

Doctoral Thesis

History in Robert E. Howard's Fantastic Stories:  
From an Age Undreamed of to the Era of the Old  
West and Texas Frontier

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## Contents

Preface .....	1
Part I: Robert E. Howard's Creation of an Authentic Pseudo-History	
Introduction .....	3
Chapter I: Robert E. Howard's Alternative History of the Picts	
1. Introduction .....	5
2. Howard's Discovery of the Picts as a Medium to Connect with Ancient Times .....	6
3. Howard's Creating of an Alternative History of the Picts .....	10
(a) "The Lost Race": Outlining an Alternative History of the Picts .....	10
(b) "Men of the Shadows": Enhancing the Picts' Fictive History to an Alternative History .....	13
4. Bran Mak Morn: The Tragic King of Howard's Alternative History of the Picts .....	19
(a) Bran Mak Morn's Role in the Alternative History of the Picts .....	20
(b) Mirroring the Pictish History: Bran Mak Morn's Loss of Humanity .....	22
5. Howard's Connecting the Picts' Alternative History with the 20th Century .....	29
6. Conclusion .....	34
Chapter II: Atlantis and Its Influence on Howard's Creation of a Pseudo-History	
1. Introduction .....	36
2. The Age of Atlantis as Alternative Reality for Howard to Address Personal Issues with His Real-Life Environment .....	37

3. The Impact of Classic and Occult Sources on Howard’s Depiction of Atlantis .....	46
4. Anthropology and Atlantis: Lewis Spence’s Influence on Howard’s Portrayal of Atlantis .....	49
5. Populating the Age of Atlantis and Connecting It with the Alternative History of the Picts .....	53
6. Conclusion .....	59

Chapter III: Robert E. Howard’s Historical Short Stories

1. Introduction .....	61
2. Howard and History .....	61
3. Robert E. Howard and Historical Fiction in the American Pulps .....	63
4. Harold Lamb’s Influence on Howard’s Historical Fiction .....	68
5. Howard’s Creation of Authentic Characters .....	72
6. Howard’s Realization of the Importance of Realism for His Historical Fiction .....	78
7. Conclusion .....	81

Chapter IV: “The Hyborian Age”: Creating a Fictive Age and Pseudo-History

1. Introduction .....	83
2. Conan of Cimmeria: A Barbarian Adventurer and His World .....	83
3. Creating Pseudo-History: “The Hyborian Age” Essay .....	88
(a) Draft A .....	91
(b) Draft B .....	94
(c) Draft C .....	95
(d) The Final Draft .....	97
4. From Mythology to a Multi-Ethnic Pseudo-History .....	98
(a) Howard’s Naming Process to Evoke Mythological Times .....	98
(b) Anthropology and Multi-Ethnicity in Howard’s “‘The Hyborian Age” .....	101
5. Conclusion .....	106

Chapter V: Howard's Pseudo-History in the Context of Secondary World Building  
in Fantastic Literature

1. Introduction	107
2. William Morris' Fictive Medieval Setting	108
3. "Static Time"	112
(a) Lost Worlds	112
(b) History Repeating Itself: E. R. Eddison's <i>The Worm</i> <i>Ouroboros</i>	117
4. Planetary Romances: The Martian Stories of E. R. Burroughs	124
5. Tolkien's Middle-earth and Howard's World of the Hyborian Age	129
6. Conclusion	136

Part II: Robert E. Howard and the History of Texas

Introduction	138
Chapter I: Robert E. Howard and His Relation to the Old West and Modern Texas	
1. Introduction	139
2. Howard's Image of the Old West and View of Modern Texas	140
3. The End of the Texas Frontier in Howard's Work	152
(a) "Old Garfield's Heart"	154
(b) "Wild Water"	160
4. Conclusion	164
Chapter II: Texas History in Robert E. Howard's Fantastic Stories	
1. Introduction	166
2. Aspects of the Frontier in Howard's Fantastic Fiction	167
(a) Howard's Taking the Texas Frontier into the Hyborian Age	167
(b) The Frontier and Barbarism in Howard's Southern Gothic Horror Tales	172
3. Historic Texas Violence in Howard's Work	185

(a) Violence in Howard’s Work and Its Relation with Texas	
History .....	185
(b) Historic Texas Violence and Howard’s Hyborian Age .....	190
4. Connecting Texas History with the Hyborian Age .....	201
5. Conclusion .....	205
Conclusion .....	206
Notes .....	209
Works Cited .....	221

## Preface

Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) is mostly known for two contributions that had significant impact on the literary genre of fantasy. First, he is the creator of the fantasy subgenre Sword and Sorcery, which together with J. R. R. Tolkien's epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings*, defined the emerging literary genre of fantasy in the 20th century. Second, Howard is also the literary father of Conan of Cimmeria, the barbarian adventurer who has not only become the representative image of the Sword and Sorcery subgenre but also a pop culture icon.

In this thesis I am arguing that there is one more influential aspect to be found in Howard's work that has up to now been overlooked. This is the well-noted but never fully explored feature of history in his fantastic stories. In Howard's work history comes in the form of time abysses that span hundreds, thousands and even millions of years, with Howard even hinting at an unknown, more ancient history. He put this fascination for such ancient history in the essay "The Hyborian Age," in which he outlined a fictive era before our world's official time reckoning.

Regarding the history of the secondary worlds featured in genre fantasy, Diana Wynne Jones has satirically observed that it "is generally patchy and unreliable. Any real information about past events is either lost or contained in a SCROLL jealously guarded in a MONASTERY or TEMPLE" (90). In fact, many authors of genre fantasy, with the intention to lend their fantasy worlds a supposedly ancient background history, are simply using phrases in which they refer to events back thousands, or hundred thousands, of years. These efforts, though, do not create a plausible history. In fact, they are nothing more than semantic empty shells or word dropping with the author throwing numbers at the reader, which he cannot process or visualize. I am arguing that Howard, on the other hand, was successful in depicting convincingly the time abysses in his stories and in creating a vivid history in which his readers could immerse themselves. In this thesis I will demonstrate how Howard

achieved this feat. Furthermore, I also will show that Howard was a literary pioneer in this field.

Another aspect I would like to explore in this thesis is my claim that the history, which Howard successfully created as the background of his fantastic stories, was not just an exclusive product of his imagination. In fact, this pseudo-history was rooted in real life, in the history of Texas, the state where Howard was born and spent his life. Aspects of this history are the violence and the barbarism of the Texas frontier, the conflicts between traditional and modern Texas, which the early 20th century brought; I would like to demonstrate that Howard integrated all of these aspects of Texas history into his fantastic stories as well.

Robert E. Howard is still widely regarded as a simple pulp fiction writer. With this thesis I hope to demonstrate that his work contains aspects that raise his work above the level of just being simple commercial, formulaic mass entertainment.



**Part I:**  
**Robert E. Howard's Creation of an Authentic Pseudo-History**

Introduction

Robert E. Howard held a great interest in history and fascination for time abysses that span hundreds, thousands and even millions of years, as a look at his extant letters and literary work proves. In his communication with his friends and fellow writers, Howard often referred to historical episodes or elaborated on such episodes. Moreover, many of Howard's fantastic stories are set in ancient times so far in the past that the term "times before time" appears to be more accurate. For example, the stage of Howard's stories about the barbarian king Kull was the era before the sinking of Atlantis. The world of Howard's most famous literary creation, Conan of Cimmeria, was the Hyborian Age, a pre-prehistoric fictive period between the sinking of Atlantis and the beginning of earth's time reckoning. In 1932 Howard even wrote an essay titled "The Hyborian Age," in which he detailed the historical background of this age.

"The Hyborian Age" has been an overlooked entry in Howard's work that only recently found attention via the secondary work of Jeffrey Shanks, who approached Howard's essay from the point of view of an archaeologist. In this chapter, I am picking up Shanks' claim of the importance of "The Hyborian Age" but will take it from the field of archaeology into the field of literature studies. My claim is that "The Hyborian Age" is in fact a pioneering achievement in the field of fantastic literature. I would like to prove my claim by looking at the various stages of the creative process that led to the composition of this essay, as, in my opinion, "The Hyborian Age" is not a work that originated on Howard experiencing a sudden gust of inspiration. It is instead the result of Howard's dealing with the aspect of history

and his experimenting with various forms of history. This was a longer process that took place over the various stages of Howard's career as a writer.

