldier of fortune; he learns, almost by accident, what it is to lead men and how much duty is implied by the concept 'chief'; finally, as King of Aquilonia, he puts down the banditry by which he once made his own living, fights less for himself than for his country, and even settles down with a lawful wife.

And, of course, the things that happen to him! In this, I think, the art of Robert E. Howard was hard to surpass: vigor, speed, vividness. He had not the command granted an Eddison or a Tolkien, but nonetheless he fulfilled the storyteller's prime obligation, to make scenes and events come real. Howard was a highly

visual writer; I imagine what he treated of stood clearly before him as he wrote. And not all that he saw was dark, evil, or violent. There are scattered passages of considerable beauty -- for example, in *Conan the Conqueror*, a description of the southern Aquilonian landscape, seen from a hilltop near sunset. And always, there is that furious, galloping narrative pace.

The compliments Howard pulls in from these writers is all well and good, but it seems to be at a 50,000 foot level. I wanted to get into detail, to really explore what it is about the wordsmithing of Howard that set him apart. So I sat down with *The Tower of the Elephant* and pulled out this list of my favorite snippets:

torchlight licked luridly
a touch on his tunic
"Harken to this heathen!"
"I'll have your heart..."
sent forth dooms and death
dooms...gloomy...looming...doom
thither he glided, gripping his sword
tense expectancy
shrubbery was shaken
his sword flashed frostily
its slanting skull split in half
still gripping his dripping sword
set thick as stars in the shimmering silver
hypnotizing him with their scintillations
gleaming floor...sparkling door
vaguely waving sea of leaves
he had dealt doom
the base of his bull neck
heaps of jewels in a careless riot of splendor
the castanet rattle of the monstrosity's fangs
at the monster's mercy
full in the midst of the branching black legs the massive
missile struck
slime splattered, and the shattered mass fell
through to the grim finish
sinister sounds, and screams of agony
he shrank with shame
Conan came near unfearingly
clean, lean fierceness of the wastelands
"so -- and so; I know, I feel."
framed in the whiteness of dawn
crash into shining shards

The beauty of some of those phrases is undeniable. They roll off the tongue and through the mind like Godiva chocolate and Cuban cigars. In this story, one of his very best, Howard took the reader under his wing like a guide through a Paris museum. Each paragraph, each sentence, seems to hold a treat. His construction of alliterations alone is a Howard hallmark that makes readers begin to lean forward, like a fastball hitter sitting on a 3-2 pitch.

Yet Howard's prose rarely runs over the top, rarely intrudes to the point of distraction. That, perhaps, is the truest beauty of his work – that he can heap up word trick after word trick, without breaking the pace. Writers are forever injecting themselves, and their prose, into the most awkward situations, until the reader is forced to take a breath. But Howard keeps his eye on the pace, even when piling up the adjectives and adverbs.

Poul Anderson's assertion that Howard was a highly visual writer is true enough, but it misses the main point about Howard – he wasn't *just* a visual writer. Yes, he could paint a picture with his words. Conan springs full from the page with just a few sentences; Yara, the evil priest, is a fully developed devil wholly in passing. Yes, Howard's visual effects are legend, but the strength of his wordsmithing is that there is so much more. He also had an ear for language that is the sign of a natural storyteller. There are scenes from the movie *The Whole Wide World* that utterly drive home the point, where he is pounding on his typewriter while shouting out the story. Howard's ear told him what worked better than any editor could. When Howard was in that zone, he was hitting on all cylinders, and he knew it.

WordSmithing 101 – Tricks of the Trade

The phrases that came off Howard's tongue best were in the passages that used basic wordsmithing tricks – the alliteration, that rolls sounds together (torchlight licked luridly); the onomatopoeia, which ascribes sounds to their source (the castanet rattle) and the metaphor (a careless riot of splendor).

Another trademark of Howard's best writing is that he can rarely leave out an adjective. Conan's nose doesn't just pick out a scent – it's a subtle scent. Howard kills two birds with one word stone this way – he gets a chance to choose just the right descriptor that gives him one more brush stroke on his canvas, and also uses another opportunity for an alliteration. And Howard always erred on the side of one more play with the sound of the words.

One of my favorite passages in the story was when Howard finally introduced Conan to the Tower:

Ahead of him he saw, looming against the sky, the Tower of the Elephant. He mused, wondering why it was so named. No one seemed to know. He had never seen an elephant, but he vaguely understood that it was a monstrous animal, with a tail in front as well as behind. This a wandering Shemite had told him, swearing that he had seen such beasts by the thousands in the country of the Hyrkanians; but all men knew what liars were the men of Shem. At any rate, there were no elephants in Zamora.

The shimmering shaft of the tower rose frostily in the stars. In the sunlight it shone so dazzlingly that few could bear its glare, and men said it was built of silver. It was round, a slim, perfect cylinder, a hundred and fifty feet in height, and its rim glittered in the starlight with the great jewels which crusted it. The tower stood among the waving, exotic trees of a garden raised high above the general level of the city. A high wall enclosed this garden, and outside the wall was a lower level, likewise enclosed by a wall. No lights shone forth; there seemed to be no windows in the tower—at least, not above the level of the inner wall. Only the gems high above sparkled frostily in the starlight.

