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Conan as Bright Barbarian: Or—Barbarism Is Relative

[Optional Subtitle: Or—“What Do You Think of Your Blue-Eyed
‘Dark Barbarian’ Now, Mr. Herron?”] (with apologies to e. e. cummings
AND Buffalo Bill) [Or Optional Subtitle #2: The Devil Is Not Only in
Iron—But in the Details]

Much—and I believe too much—has been written about Robert E. Howard’s vision of “The Dark Barbarian who towers over all.” An extension of this has been the almost blind—or at least “blinded” opinion (by most of those critical “hosses” and bosses pulling the “wagon” of Howardian studies) that Howard’s most popular creation, Conan, fits the mold as one of these ultimately and intensely “dark” barbarians. Don Herron’s essay, “The Dark Barbarian,” in the tome that bears the same title, has done much to perpetuate this misconception. Generally agreement with the premise seems to have solidly become the mantra of the Howardist Intelligentsia.

In reality, Conan is depicted by Howard, not only as a complex character, but, indeed, as a fluctuating character showing many moods and “faces” to the observant reader or critic. And although Howard’s correspondence—with Lovecraft especially—shows a viewpoint that the condition of barbarism is stark and primitive and, ultimately, benighted and dimly ignorant, Howard’s most magnificent “barbarian” is usually depicted as being far removed from such a condition. Nor does he fit the typical character suggested by Howard’s letters or some poems.

For one thing, Howard often shows us a definitely *darker* and decidedly more *barbaric* barbarian as a “foil” character to Conan. If we look at one of the more interesting of the Conan stories, “The Devil in Iron,” we find clear evidence of this. The doomed Yuetshi fisherman whose character opens the tale is described thus:

“He was broadly built, with long, apish arms and a mighty chest, but with lean loins and thin, bandy legs. His face was broad, his forehead low and retreating, his hair thick and tangled.

A belt for a knife and a rag for a loin cloth were all he wore in the way of clothing.

That he was where he was proved that he was less dully incurious than most of his people.”

“...The fisherman lusted for the weapon. The man, of course, was dead; had been dead for

many centuries. This dome was his tomb. The fisherman did not wonder by what art the ancients had preserved the body in such a vivid likeness of life, which kept the muscular limbs full and unshrunken, the dark flesh vital. The dull brain of the Yuetshi had room only for his desire for the knife with its delicate, waving lines along the dully gleaming blade (emphasis added).

The “apish” appearance, the low brow, the wretched loin cloth, the “dull brain,” and the lack of any sense of intellectual curiosity mark this fellow as far inferior to and much more darkly barbarous and uncivilized than any view we see of Conan (in this story or others).

Howard does this in his poetry too. In the fragment, “Am-ra, the Ta-An,” Howard shows us the exiled title character and indicates he will have a “sidekick” of his tribal group to help him on possible future adventures, BUT he is appalled and disgusted by the “black, ape men” who represent a lower—indeed, less “civilized”—level of barbarity. Critics have looked away from the fact the Conan becomes a king (not merely always a leader or chieftain), and his rule brings him into proximity with the comparatively organized society and at least the partially-imposed order which is *civilization*. As barbarians go, Conan consistently shows the better and brighter “angels” of barbarity—existing many levels above the ilk of the Yuetshi.

On another note, sometimes the setting of a tale will indicate societal and cultural levels and comparative and contrastive images of barbarity versus civilization. The setting of “The Devil in Iron” is decidedly Middle Eastern. It’s the story maybe best described as a blend of Oriental Adventure and Sword and Sorcery. We have beautiful women clad in diaphanous garments; we have a “gaily” outfitted Conan (*A crimson scarf was knotted about his head; his wide silk breeches, of flaming hue, were upheld by a broad sash, which likewise supported a scimitar in a shagreen scabbard. His gilt-worked leather boots suggested the horseman rather than the seaman, but he handled his boat with skill. Through his widely open white silk shirt showed his broad, muscular breast, burned brown by the sun—Errol Flynn, anyone?*). Conan is wielding a scimitar rather than an ax. We have names that fit the Middle Eastern atmosphere and mystery: *Shemites, Aghrapur, Sultanapur, Khawarizm, Shahpur*.

As Ghaznavi describes Conan, he depicts him as being, yes, “a barbarian,” but adds only “He has a keen relish for women and strong drink.” To suggest that these are traits unknown to “civilized” men would be a stretch, it seems to me. As we first see Conan:

A fierce vitality that was evident in each feature and motion set him apart from the common men; yet his expression was neither savage nor somber, though the smoldering blue eyes hinted at ferocity easily wakened. This was Conan, who had wandered into the armed camps of the kozaks with no other possession than his wits and his sword, and who had carved his way to leadership among them (emphasis added).