I will identify and describe these stages and working steps, and will also include an analysis of the various sources that Howard used when he finally wrote "The Hyborian Age." With this I will demonstrate not only the aforementioned importance of "The Hyborian Age" essay for fantastic fiction. I also wish to correct the wrong image of Howard having been just a simple pulp fiction writer who produced standard genre work for lesser quality magazines in the American pulp fiction market of the early 20th century. I will show that "The Hyborian Age" was in fact the result of Howard's conscious, disciplined creative process. My argument is that "The Hyborian Age" is not exclusively based on the author's imagination but actually involved his thorough research into various sources, which he then adapted and used for his literary purposes.

Finally, I will put the "Hyborian Age" into the historic context of the development of the genre of fantastic literature. By comparing this essay with work by other authors, written before "The Hyborian Age" and focusing on how these writers used the aspect of history in their work, I would like to demonstrate Howard's overlooked pioneering role in this field.

## Chapter I: Robert E. Howard's Alternative History of the Picts

### 1. Introduction

One characteristic feature of Robert E. Howard's work is the ephemerality of many of the literary characters he created. A look at his bibliography shows a pattern according to which he created a character and wrote within a short time several stories featuring his literary creation. Often, though, instead of developing a longer series that featured this character, all of a sudden and without any apparent reasons, Howard stopped to write more stories about it. One example of his idiosyncrasy is Bran Mak Morn, who had the potential to become the protagonist of a longer series, but appeared in only four stories. Howard claimed in the correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, that his literary creations Kull, Bran Mak Morn, and Conan of Cimmeria simply stepped out of his imagination as fully-fledged characters and that writing the stories featuring them was, according to Howard, hardly any effort for him. However, the moment that Howard felt he had lost his connection with his creation, he did not continue to write any more stories starring this character.

In contrast to this trait, there is also an element of constancy in Howard's work. This element is the Picts, a people, or as historian Stuart McHardy describes them, a "confederation of tribal units" (McHardy 176) who lived in Northern Scotland and were "first mentioned as 'Picts' by the Roman writer Eumenius in 297 CE, who referred to the tribes of Northern Britain as 'Picti' ('the painted ones'), ostensibly because of their habit of painting their bodies with dye" (Mark).

The Picts appeared between 1927 and 1935 in 30 of Howard's stories and editor Rusty Burke notes, "rarely a year went by that they [the Picts] did not figure in some Howard tale" (*Bran Mak Morn* xviii). Howard wrote about his fascination with the Picts in January, 1932, to H. P. Lovecraft: "there is one hobby of mine that puzzles me to this day. I am not attempting to lend it any esoteric or mysterious

significance, but the fact remains that I can neither explain nor understand it. That is my interest in the people which, for the sake of brevity, I have always designated as the Picts. . . . But what is strange, is my unflagging interest in them” (*A Means to Freedom* 254). The Picts are for Howard more than just a life-long obsession, and in this chapter their importance and influence on Howard’s literary work will be discussed.

## 2. Howard’s Discovery of the Picts as a Medium to Connect with Ancient Times

According to Howard, his interest in the Picts had begun from an early age. In a January, 1932, letter to H. P. Lovecraft, Howard described his discovery of the Picts, stating:

. . . to me, “Pict” must always refer to the small dark Mediterranean aborigines of Britain. This is not strange, since when I first read of these aborigines, they were referred to as Picts. But what is strange is my unflagging interest in them. I read of them in Scottish histories—merely bare mentionings, usually in disapproval. Understand, my historical readings in my childhood were scattered and sketchy, owing to the fact that I lived in the country where such books were scarce. I was an enthusiast of Scottish history, such as I could obtain, feeling a kinship with the kilted clansmen because of the Scottish strain in my blood. In the brief and condensed histories I read, the Picts were given bare mention, as when they clashed with and were defeated by, the Scotch. Or in English history, as the cause of the Britons inviting the Saxons. The fullest description of this race that I read at that time was a brief remark by an English historian that the Picts were brutish savages, living in mud huts. The only hint I obtained about them forming a legendary point of view was in the description of Rob Roy, which mentioning the abnormal length of his arms, compared to him in this respect to Picts, commenting

briefly upon their stocky and apelike appearance. You can see that everything I read at that time was not calculated to inspire an admiration for the race. (*A Means to Freedom* 254-55)

Howard does not state in this letter how young he was when he learned about the Picts for the first time. Clearly, this image of the Picts was a very vague and negative one that did not impress him. However, his next encounter with the Picts added significant information to his image of the Picts and turned out much more influential on Howard.

In 1918 the Howard family spent several months in New Orleans, where Howard's father needed a qualification required for his profession as a physician. It was during this stay that Howard discovered another source of information about the Picts. In a letter to Lovecraft Howard wrote many years later:

[I] found in a Canal Street library, a book detailing the pageant of British history, from prehistoric times up to—I believe—the Norman conquest. It was written for school-boys and told in an interesting and romantic style, probably with many historical inaccuracies. But there I first learned of the small dark people which first settled Britain, and they were referred to as Picts. I had always felt a strange interest in the term and the people, and now I felt a driving absorption regarding them. (*A Means to Freedom* 255)

According to Howard, “the writer painted the aborigines [Picts] in no more admirable light than other historians whose work I had read. His Picts were made to be sly, furtive, unwarlike, and altogether inferior to the races which followed—which was doubtless true” (255).

Once again, the Picts were portrayed in a negative way. Nonetheless, in spite of this negative image that Howard regarded as historically correct, he “felt a strong sympathy for this people, and then and there adapted them as a medium of connection with ancient times. I made them a strong, warlike race of barbarians, gave them an honorable history of past glories, and created for them a great king—one

Bran Mak Morn” (255).

In my opinion, this passage is a crucial one. In it Howard clearly states the importance of the Picts for his work: the Picts were for Howard a medium of connection with ancient times. Howard’s extant letters amply prove his interest and knowledge of history, modern, and past. Howard also wrote many historical stories set in the time of the Crusades. In fact, I am arguing that even Howard’s Fantasy stories can be regarded as historic stories—only with fantastic or supernatural elements added. Howard’s work also shows that he was interested in stretching the historic scope of his stories as wide as possible, far beyond the Medieval Age setting of many of his stories, back to ancient times. Howard’s debut story, “Spear and Fang,” is for example set in the Stone Age, while another story, “The Lost Race,” has the early Bronze Age as its background.

The correct description of the historical background of a story set in a different period of time than the one its author is living in is a difficult but manageable task as the works of writers of historical novels like Harold Lamb or Bernard Cornwell prove. This task becomes considerably more difficult when an author is trying to describe the flow of time, and depict the vastness of history itself. Robert E. Howard was such an author, and H. P. Lovecraft praised him as having “the most magnificent sense of the drama of ‘History.’ . . . He possesses a panoramic vision which takes in the evolution and interaction of races and nations over vast periods of time . . .” (*Hyborian Age: Facsimile Edition*).

Time, or ancient times, is an abstract concept with no physical form, which makes it a challenging task for a writer to describe or visualize. In my opinion, Howard had found with the Picts a medium that made it possible for him to give the concepts of time and ancient times a physical form that he could describe and work with in order to relate with the ancient times which are the background of many of his fantasy stories. I am arguing that he used the Picts in his work to chronicle their wanderings through an ancient, pre-prehistoric world and—more important—to depict their evolutionary state as it was affected by the time in which the story of

their appearance is set. Proving my point is the fact that whenever the Picts appear in Howard's stories, their evolutionary state is a different one. In "The Shadow Kingdom" (1929), a story set in the era before the sinking of the mysterious continent of Atlantis, the Picts are described as a powerful nation of this age. The story "Beyond the Black River" (1935), which takes place in the age after the sinking of Atlantis does not present the Picts as a powerful nation. As a result of the sinking of Atlantis, the Pictish nation was also destroyed and the Picts were scattered throughout this ancient world. In "Beyond the Black River" the Picts have become nothing more than a tribal alliance of barbarians. This decline of the Picts continues in "The Valley of the Worm" (1934): another cataclysm that has again changed the geography of the world and has thrown them even further back on an evolutionary level of beastlike creatures. Other stories again see the Picts climb up the evolutionary ladder only to become defeated by cataclysmic events or stronger enemies, which results in further evolutionary throwbacks.