Beautiful stuff. In the first paragraph, Howard gives Conan the beginnings of wordly wisdom, in his disdain for anything related by Shemites. Then he follows up with masterful artistry, painting a picture of a tower that sticks in one's mind.

Another superb piece of writing is found where Howard introduces Conan to the pile of wealth at the top of the tower:

Closing the door behind him, the Cimmerian advanced into the chamber. His bare feet made no sound on the crystal floor. There were no chairs or tables in the chamber, only three or four silken couches, embroidered with gold and worked in stranger serpentine designs, and several silver-bound mahogany chests. Some were sealed with heavy golden locks; others lay open, their carved lids thrown back, revealing heaps of jewels in a careless riot of splendor to the Cimmerian's astounded eyes. Conan swore beneath his breath; already he had looked upon more wealth that night than he had ever dreamed existed in all the world, and he grew dizzy thinking of what must be the value of the jewel he sought.

Of course the irony is that Howard puts Conan amongst all those gems and the poor thief still comes home empty-handed. But that's an author's prerogative. What a short legend it would have made, had Conan secured all that wealth in one night, purchased a kingdom, and raised an army to conquer Aquilonia the easy way...

Conclusion

In peering so intently between the lines of *The Tower of the Elephant*, the genius of Robert E. Howard springs boldly to life. His success lies in the power of his message on so many levels – as story teller, as word smith, as a creator of worlds, and as a philosopher. He plays his tunes on so many instruments at once, he is

well-nigh mystical. Toss in the fact that he pounded out his stories in pell-mell fashion, rarely making grammatical errors, and you see why his art is kept alive by his faithful fans.

Combining a highly visual, yet distinctly oral style is no small feat. A visual style almost compels the author to "over-write", to stack images upon each other with dizzying height. And an oral style demands attention to lyrical detail, with almost a poet's touch. Though Howard used poetry rarely, he had a knack for it, or at least the poet's ear. His rhymes seemed natural and unforced. Mostly, his poet's heart and writer's eye came together in his unique style.

Writing fantasy tales with spare, economical prose is hard work. Howard made it look effortless. Here was a writer that pounded out nearly 200 stories from "Spear and Fang" when he was 15 to his final snip of poetry found in his wallet at the age of 30. Not every piece was as packed with tricks as *Tower*. But taken together, they are an impressive body of work. - **GR**

Conan Desktop Theme Available

One of the nice features of the Windows 95 operating system is that you can use the desktop function to coordinate the fonts, backgrounds, wallpaper, screensaver, and other features. A passing Shemite told me of a Conan desktop theme, available on the 'net. The author is Barry Powell, whose e-mail address is bpowell@kiva.net. I'm not clear if anyone has posted the theme to a web site yet - perhaps Staale could be induced, with a few tankards of ale? Or perhaps Barry knows. The file size is over a megabyte, so using e-mail may or may not be an option, depending on your provider.

A Fan Letter from Sean Moore!

[One of the contributors to Staale's discussion page mentioned Sean's e-mail address, so I sent him one of my reviews. By Crom, he replied!]

Dear Garret,
I appreciate your sending to me your review of CONAN AND THE GRIM GREY GOD and your interesting commentary. Please accept my apology for the late response; I have returned from a long trip during which I had no email access.

Congratulations on the fine work you've put into The Hyborian Review. It's reassuring to see that such a good resource is available to fans of REH's prose and related subjects. I hope that future Tor offerings will prove to be enjoyable reads. Unfortunately I've no firm dates for

any upcoming Conan novels but have kept writing them nonetheless. It was the long wait between releases that originally inspired me to try my hand at the task -- my brother introduced me to Conan and REH's stories; my wife Raven, an avid reader of fantasy and a professional editor as well, motivated me to finish the first book. Rest assured that the ideas in 'CAVERNS OF PERIL' [Moore's upcoming Tor novel - *ed.*] were met with enthusiasm by these first readers.

In particular, your notes and keen memory of the Howard references delighted me. It's difficult to tell if the extra effort to weave continuity into the tales is effort that may not be appreciated. As you know, Howard himself took pains to develop a vibrant world rich in detail and history. To neglect that history in the continuing tales would be, at the very least, a gross disservice to his readers. As for the title . . . certainly it was not a conscious decision to use anything from the Marvel canon; perhaps that phrase simply 'stuck' and was in keeping with Howard's frequent use of alliteration. Titles have not been easy; CONAN THE HUNTER was originally titled CONAN THE ROGUE (taken by JMR the same year that I began HUNTER). CONAN AND THE SHAMAN'S CURSE was originally titled CONAN THE CASTAWAY.

Now that another of Howard's better characters -- namely Kull -- will soon be in the theatres, we may see renewed interest in his work. Tor is planning to release the novelization of KULL THE CONQUEROR in late August, adapted (by yours truly) from an entertaining script that should translate to an excellent feature. FYI to Kull aficionados: only certain elements match the original storyline as set forth by Howard. Let's all support it, as its success can only help to bring more of Howard's tales to the forefront and entertain more of those who've never experienced his work.

Thanks again for sharing your thoughts. I look forward to future issues of The Hyborian Review. Carry on, by Crom!

Best Regards,
Sean A. Moore

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NEXT Issue: **The God in the Bowl**. Another early Howard story about Conan as a youthful thief.

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