Fierce vitality can’t be said to be the province of the barbarous alone. But stronger evidence for this “brighter” barbarian is the fact that he is “neither savage nor somber.” Conan is NOT the every-waking-minute berserker of the ultimate barbarian of the Lovecraft letters, one whom Howard himself often insists is the essence of barbarity. He is not the perpetually somber or morose and benighted child of ultimate darkness, totally ignorant of the ways of civilization. To say that he possesses a “ferocity easily wakened” may be said to be a trait of humankind in any

degree of civilization. Oh, of course, Howard tries to impose what we might call his “*Super-Tu*” upon Conan on occasion (a superimposition of a concept upon the character, a sort of overweening “YOU” of the starkest and darkest barbarian of his vision—parallel to *Super-Ego*, with apologies to Freud—well, not really :-). We see such a “move” in the following passage:

*He was keenly alert, not because he consciously suspected hidden danger, but because **alertness was a part of him, whetted by the wild existence he followed.***

*What Ghaznavi had considered animal intuition or some sixth sense was merely **the razor-edged faculties and savage wit of the barbarian.** Conan had no instinct to tell him that men were watching him from a covert among the reeds of the mainland. (emphasis added)*

And later:

*He would have desired her even if she had displayed repugnance toward him. But her cryptic smiles and glances had fired his blood, and **with all the lawless violence which was his heritage** he desired that white-skinned, golden-haired woman of civilization. (emphasis added).*

But the Conan we have depicted and who we see in action and thought throughout the story is not this wild savage, child of a wild existence. And the wit displayed by our hero is not, as we shall demonstrate, of a savage nature.

Conan’s thinking and reasoning processes and his intellectualism—indeed, his culture and apparently sophisticated education are apparent in the story. When confronted with the vista of the suddenly reconstructed ancient city we see:

*Conan stood paralyzed in the disruption of the faculties which demoralizes anyone who is confronted by an impossible negation of sanity. **He doubted neither his sight nor his reason, but something was monstrously out of joint.** Less than a month ago, only broken ruins had showed among the trees. What human hands could rear such a mammoth pile as now met his eyes, in the few weeks which had elapsed? (emphasis added)*

His reason is never in doubt, and, of course, the “monstrously out of joint” aspect is the essence of the Sorcery in *Sword & Sorcery*. But Conan is quick to use rationality and be sure of his faculties, this where the more dully barbarous type would be completely befuddled and likely fallen into superstitious stupor. Reason is not a marker of the truly dark barbarian. Even though he initially flees from the clearly supernaturally rebuilt city, determined to “put a thousand miles between him and the blue, mysterious East where the most basic laws of nature could be set at naught, by what diabolism he could not guess,” he is aware that Nature has laws—something the completely superstitious and benighted barbarian of the dark would not appreciate. Also note the clear connection to “the East” in this story—as mentioned above.

What stops him in his flight is a shred of silk from the garment of this tale’s “damsel in distress” (with the curiously sophisticated and Roman name of Octavia [Maybe she’s an 8 out of 10, although she seems to be depicted as an 11. Sorry for the digression, well, maybe not ;-)). Howard even throws in a glimpse at Conan’s regal future:

For an instant, the future fate of kingdoms that hinged on this gay-clad barbarian hung in the balance. It was a small thing that tipped the scales—merely a shred of silk hanging on a bush that caught his uneasy glance. (emphasis added).

Thus we find Conan stopping in his flight, and we realize that this has become a Quest Story of sorts, Conan lusting after, yes, but also seeking out and coming to the aid of a woman in need of assistance. One cannot dismiss an element of Chivalry in this cancellation of flight and a return to the threat of clear sorcery and probable danger to seek her out. This aspect of the story, this hero-rescuing-the-damsel-in-distress theme is certainly one that detracts from any notion of callous barbarity. It speaks of selflessness and civility, if not gentility. Conan may not be Lancelot, but he's also not a Yuetshi fisherman.