I am arguing that it is this evolutionary cycle and devolution of the Picts in which Howard gives time or ancient times a physical shape by describing the visible effect time has on the Picts at the various points of their history. In my opinion, this turns the Picts hereby into what Howard referred to as a "medium of connection with ancient times" (*A Means to Freedom* 255).

I would like to point out that Howard used the Picts, his medium of connection with ancient times in one more way: although the Picts had been portrayed as weak and inferior in the sources Howard had read, an information Howard regarded as historically correct, he decided to change the historical reality of the Picts having been an unremarkable people by giving the Picts their own "honorable history of past glories" (255). My argument is that this change of historic realities set Howard on the path of creating a new version of history and made him the creator of an alternative history. The Picts were Howard's catalyst for this process of alternative history making.

### 3. Howard's Creating of an Alternative History of the Picts

#### (a) "The Lost Race": Outlining an Alternative History of the Picts

By the time Howard was twelve years old, his fascination with the Picts led to Howard giving the Picts their own "honorable history of past glories" (*A Means to Freedom* 255). The result of Howard's efforts was, as I will be calling it from this point forward, an alternative history of the Picts.

The term alternative history is in my definition meant as the depiction of history by a writer of a literary work of fiction, which differs from the facts of official history. Alternative history is not a writer's embellishing of a specific historical period with fictive details of specific events that never happened in real history, for example the heroic deeds of imaginary characters in battles not recorded by history. For my purposes, alternative history means that a writer covers in broader strokes a longer period of time in history. The writer does not just depict a short, specific historic period, such as the French Revolution or the American Civil War, but a longer period that covers thousands of years. In such an alternative history the writer sticks mostly to the proven facts of history, but at the same time interprets some of these facts differently from the way they are viewed by historians. In this different interpretation of history, the writer uses familiar facts but twists them in order to depict a new version of history, an alternative history that is different from the official, known history. This alternative history is still plausible although different from official history.

On the other hand, a writer who reimagines history by fully changing all official historically proven facts and hereby thus creating an utterly new version of history, is creating not an alternative history, but something that I regard as pseudo-history. Howard created later in his career such a pseudo-history, a point we will address in the chapter about the Hyborian Age.

In my opinion, Howard's first step on the way of creating such an alternative history of the Picts was the story "The Lost Race." Submitted to *Weird Tales* in 1924 and accepted for publication in January, 1925, "The Lost Race" was the second story



Howard professionally sold and the first one that featured the Picts.<sup>1</sup>

“The Lost Race” is set in Bronze Age Britain. The story’s protagonist is a young man called Cororuc, “with gray eyes, a pure Britain but not a pure Celt, his yellow hair revealing, in him as in all his race, a trace of Belgae” (*Bran Mak Morn* 169), who after his adventures of saving a wolf from a panther and fighting bandits is captured by small dwarfish men. Cororuc’s captors carry him to the subterranean cave they are living in and turn out to be Picts. The Picts want to kill Cororuc, thinking that he is a descendant of the Celts, a race they bitterly hate because the Celts invaded Britain and defeated the Picts, who ruled the island before the arrival of the Celts. As a result of their defeat, the Picts are thrown back on the evolutionary ladder. One group of surviving Picts escaped into the northern part of the islands where they mixed with local tribes and lost their Pictish identity. The other group, Cororuc’s captors, turned into cave dwellers shunning the surface but claim to have stayed “true Picts.” The Picts are about to kill Cororuc, when another Pict appears who turns out to be a shape shifter and the wolf, which Cororuc saved earlier in the story. He intervenes and saves Cororuc in the nick of time.

In “The Lost Race” Cororuc learns from an old Pict about the history of the Pictish race.<sup>2</sup> According to the old man, the Picts “came from the south. Over the islands, over the Inland Sea” (179). That Inland Sea which the old Pict refers to is the Mediterranean Sea, which makes the Picts a people of Mediterranean descent. The old Pict echoes Howard’s opinion as stated in a letter to H. P. Lovecraft written in January 1932, that for him the term “‘Pict’ must always refer to the small dark Mediterranean aborigines of Britain” (*Means to Freedom* 254). Howard’s assumption that the Picts were of Mediterranean origin is based on the theory of George Francis Scott Elliot (1862-1934), who claimed that the Picts were Mediterraneans and arrived in Britain in Neolithic times. Scott Elliot published this theory in his book *The Romance of Early British Life: From the Earliest Time to the Coming of the Danes* in 1909.

Howard never mentioned the title of the book he found in New Orleans in

1918 from which he learned more about the Picts, eventually deciding to create an alternative history for them. It is safe to say that Elliot's *The Romance of Early British Life: From the Earliest Time to the Coming of the Danes* is the book in question. In their essay "Robert E. Howard, Bran Mak Morn and the Picts" Rusty Burke and Patrice Louinet advocate *The Romance of Early British Life: From the Earliest Time to the Coming of the Danes* (1909) as having been the source for Howard's account of the history of the Picts in "The Lost Race" and give examples of similarities between Elliot's book and Howard's story.

One such example is the similarity in the description of the people the Picts met when they arrived in Britain Neolithic times. According to Elliot, these people were a race of red-haired cave dwellers (Burke and Louinet 344). Burke and Louinet point out the passage in "The Lost Race," in which the old Pict tells Cororuc that the Picts came to Britain from the South via the Inland Sea, where they "found a race of red-haired barbarians, who dwelt in caves" (345).

This example and other ones given by Burke and Louinet do not simply identify Elliot's *The Romance of Early British Life: From the Earliest Time to the Coming of the Danes* as Howard's source for his description of the Picts' history in "The Lost Race." In my opinion, they also hint at a decisive feature of Howard's approach to writing. Howard tried to give his fantastic stories plausibility and realism. In Howard's case, his attempt to give the Picts an alternative history meant that the real history had to be re-imagined. Before Howard's imagination took over and turned the real history of the Picts into an alternative history, Howard worked with facts that historians of his time regarded as historically correct. In the case of "The Lost Race," Howard used Elliot's *The Romance of Early British Life: From the Earliest Time to the Coming of the Danes* as the foundation of his alternative history of the Picts. This basing of fictive elements on what was then considered scientifically proven facts gave Howard's fictive alternative history a ring of plausibility and truth.

In "The Lost Race," Howard neither rewrote history nor did he give the Picts

their glorious past he had mentioned in his correspondence with Lovecraft. In this story, Howard still stayed within the frame of the official history of the world. In spite of this, I am arguing that “The Lost Race” is more than just simply Howard’s first story in which the Picts appeared: it is his general outline of the history of the Picts from their origins in the Mediterranean region over becoming the rulers of the British Islands until they were defeated by the later arriving Celts. By presenting the Picts as a race that after their defeat were driven to live in underground caves or to mix with other races, hereby losing their true identity, Howard also introduces the element of ‘evolution and evolutionary deterioration’ of the Picts that became another feature of his work and his creation of an alternative history. “The Lost Race” is Howard’s first step to create an alternative history of the Picts.

(b) “Men of the Shadows”: Enhancing the Picts’ Fictive History to an Alternative History

In “The Lost Race” Howard introduced the Picts and their historical background in his literary work. Nonetheless, I would like to point out that the Picts’ history as he had described it in “The Lost Race” was far from being his own creation. The Picts’ portrayal in this story was still too strongly influenced by Scott Elliot’s theories of the Picts of early England. Due to this strong influence of Elliot’s theories, the Picts’ history in “The Lost Race” was still firmly set in the known history of the world. Also, in “The Lost Race” Howard had not given the Picts their honorable history of the past he had mentioned in his letter to H. P. Lovecraft. What Howard had rather achieved was setting up an outline of the Picts’ past history that was based on Elliot’s theories. I am arguing that Howard began creating an alternative history of the Picts with the story “Men of the Shadows,” which he submitted to *Weird Tales* in early 1926.

“Men of the Shadows” begins with a battle scene between the Romans and the Picts that ends with the decimation of the Roman legion. The story’s protagonist, a Norse mercenary in the service of the Roman army and the only survivor of the

battle and its aftermath, is captured by the Picts and taken to their stronghold. Here a Pictish shaman demands that the mercenary be sacrificed, but the chief of the Picts, Bran Mak Morn, opposes. It comes to a contest of wills between Bran Mak Morn and the shaman, which the shaman loses.

The shaman then begins to tell the history of the Picts where in an unspecified ancient prehistoric time there were three races of mankind. The Picts, the Lemurians, and the Atlanteans. The Picts were living on islands in the western part of the world. Neighboring these islands was the continent of Atlantis inhabited by the Atlanteans. The Lemurians lived on a continent in the far eastern part of this world. Then a cataclysm occurred: the islands of the Picts became the mountains of a newly risen continent (North America). In the east Lemuria sank.

The cataclysm and the formation of glaciers on both poles of the world caused massive migrations of people: surviving Lemurians came to live on the newly risen continent in the west. The Picts would at first migrate to the south of the western continent and then move to Atlantis, where they defeated the Atlanteans, whose survivors escaped to the proto-European continent east of Atlantis. The Picts followed later and settled on the British isle. A new race of man, the Celts, then invaded the British isle and defeated the Picts. At this point of the narration “Men of the Shadows” ends.

“Men of the Shadows” was never published during Howard’s lifetime. On its submission, the story was rejected by *Weird Tales*’ editor Farnsworth Wright criticizing that it was not so much a story, but the “chronicle of a tribe, a picture of the evolution of a race; and thereby it lacks the suspense and thrill that a story of individual conflict and hopes and fears and drama would have” (*Bran Mak Morn* 325). In my view, Wright’s criticism is indeed correct: “Men of the Shadows” is a very uneven story. The story starts as an action story about a Norse mercenary fighting for his life in an hostile environment but then turns into an utterly different direction, becoming as Wright put it, the “chronicle of a tribe, a picture of the evolution of a race” that takes up two thirds of the story and then abruptly ends after

the Pictish shaman is finished with his account, leaving the fate of the captured Norse mercenary unclear.

In spite of Farnsworth Wright's criticism that "Men of the Shadows" is lacking suspense, thrill, and conflict, I would like to stress that there is actually a very short instance in the story in which Howard creates the scenario of an individual conflict. In the story he introduces the Pictish chief Bran Mak Morn, who is challenged by a shaman to a contest of wills. Should Bran be defeated, he will lose his status as chief and become the shaman's slave. Howard, though, does not elaborate on this conflict between Bran and the shaman or its background. The clash between Bran and the shaman is described in a short, unspectacular passage that lacks any pulpish thrills. Due to this, in my eyes, the passage becomes a means intended to serve as a bridge that leads to the shaman's telling of the Pictish history. The haste with which Howard virtually rushes to the account of the Pictish shaman, neglecting to fully exploit the conflict that could have been the real selling point of "Men of the Shadows" strongly indicates the fact that Howard's main interest lay indeed not on drama or action, but on an utterly different aspect: the depiction of the history of the Picts, which the shaman tells after the duel with Bran.

Concerning this account of the Pictish shaman, David Weber writes in his introduction to the 1996 Baen edition *Bran Mak Morn*:

[the] weakness of "Men of the Shadows" is the amount of information Howard crams into it. The crux of the entire story is the wizard's trance—the story of the Picts' tragic history with which he harangues the narrator—and it makes for a somewhat indigestible lump of explanation. But that lump is essential to Howard's whole vision, for it explains the working out of the cyclical progress of both history and mankind which is central to almost all of his fiction. (xi)

Weber clearly sees that there is more to "Men of the Shadows" and correctly identifies the fact that in "Men of the Shadows" Howard indeed described history as a steadily repeating cycle of kingdoms and empires and races rising and falling and

that this is a central element of his work. On the other hand, Weber does not realize the most crucial aspect that makes “Men of the Shadows” not only different from “The Lost Race” but also lends the story significance in Howard’s work. The point Weber does not see is that “Men of the Shadows” is the origin of Howard creating a fictive history.

“Men of the Shadows” shows a lot of similarities to “The Lost Race” with the basic plot of both stories, a man taken prisoner by the Picts, and then learning about their history. In many ways, “Men of the Shadows” appears to recycle, update, and extend “The Lost Race.” In the business of pulp fiction such a strategy was not uncommon. Pulp fiction writers were paid by their output and the number of words they could put into their stories and therefore were not shy to recycle the plots of successfully sold stories. In fact, Howard resorted to this strategy when he was in dire need of money. His Conan of Cimmeria series contains several stories, all of them of lesser quality, whose plots and settings involving uninhabited islands, isolated mysterious cities, and damsels in distress show remarkable similarities. Considering all the similarities between “The Lost Race” and “Men of the Shadows,” the conclusion that “Men of the Shadows” is such a case of a pulp writer attempting to recycle his own story appears to be obvious. I will soon demonstrate that this is not the case.

Some of Howard’s efforts to extend “Men of the Shadows” are meaningless, as the story’s opening sequence begins with a battle scene, followed by another long, action-filled sequence that describes how the surviving legionnaires try to escape to the safety behind Hadrian’s Wall. This whole sequence turns out to be a false set up: it has nothing at all to do with the main part of the story, and I regard it as a high possibility that Howard created this false start sequence only with the intention of attracting *Weird Tales*’ editor Farnsworth Wright’s attention in order to make the story more sellable.<sup>3</sup>

However, I would like to point out that there is one notable difference between “The Lost Race” and “Men of the Shadows.” In “Men of the Shadows” the account

of the Picts' history told to the prisoner is significantly longer and much more detailed than in "The Lost Race," so Howard's intention to create an alternative history is again apparent.

I have shown that "The Lost Race" was just an outline of the history of the Picts, which Howard based on the theories of historian Scott Elliot. In "The Lost Race," Howard's history of the Picts remained within the frame of known world history, in this case the Bronze Age and the time of the settling of the British Isles. In "Men of the Shadows" though, Howard, offering a wider view, took the Pictish history considerably out of this timeframe. In the account of the shaman in "Men of the Shadows" the history of the Picts goes back into times when the mystic lost continents of Atlantis and Lemuria still existed. In this new version of the Pictish history, the origin of the Picts is also revealed. The Picts were not a people with European roots but were originally living on islands in the western hemisphere of the world that would later turn into the North American continent. Due to a cataclysm that changed the geography of the world of this time, the Picts were forced to leave their former habitat and came to live on the continent of Atlantis.

Although by Howard's time serious science had come to the conclusion that Atlantis had never existed, there were still sufficient skeptics who believed in the existence of this mystic continent. The mentioning of places like Atlantis and Lemuria in "Men of the Shadows" established a ring of familiarity, even plausibility and was suited to wake among readers of the story associations with an ancient, antediluvian time. Furthermore, in the official world history there are no sources that give any historically proven facts or details of the age of Atlantis and Lemuria. In my opinion, Howard not only took the history of the Picts back beyond the dawn of mankind, he also gained the artistic freedom to create a history that would tie in with the official history of the world while at the same time allowed him to depict events that formed his version of the history of the Picts. In "Men of the Shadows" Howard completely left the limitations of the history as he had presented it in "The Lost Race" and became a true creator of history.

I would like to stress that this does not mean, however, that from the very instance on Howard's imagination took over full command, that Howard created a completely fictive history. In spite of Howard's introduction of elements like Atlantis or Lemuria in his version of the history of the Picts, this enhanced version was still a history that was not fully re-imagined. Howard based his depiction of Atlantis on a mix of his imagination as well as scientific and occult sources. Due to the fact that Howard created his extended version of pre-prehistoric history on other sources than his imagination, the history of the Picts in "Men of the Shadows" is exactly an alternative history in the way that I defined it at the beginning of this chapter.

Therefore, I think that "Men of the Shadows" is the story in which Howard fulfilled his intention to give the Picts their "honorable history of past glories" and created a plausible alternative history. In his article "Hyborian Age Archaeology" Jeffrey Shanks writes:

. . . for Howard this story was an attempt to create an artificial history of the Picts. . . . Howard following British historian G. F. Scott Elliot's book *The Romance of Early British Life*, linked the historical Picts of Scotland and Wales with the so-called "Mediterranean race" . . . .