Another thing that makes Conan rise above the status of “Dark Barbarian” in this tale (and others) is his obvious knowledge of many things and apparent education and aptitude. When he encounters the reanimated girl in one room of the complex we find:

Presently she spoke, but the tongue was unfamiliar to him, and he shook his head. She yawned again, stretched lithely and, without any show of fear or surprise, shifted to a language he did understand, a dialect of Yuetshi which sounded strangely archaic. (emphasis added)

The “barbar-” syllables of the word *barbarian* (and related words) etymologically arise from the ancient Greek onomatopoeically-derived sense of an imitation of the garbled tongues of outlanders and those alien to the Greeks and their language. The speech of these “others” sounded like “bar bar bar”— but here, with Conan, we have a person with a keen sense of other languages. He not only recognizes it as a dialect, but has enough linguistic moxie to note that it seems “archaic.” In short, Conan is educated, albeit self-educated most likely.

We also find evidence of his *education* in the following

Then he found something else to make him wonder. Among the furs on the dais was a gorgeous spotted skin, whose predominant hue was golden. It was not a clever copy, but the skin of an actual beast. And that beast, Conan knew, had been extinct for at least a thousand years; it was the great golden leopard which figures so prominently in Hyborian legendry, and which the ancient artists delighted to portray in pigments and marble. (emphasis added)

So, Conan is enough of a student of civilization to know something about history, biology, and art culture and both the extinction of and portrayal in art and artifact of the “great golden leopard” (perhaps he'd visited the Hyborian National Museum of Natural History ;-).

More proof of his very *unbarbarian knowledge* and seeming education can also be found in the text of “The Devil in Iron.” Indeed, based upon the following passage, it seems clear that our “dark barbarian” was, at least, enlightened to such a degree that he is literate and has put his literacy to practice :

Recognition stirred in his mind. The snake was evidently meant to represent one of those grim monsters of the marsh, which in past ages had haunted the reedy edges of Vilayet's southern shores. But, like the golden leopard, they had been extinct for hundreds of years. Conan had

seen rude images of them, in miniature, among the idol huts of the Yuetshi, and there was a description of them in the Book of Skelos, which drew on prehistoric sources. (emphasis added)

Not only does Conan seem to have a recognition “stirring in his mind,” but one called up by a knowledge of local natural history and of which he, seemingly, has read of in a tome entitled *The Book of Skelos*! Note also that the reference to “the idol huts of the Yuetshi”—where truly “dark” barbarians pay homage—those who live in their “rude” huts. A literate barbarian! Dark Barbarism should be made of sterner stuff!

And Conan displays a sort of courage that is more sophisticated than dull, recklessness or wild, devil-may-care abandon. When he realizes that the giant serpent in the chamber is alive:

*His hand jerked back in instinctive repulsion. Sword **shaking in his grasp, horror and revulsion and fear almost choking him**, ... He reached the bronze door and tried it, **with his heart in his teeth, sweating with fear** that he should find himself locked in with that slimy horror.* (emphasis added).

So our hero is subject to fear, but we see him later in the story confronting both Serpent and Khosatral (again, remember, trying his best to protect and save Octavia) with that true courage which goes ahead in spite of fear. In the frenzy of combat, Conan can be the berserker, but he is not always so. Fey in battle, he is not above fear.

But his civilized and nearly-chivalrous decision to have entered the reconstituted city in the first place is clear:

*He had a twofold purpose in his apparently aimless prowling; **to escape from the building and its mysteries, and to find the Nemedian girl who, he felt, was imprisoned somewhere in this palace, temple, or whatever it was**. He believed it was the great domed edifice at the center of the city, and it was likely that here dwelt the ruler of the town, to whom a captive woman would doubtless be brought.* (emphasis added).

Not only to find the “imprisoned” girl, but to rescue her was the primary goal. He need not have “escape[d] from the building and its mysteries” if he had not gone seeking for her in the first place. She was the “prime mover” in his decision. Selflessness and concern for another don’t seem to be the characteristics of the “Dark Barbarian.” Note also, he has reasoned clearly that she would have been brought to the center of the city where the ruler likely dwelt. Such rationality seems to defy some concept of ultimate or extreme barbarity and obdurate darkness.

When we see Conan depicted at the point where he believes there is no “out,” where they are confined in a room with no escape, we find this description of his mindset and determination:

*This was the end of the trail. There was no other door in the chamber, nor any window. He tested the nicked edge of his scimitar, quite cool now that he was at bay. He had done his volcanic best to escape; when the giant came crashing through that door, **he would explode in another savage onslaught with the useless sword, not because he expected it to do any good**,*

but because it was his nature to die fighting. For the moment there was no course of action to take, and his calmness was not forced or feigned. (emphasis added)

But this kind of courage against the impossibility of victory or survival is not unknown to “civilized” warriors. Every depiction of war from ancient to contemporary times has accounts of such resolve.