At time, many anthropologists believed this Mediterranean race was responsible for spreading Neolithic culture throughout Europe prior to the Bronze Age. Howard went further, however, by extending the story of the Picts back to the dawn of humankind." (19)

Shanks perfectly summarizes with this statement the importance of "Men of the Shadows."

Furthermore, what must not be overlooked is that in spite of all its faults,<sup>4</sup> "Men of the Shadows" is the very first story in the field of fantasy literature that has ever featured such an alternative history based on the evolution, development, and history of a mystic race or people. There are two writers besides Howard, who were highly influential in the development of the literary genre of fantasy and who could be eligible for the ones who introduced alternative history into the genre: William



Morris and J. R. R. Tolkien. Morris established in fantasy literature the influential and even nowadays often copied setting of a pseudo-medieval epoch, but never provided in his novels any background history of such a setting. Likewise, the writer who is usually associated with creating the most perfectly detailed fantasy world in the genre that includes a fully developed history of this world is Tolkien, who depicted such a history in his genre defining *The Lord of the Rings* and the posthumously published *The Silmarillion*. However, Tolkien began his work of creating this history of Middle-earth after the publishing of *The Hobbit* in 1937, more than ten years after Howard wrote “The Lost Race” and “Men of the Shadows.” It was Robert E. Howard who was the pioneer in creating such an alternative history.

#### 4. Bran Mak Morn: The Tragic King of Howard’s Alternative History of the Picts

In “Men of the Shadows” Howard established an alternative history of the Picts that ranged from the era of the occupation of the British isle by the Roman Empire back to antediluvian times before the sinking of Atlantis. This alternative history of the Picts, though, was a general description of the Picts’ origins, their wanderings through the various ages, and their various evolutionary phases without any further embellishments in the form of heroic characters or decisive events such as battles or other conflicts. In order to make his version of the Pictish history more than just a general chronology, Howard had to take further steps.

Among the reasons why “Men of the Shadows” was rejected by *Weird Tales* was, according to the magazine’s editor Farnsworth Wright, the lack of individual conflict and drama. In the previous chapter, I pointed out a passage in “Men of the Shadows” that featured the conflict between a Pictish shaman and the Pictish chief Bran Mak Morn, with the shaman demanding that a prisoner be used as a human sacrifice, an act Bran Mak Morn rejected. In his eagerness to put the focus of “Men of the Shadows” on the shaman’s recounting of the Pictish history, Howard did not use the potential conflict he created in this scene. The result was that “Men of the

Shadows” became an uneven product. It starts out as an underdeveloped action story that suddenly turns into a lengthy account of the Pictish history that makes out most of “Men of the Shadows.”

Howard remedied this lack of individual conflict and drama in “Men of the Shadows” by turning Bran Mak Morn, originally a side character in “Men of the Shadows,” into the protagonist of three stories: “Worms of the Earth” (1930), “Kings of the Night” (1932), and “The Dark Man” (1931), where Bran appeared in name only.<sup>5</sup> I am arguing that by making Bran Mak Morn the protagonist of these stories, Howard introduced a character who personified the drama of Howard’s alternative history of the Picts.

#### (a) Bran Mak Morn’s Role in the Alternative History of the Picts

Although Bran was originally only a side character in “Men of the Shadows,” I would like to point out that he is depicted from the very first moment in these three stories in a way that marks him as special. The captive Norse mercenary describes Bran as “a slim, dark haired man, whose head would come scarcely to my shoulder, but who seemed as lithe and strong as a leopard. . . . He resembled in form and features the Picts no more than did I, and yet there was about him a certain apparent kinship to them” (13). Bran himself explains to the prisoner the reason for his different appearance from his own people: “I am as the race was . . . . The line of chiefs has kept its blood pure through the ages, scouring the world for women of the Old Race” (16).

His different physique makes Bran stand out among the Picts in several ways. Bran’s pure-bloodedness, the result of his line not having mixed with other races, lends him a superior physique, which is drastically different from the Picts’ dwarfish, even beast-like appearance. This physical appearance marks Bran not only as unique among the Picts, it also visually supports his claim to be the Picts’ leader and king.

In my view, Bran’s physique for the Picts is also a steady reminder of their past history and the glory the Picts have lost throughout this history. It shows the

Picts their original condition before history changed them via repeating circles of evolution into their present, deteriorated form of beast-men. A glimpse of the Picts' original appearance is found in the Kull of Atlantis story "The Shadow Kingdom," which is set thousands of years before the events of "Men of the Shadows." Here the Picts are still a mighty and influential nation. Kull's sidekick in this story is the Pict Brule, who in the story "Kings of the Night" turns out to be Bran's direct ancestor and whose looks are much closer to Bran's than the Picts of Bran's time: "[Brule] gave back the gaze of the king without flinching. He was a lean-hipped, massive-chested warrior of middle height, dark, like all his race, and strongly built. From strong, immobile features gazed dauntless and inscrutable eyes" ("The Shadow Kingdom" 14).

In "Men of the Shadows" Bran is the one who is most painfully aware of the tragedy of how the Picts, once a great people and nation, have been reduced to their sad state of existence and he expresses this plight to the Norse prisoner: "Look upon me. I am what the race once was. Look about you. A race of ape-men, we that were the highest type of men the world could boast" ("Men of the Shadows" 16).

Bran clearly realizes the tragedy of the Picts' history. Furthermore, Bran is actually the only one among the Picts who has such an understanding. I would like to point out that in all of Howard's stories about the Picts and their history, there is not one single Pict to be found who reflects about the Picts' fate of being an eternal underdog of history. It is as if the Picts were lacking an elemental understanding of their race's history and tragedy. They live for the moment and stoically suffer through all the blows history, time, and fate deal them without pondering the reason for their lot or lamenting it.

On the other hand, Bran is both the leader of the Picts and, due to his different and superior physique, also an outsider among his people. From both these perspectives he clearly sees and understands the full extent of the tragedy of his people's history: Bran knows what the Picts themselves do not seem to realize; that they were once "the highest type of men the world could boast" (16) and that they

are now caught in a historical development that inevitably leads to a further deterioration of their once mighty race. Ironically Bran's outsider existence and his understanding of the extent of Pictish history elevates him to the position of being the Picts' leader and at the same time being the helpless watcher of the unfolding drama of the Picts' further evolutionary deterioration.

Bran adds tragedy to this drama by taking on a self-chosen role: he regards it as his mission to "lift the Pictish nation out of the darkness of the valley of abysmal savagery" ("Men of the Shadow" 18), to lead and raise his people out of this condition of savagery back to their former glory. What makes Bran's mission a tragedy, though, is that Bran knows that he will not be successful in this undertaking as his future and defeat are predicted by the shaman in "Men of the Shadows":

From the east came stealing a dim gray radiance. In the ghostly light Bran Mak Morn's face showed bronze once more, expressionless, immobile; dark eyes gazing unwaveringly into the fire, seeing there his mighty ambitions, his dreams of empire fading into smoke.

"For what we could not keep in battle, we have held by cunning for years and centuries unnumbered. But the New Races rise like a great tidal wave and the Old gives place. In the dim mountains of Galloway shall the nation make its last fierce stand. And as Bran Mak Morn falls, so vanishes the Lost Fire—forever. From the centuries, from the eons." ("Men of the Shadows" 30)

Bran is fully aware of the inevitable fact that he will not succeed in his undertaking. In spite of his knowledge of the futility of his self-chosen mission and ambition, Bran unerringly walks the path that he knows will ultimately lead to his own demise.

#### (b) Mirroring the Pictish History: Bran Mak Morn's Loss of Humanity

Besides the tragedy and drama on Bran's personal level, Bran is also representing the Pictish history in his own adventures and life. I have shown that the

drama of the Pictish history lies in the Picts being a race that is not so much evolving onto a higher level of evolution but rather goes into the opposite direction, steadily deteriorating on a lower level of evolution. In my opinion, the stories “Kings of the Night” (1932) and “Worms of the Earth” depict how Bran actually goes through a similar deteriorating process at the end in which Bran loses the other aspect that sets him apart from the beast-like Picts: his humanity.

In “Kings of the Night” Bran has become king of the Picts and finds himself as the leader of an unstable alliance of Picts, Celts, and Vikings that is about to give battle to Roman legions.<sup>6</sup> Bran is fully aware of how weak his position is, not only as king of the Picts, but also as the leader of the alliance preparing to fight the Romans. To his Celtic ally, Cormac of Connacht, he admits: “how shall I expect loyalty from alien tribes, who am not sure of my own people? Thousands lurk in the hills, holding aloof. I am king in name only. Let me win tomorrow and they will flock to my standard; if I lose, they will scatter like birds before a cold wind” (39). Although according to the prophecy given in “Men of the Shadows” Bran will ultimately sacrifice his life for the sake of the Picts, his Pictish subjects’ loyalty is at best unreliable. In spite of this ungratefulness of his subjects, Bran continues to fight proceeding towards his prophesied doom.

Although Bran regards himself as king in name only, the events in “Kings of the Night” show that he has indeed become a king and acquired in this process also the negative attributes which the position of a king requires and brings along. As part of his battle plan, Bran knowingly sacrifices the Vikings in order to lure the Roman troops into a trap that will give his alliance the victory. Shocked and angry about Bran’s cold-bloodedness, Cormac, the leader of the Celtic troops faces Bran after the battle:

“It is in my mind to slay you,” said the Gael heavily and like a man speaking in a gaze, “for the blood of brave men is on your head. Had you given the signal to charge sooner, some would have lived.”

Bran folded his arms; his eyes were haunted. “Strike if you will; I am

sick of slaughter. It's cold mead this kinging it. A king must gamble with men's lives and naked swords. The lives of all my people were at stake; I sacrificed the Northmen—yes; and my heart is sore within me, for they were men! But had I given the order when you would have desired, all might have gone awry. The Romans were not yet massed in the narrow mouth of the gorge, and might have had time and space to form their ranks again and beat us off. I waited until the last moment—and the rovers died. A king belongs to his people, and can not let either his own feelings or the lives of men influence him. Now my people are saved; but my heart is cold in my breast.”

Cormac wearily dropped his sword-point to the ground.

“You are a born king of men, Bran,” said the Gaelic prince.” (73)

In this story Bran is in the role of being a king who feels that his people do not accept him. In order to gain the Picts' acceptance, Bran needs to give them a victory in battle, which he can only gain by sacrificing allies at the cost of his moral values and humanity. It is out of this ambition that Bran gives up his Viking allies and leads them to their deaths. In my eyes, Bran's claim of regretting having to sacrifice his allies is thus an ambiguous one. Although he claims that this sacrifice was necessary as part of his duty as a king to ensure the well-being of his own people, Bran's need of satisfying his own ambition to deliver a victory that will bring him the loyalty of the Picts may very well have been his reason behind giving up his allies. The result of both scenarios is that Bran's victory, which should be the crowning moment of his life, is, in reality, a hollow one. It leaves Bran with the bitterness of disillusion, his realization that being a king is a burden that comes at the price of giving up one's humanity. In fact, it is Bran's humanity that puts him above the Picts. Bran's original motivation of his attempt to raise the Picts out of the stage of their present savagery is to give the Picts back the humanity they have lost in the course of their history. I would like to argue that the tragic irony is that in this process of restoring his people's humanity, Bran loses his own humanity.

In my argument Bran's downward spiral continues in the story "Worms of the Earth." After Bran helplessly has to witness how Romans crucify an innocent Pict, he vows vengeance on the Roman military governor Titus Sulla, on whose orders the crucifixion was executed. Bran does not mobilize the forces of the Picts to get his vengeance. Instead, he turns to an ally, his trusted advisor, the wizard Gonar warns him to avoid, prophesying if Bran follows his plan that he "will go down to Hell and . . . will not return" (94). Bran plans to use the worms of the earth as allies,<sup>7</sup> who are the mysterious descendants of a race that lived in Britain long before the coming of the Picts and who are hiding at a secret location.

In order to find the mysterious creatures, Bran has to undergo an ordeal that includes suffering sexual humiliation by the witch Atla, a descendant of this mystic race, in exchange for information on the whereabouts of the worms of the earth and a way to turn them into his allies.

On the day of meeting the worms who are supposed to deliver the Roman governor Titus Sulla to him, Bran passes the Roman fortress in which Titus Sulla was hiding and finds it utterly destroyed. A dying Roman tells Bran that unknown enemies managed to collapse the fortress by digging away its foundation and that they abducted Titus Sulla. Bran travels to the meeting point with the worms, who turn out to be horribly malformed creatures that are a mixture of snakes and men who have lost any aspect of being human. When they hand over Titus Sulla, the Roman has become mad. The witch Atla explains the Roman's condition with the words: "they [the worms of the earth] have not harmed him. . . . It's what he saw and came to know that broke his brain" (124).

Bran then takes Titus Sulla's life, at the same time realizing that with using the worms of the earth as the tool for his vengeance he has gone too far and has unleashed forces that are beyond his control. Disgusted by what he has done, ridiculed by Atla, and threatened that the worms will come for him too, Bran leaves the place.

"Worms of the Earth" is more than just a simple horror story that treats the

topic of how the evoking of the unknown, supernatural forces gets out of control of the person who has called them. In fact, I am claiming that the story shows Bran's ultimate fall. After Bran gave up his humanity in order to fulfill his ambition of becoming accepted by the Picts as their king in "Kings of the Night," the story "Worms of the Earth" depicts the further loss of his remaining humanity.

Bran's vengeance in "Worms of the Earth" is not a personal vendetta intended to satisfy his personal wish to see justice meted out on the Romans. His lust for vengeance is based on his sense of duty towards his people, the Picts. The crucified Pict, Bran says, "was bound to my heart-strings, as every man and every woman and every child of Pictland is bound. It [the Pict's life] was mine to protect him; now it is mine to avenge him" (93-94). In my argument, Bran's motivation for using the worms of the earth as the tool of his vengeance against all warnings is his misguided sense of responsibility towards his subjects the Picts. By taking the worms as his allies, Bran uses a weapon that is "too foul to use even against Rome" (127). It is in this process that leads to Bran losing more of his humanity.

Bran realizes for the first time that he has called forces beyond his control when he sees the destruction the worms have wrought on Titus Sulla's fortress.

A shudder shook Bran Mak Morn. The worms of the earth! Thousands of vermin digging like moles far below the castle, burrowing away the foundations—gods, the land must be honeycombed with tunnels and caverns—these creatures were even less human than he thought—what ghastly shapes had he invoked to his aid? (120)

Bran's suspicion that he bargained for more than he can handle finally becomes true when he meets the target of his intended revenge, Titus Sulla, who has gone mad from the terror of his encounter with the worms.

There was a stir, a seething in the writhing shadows, and from the darkness crept, like a four-legged animal, a human shape that fell down and groveled at Bran's feet and writhed and mowed, and lifting a death's-head, howled like a dying dog. In the ghastly light, Bran,



soul-shaken, saw the blank glassy eyes, the bloodless features, the loose, writhing, froth-covered lips of sheer lunacy—gods, was this Titus Sulla, the proud lord of life and death in Eboracum’s proud city? (123-24)

I do not regard Bran’s consequent killing of the Roman as an act of taking vengeance. It is a mercy killing and can be understood as Bran’s very last act of humanity, ironically given to the very enemy Bran had set out to punish for crucifying his Pictish subject.

Bran finally realizes the full extent of the horror, and that his land is full of “monster-haunted meres, . . . foul witch-women, and . . . lost caverns and subterranean realms where spawn in the darkness shapes of Hell” (124), and that he was the one who woke these forces. Like his seeming regrets of sacrificing his allies in “Kings of the Night,” Bran’s consequent lamenting of having woken unnatural allies in “Worms of the Earth” is, in my eyes, an act of utter hypocritical self-pity. It was Bran who ignored all the warnings and forced the worms to serve him in his vengeance. The worms never acted out of their own volition, but only because of Bran’s pressuring them for their help. All of the destruction and havoc caused by the worms was the result of Bran’s doing. It is the witch Atla who mercilessly points out Bran’s hypocrisy by asking him, “[Are] they [the worms] more foul than a mortal who seeks their help [?]” (124).