Also, we have evidence of rather sophisticated emotions and conversational skills that seem more developed and civilized than the truly “dark” barbarian would possess. After the foes—both human and devilishly supernatural, both flesh and iron—have been vanquished, we have this interchange between Conan and Octavia:

"Why didn't you climb the stair and make your escape in my boat?"

"I wouldn't desert [implied “you”]—*she began, then changed her mind, and amended rather sulkily, "I have nowhere to go. The Hyrkanians would enslave me again, and the pirates would—"*

"What of the kozaks?" he suggested.

*"Are they better than the pirates?" she asked scornfully. **Conan's admiration increased to see how well she had recovered her poise after having endured such frantic terror. Her arrogance amused him.***

"You seemed to think so in the camp by Ghorii," he answered. "You were free enough with your smiles then." [*<sophisticated banter, I would submit*]

Her red lips curled in disdain. "Do you think I was enamored of you? Do you dream that I would have shamed myself before an ale-guzzling, meat-gorging barbarian unless I had to? My master—whose body lies there—forced me to do as I did."

*"Oh!" **Conan seemed rather crestfallen.** [*<evidence of a somewhat sophisticated disappointment*] *Then he laughed with undiminished zest. "No matter. You belong to me now. Give me a kiss."* (emphasis added).*

Finally, we have some literary conventions and some aspects of Howard’s stylistics in handling this story that trend decidedly toward civilized literature and formal sophistication. Importantly, there are clear evidences of Howard’s familiarity with the conventions of epic poetry. This tone serves in some small way to further elevate the tale and ennoble Conan.

We have FLYTING, the battle with words that marks the boastful clash of insults and threats that is the preamble to actual combat in *The Iliad* and other works:

Lifting his bow he drew the shaft to its head and loosed. Conan crouched and the arrow splintered on a tree, and Conan laughed.

"Dog!" he taunted. "You can't hit me! I was not born to die on Hyrkanian steel! Try again, pig of Turan!"

We also have a wonderful instance of the classical “Homeric” or “Epic Simile”—an elaborated simile with extra detail, often of the “As-So” pattern:

*Then Khosatral turned again, flailing the air with desperate blows, but Conan, fired to berserk fury, was not to be denied. **As** a panther strikes down a bull moose at bay, **so** he plunged*

under the bludgeoning arms and drove the crescent blade to the hilt under the spot where a human's heart would be. (emphasis added)

We also have sophistication of style that runs a bit counter to the notion of stark or dark barbarity. Howard is a much more sophisticated stylist than many know. He makes wonderful use of the Absolute Structure (the omission of “understood” verbs in a parallel construction—typical of Latin and Greek and borrowed into English) in the following example:

*So he stood up in the shape and aspect of a man,
but his flesh was not flesh;
nor the bone, bone;
nor blood, blood.*

All in all, the Conan we see in this story—and almost all others—is not the truly “dark” barbarian that we see in Howard’s letters, or, perhaps, even that barbarian that his conscious mind wished to project. And it is not the “Dark Barbarian so broadly encountered in the work of Howard’s critics. We see here a swashbuckling, Errol Flynn-like, “gaily”-clad Conan, with a streak of chivalry and selflessness and a great deal of rational, educated, and literate “finish” to him. We see truly benighted and primitive barbarians as foil characters to this *Bright Barbarian*.

So, the critical consensus has it wrong. We have a memorable hero-figure who is fully capable of “grasping,” however “dimly”—“something of the cosmic tragedy of the fitful ephemera called mankind and the hooded shapes of darkness which prey upon it.” This, I will submit, is hardly the insight of a “barbarian”—let alone one of the darkest variety.

COFFMAN STREET

CREATIVE WRITING FEATURE OF — THE CROSS PLAINSMAN

The Bright Barbarian

Despite his works, the cultured man
Will rise again, stand tall.
For aye the Bright Barbarian
Will evolve from the small.

And though he hurls your cities down,
More rise to take their place,
For there’s an essence in us all
To save the human race.

It is the pendulum of time
Ticks this way, that way tocks—
A back and forth of reasoned rhyme
That forward reels and rocks.

Though bold attempts at order fail
And Chaos hold long sway.
Our urge for progress will prevail
And once more have its day.

There is a war that will not cease
‘Tween cultured man, barbarian,
A war that knows no peace,
A war we did not choose,
A war which we can never win,
But which we dare not lose.