Atla adds insult to injury by taunting Bran and revealing to him the full extent and the consequences of his invoking the worms. “King of Pictland! . . . King of fools! . . . Stay and let me show you the real fruits of the pits! . . . Run, fool, run! But you are stained with the taint—you have called them forth and they will remember! And in their own time they will come to you again” (127).

I would like to point out that by having invoked the worms, Bran has stained his honor as king and has given up more of his humanity. Humiliated and afraid, he runs away from the worms and Atla. He knows that he will never be able to lose the stench that will leave a trace for the worms to follow him and take him in the future. I regard Bran’s consequent leaving the scene not as a dignified one, worthy of a king

who has gained a glorious victory over a hated enemy. It is Bran escaping without any dignity at all. Bran's embarrassment divulges itself in a final act of helpless violence when he strikes Atla in the face, resulting in her taunting him even more with her laughter, as she knows that wherever Bran goes, the worms will follow.

The character of Bran Mak Morn is the individual fate that personifies the Pictish declining history, an element that, as I would like to argue, was notably missing when Howard developed his alternative history of the Picts. In "The Lost Race" Howard had begun to work on a general outline intended to be Howard's version of the history of the Picts. In "Men of the Shadows" he significantly enhanced this outline to an alternative history of the Picts. He added the tragic element of the Picts being a race that history had sent on a deteriorating path in their evolution, turning the Picts from having formerly been the leading race of a distant antediluvian past into beast-like creatures. In "The Lost Race" and "Men of the Shadows" the Picts' history was presented in the form of a chronicle that covered thousands of years, a process exempt of closer details, tragedy or drama. As a result, in both stories Howard did not manage to convincingly describe the tragedy of his Pictish alternative history, which in the case of "Men of the Shadows" led to the story's rejection when it was submitted to *Weird Tales*.

I am arguing that in the Bran Mak Morn stories, Howard went into the Pictish history by depicting it in its decline. Bran Mak Morn represents the tragedy of the Picts at one specific time in their history. Bran is personifying the history of the Picts in two ways, as an outsider with a better perspective of the Picts' tragedy and as an insider who lives Pictish history. As an outsider among the Picts, he is the only remaining pureblooded Pict who has kept the superior physiognomy the Picts have lost in the course of their ancient history. It is this position of an outsider that allows Bran to see and clearly understand the tragedy of the Picts of being stuck in a history of steady deterioration. On the other hand, he is also an insider, a part of the Picts' tragedy by undergoing a similar deterioration as the Picts. Bran does not lose his physiognomy in this process, but his humanity that originally put him above the

Picts.

In this way, the tragedy of Bran's existence, the failing of his ambitions, and the consequent loss of his humanity mirror the fate and history of the Picts.

#### 5. Howard's Connecting the Picts' Alternative History with the 20th Century

The Picts continued to appear in Howard's work long after "Men of the Shadows." Besides the Bran Mak Morn stories that I just discussed, they were mentioned in the essay "The Hyborian Age" (1932), the fictive age between the sinking of Atlantis and the world's official time reckoning that Howard had introduced in "Men of the Shadows." In the Conan of Cimmeria series, whose stage is the Hyborian Age, the Picts appear in the story "Beyond the Black River" (1936) and are described as barbarians who stand up against the decadent and weak civilizations of this age. In "The Valley of the Worm" (1934), a story set in the aftermath of the apocalypse that ended the Hyborian Age, the Picts have once again deteriorated to the state of ape-men.

While "The Hyborian Age," "Beyond the Black River," and "The Valley of the Worm" are set in the antediluvian past of Howard's alternative history of the Picts, the stages of the aforementioned "The Lost Race," "Kings of the Night," or "Worms of the Earth" are more immediate historical periods, the Bronze Age and the time of the Roman Empire's occupation of the southern part of Britain. In my opinion, this indicates that Howard's concept of his alternative history of the Picts was not limited exclusively to antediluvian times and fictive ages. In fact, Howard's alternative history of the Picts continued to flow into the realms of the world's younger, official history, by then the modern age of the twentieth century.

Moreover, I am arguing that Howard achieved this by adapting the Picts' background in the way that the Picts fit plausibly into modern times without either losing their mystic touch or corrupting the facts of the alternative history Howard had created for them so far. Howard undertook this step of moving the Picts from their

ancient history into modern times via the fragment “The Little People.”<sup>8</sup>

“The Little People” is about the adventure of two American siblings of Irish-Celtic ancestry during their travel to northern Britain. The story opens with a debate between the older brother, who is also the story’s first-person narrator and his sister Joan, in which they both argue about the possible existence of mythical creatures called the little people. Annoyed by his sister’s stubborn refusal to believe in the possible existence of the little people, he challenges her to spend the night in an old stone ruin near their hotel. In the night, Joan sneaks out of the hotel. When her brother realizes this, he follows her, just in time to see Joan being attacked by short, dwarfish creatures. He fights some of the creatures, while Joan tries to escape closely pursued by another group of these creatures. Joan is about to be caught when out of nowhere a Celtic druid materializes and saves both of the siblings from the creatures.

Howard’s description of the twentieth century Picts found in “The Little People” is a consequent continuation of the familiar element of the steady evolutionary deterioration of the Picts, which is an aspect of the alternative history Howard had already established. In order to take the Picts in a plausible way into modern times, Howard also used another source that is revealed at the very beginning of “The Little People”: the short story “The Shining Pyramid” (1895), written by Welsh writer Arthur Machen (1863-1947), whom Howard counted among his favorite authors.

“The Shining Pyramid” (1895) is a horror story set in the late nineteenth century in south eastern Wales about the encounter of two men with the mystic little people, malformed creatures that hide beneath the earth, who in a grisly ritual sacrifice a young woman they had abducted.

Machen’s influence on Howard’s story is obvious: it is actually Machen’s story “The Shining Pyramid” which Joan is reading at the beginning of “The Little People” which starts the debate that causes the story’s events. In fact, Howard namedrops the Welsh writer in “The Little People” and quotes Machen nearly verbatim when describing the attributes of the little people. When Joan asks her

brother who the little people in Machen's story were, he replies:

The 'Little People' spoken of by Machen are supposed to be the descendants of the prehistoric people who inhabited Europe before the Celts came down out of the North. They are known variously as Turanians, Picts, Mediterraneans, and Garlic-eaters. A race of small, dark people. . . . (199)

I would like to point out that in this passage Howard included all the information about the little people found in Machen's "The Shining Pyramid," which demonstrates Machen's strong influence. More important, though, is that in this passage Howard clarifies that the little people are the Picts.

With the information established that the little people are the Picts, Howard adds detail and tragedy to the history of the Picts. Both, Machen and Howard, depict the little people or Picts as mutated cave dwellers. In Howard's case, the source for this image of the later Picts can be identified again in Scott Elliot's *The Romance of Early British Life*. Elliot wrote about the Picts:

. . . at a much later period the conquering Pict is himself overcome by the Gaelic Celt. Then it is his turn to become a malignant gnome, a dark little dwarf, whose stone arrows are much to be dreaded. . . . It is by no means improbable that the 'little people' —that is, the small dark Picts— did live on for years in those underground houses of theirs. . . . (*Bran Mak Morn* 348).

In "The Little People," Joan's brother elaborates on the Picts' turning into cave dwellers after having been defeated by the Celts. According to him, the Picts "whom the Celts looked upon as scarcely human, fled to caverns under the earth and lived there, coming out only at night . . ." (200). With the Celts dehumanizing the Picts, Howard adds tragedy to their defeat because in spite of their deformed physiognomy, the Picts were actually human. In my opinion, the victorious Celts' taking away this human aspect from the Picts is the prelude to another evolutionary deterioration in their further existence as cave dwellers.

The arrival of the Celts and their defeating the Picts was mentioned previously in Howard's alternative history of the Picts. Hereby representing them as mutated underground dwellers, who after their defeat continued to exist unnoticed until the twentieth century, allowed Howard to link the Picts' alternative history with modern times. Furthermore, the Picts' deteriorated evolutionary level also tied in with Howard's alternative history in which the cycle of evolution and evolutionary deterioration was a vital element.

Howard could have used these deformed early twentieth century Picts as an element for the horror stories he also wrote. In fact, as a trope for horror stories, the Picts would have perfectly served as a representation of Sigmund Freud's term 'uncanny,' a term that has its origins in the German word 'unheimlich.' In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* Rosemary Jackson explains this German term. On one level, the un-negated version of the word—heimlich—is according to Jackson the meaning of 'familiar,' 'homely,' and 'friendly.' On another level, though,

“*Das Heimlich* . . . means that, which is concealed from others: all that is hidden, secreted, obscured. Its negation, *das Unheimlich*, then functions to discover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight. The uncanny combines these two semantic levels; its signification lies precisely in this dualism. It uncovers what is hidden, and by doing so, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar.”  
(65)

What Jackson's definition of Freud's 'uncanny' uncovers for the existence of the Picts in the twentieth century is the element of evolutionary deterioration: the act of mankind not developing further on a higher level of evolution, but into the opposite direction, back on a lower rank of evolution.

In Howard's alternative history, however, I would like to argue that evolutionary deterioration was neither something disturbing nor frightening. It was rather a natural part of an ever-repeating historical cycle that in the case of the Picts made their history a tragic one. For H. P. Lovecraft, a horror writer whose work

Howard deeply appreciated, evolutionary deterioration was indeed a matter of terror and horror. For Lovecraft, the twentieth century was an era marked by progress and the inventions of new technologies that brought mankind and man's life to a new level. On the other hand, the notion that man might not develop on a higher evolutionary level but back onto a lower one was for Lovecraft, a frightening aspect. This is evident in Lovecraft's stories such as "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family" (1920), in which the story's protagonist finds out that he is the descendant of a white human-ape hybrid, or "The Lurking Fear" (1922), in which cannibalistic, deformed descendants of century long inbreeding hide beneath a mountain and terrorize a region. Howard also explored this dark side of evolutionary deterioration in the aforementioned "The Worms of the Earth," a story that featured deformed creatures living underground like the ones in Lovecraft's "The Lurking Fear."

Although the Picts in Howard's "The Little People" are like the terrifying creatures in Machen's "The Shining Pyramid," who in the night attack unsuspecting wanderers walking off the tracks, I would like to stress that Howard managed to avoid making them simple horror genre tropes. He achieved this by referring to a source that had already insinuated in "The Lost Race." In this story Picts capture the story's protagonist Cororuc. When Cororuc sees his malformed captors for the first time clearly, his thoughts are "that these people were even human, he was not at all certain. He had heard so much of them as 'little people.' . . . That the tales which the ancient Gaels told of the Picts, already warped, would become even more warped from age to age, to result in tales of elves, dwarfs, trolls, and fairies" (*Bran Mak Morn* 181). Cororuc refers to the Picts as the origin of fairy tale tropes such as elves, dwarfs, trolls, and fairies—a point that is repeated in "The Little People" with Joan's question whether the little people are related with "the same old elf and troll business" (199).

I would like to point out that Howard's turning the Picts into the origin of British fairy tale tropes was based on another popular theory of the late nineteenth

century: David MacRitchie (1851-1925) had suggested in his publications *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890) and *Fians, Fairies and Picts* (1893) that the origin of the fairies of British folktales were pygmies who had lived in Britain in the Neolithic age. One of the sources that MacRitchie used to build his theory was a passage from the *Historia Norwegiæ*, a history of Norway that was probably written in the thirteenth century in Latin by an anonymous author, in which the Picts of the Orkney islands are mentioned as “the Picts, who were only a little bigger than Pygmies, worked great marvels in city-building each evening and morning, but at noontide they were utterly bereft of their strength and hid for fear in little subterranean dwellings” (Phelpstead 8) .

In “The Little People” Howard combined his alternative history with Machen’s “The Shining Pyramid,” Scott Elliott’s *The Romance of Early British Life* and MacRitchie’s theory. He made the Picts deformed underground dwellers that managed to stay hidden from twentieth century man and became the origin of fairy tale tropes of the twentieth century. By doing so, Howard established a plausible connection between his alternative history of the Picts that had started in antediluvian times and modern times.

## 6. Conclusion

The importance of the Picts for Robert E. Howard is evident not simply by their frequent appearances throughout his work. Originally, for Howard the Picts were a medium of connection with ancient times. They were a catalyst for him, resulting in his creating an alternative history for them. Howard’s creation of an alternative history was also a pioneering act in the field of fantastic literature where something like this had never been achieved before.

Howard also turned the Picts into a medium to connect with modern times. He connected his alternative history set in pre-antediluvian times with the theories of David MacRitchie about the Picts having been the origin of fairy tale tropes and thus



established a plausible connection to modern times, mythology, and the world of the readers of his stories.

Finally, the Picts' various states of evolution at the different periods of Howard's alternative history show the effect his vast history has had on their appearance. The Picts can hereby also be seen as a personification of 'time.'

## Chapter II: Atlantis and Its Influence on Howard's Creation of a Pseudo-History

### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated how Howard created an alternative history of the Picts that stretched back to the times of the settling of the British Isles. Howard continued the work on his version of the history of the Picts in the story "Men of the Shadows" (1926). He submitted the story to *Weird Tales*, whose editor Farnsworth Wright rejected it with the reason that "it is too little of a 'story.' . . . It is rather a chronicle of a tribe, a picture of the evolution of a race" (Burke xix). Farnsworth Wright's verdict was correct. "Men of the Shadows," which is set in the time of the Roman Empire's occupation of Britain starts out as an action story with a battle scene between a Roman legion and the Picts. It then describes the decimation of a group of survivors of the legion who try to make their way back behind Hadrian's Wall through enemy territory. The final survivor is caught by the Picts and taken to their lair, a subterranean cave where the story then turns into the lengthy account of the history of the Picts that makes up most of the story.

There is one point, though, which makes "Men of the Shadows" a story of interest. In "Men of the Shadows" Atlantis is introduced when a shaman tells that the Picts had come to the British Isles via the continent of Atlantis. This appearance of mystic Atlantis was not just a professional writer's trick of name-dropping Atlantis with the intention to evoke an atmosphere of ancient times and mystery for the readers. The implications and results of the inclusion of Atlantis into Howard's work went much deeper and I will discuss them in this chapter.

## 2. The Age of Atlantis as Alternative Reality for Howard to Address Personal Issues with His Real-Life Environment

By the time Atlantis was introduced in “Men of the Shadows,” Howard had already created an alternative history of the Picts that stretched back to the times of the settlement of the British Isles. The addition of Atlantis gave Howard the opportunity to go back even further in time, beyond the known history of mankind and enhance his version of the history of the Picts. I am arguing that besides taking this step and extending his alternative history, Howard also used Atlantis as the setting of an alternative reality in which he could contemplate the personal issues of his immediate environment in rural Texas.

Before I address this point, I regard it as necessary to point out that although Atlantis is usually associated with the image of a mysterious lost continent, in Howard’s work it takes on significance in the role of being the age or epoch of the existence of Atlantis. This clearly shows in the Kull of Atlantis series, which Howard wrote from 1927 on. In the series, its protagonist Kull is exiled from his native continent of Atlantis and escapes to the neighboring Thurian continent, the proto-Europe, where he becomes the ruler of the kingdom of Valusia. The Kull stories play exclusively on this Thurian continent, which is located east of Atlantis and are therefore not directly related with the continent of Atlantis. Their historical background, though, is supported by the existence of Atlantis.

The Kull series consisted of ten finished stories and three unfinished ones. Out of this body of work only three stories were published during Howard’s lifetime: “The Shadow Kingdom” (written in 1927, published in the August, 1929, issue of *Weird Tales*), “The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune” (also written in 1927, published in the September, 1929, issue of *Weird Tales*) and “Kings of the Night” (accepted for publication in March, 1930, published in the November, 1930, issue of *Weird Tales*).

According to Steven Tompkins, the first published Kull story, “The Shadow Kingdom,” is also “the first American sword-and-sorcery story” (xix). In my opinion, the story’s labeling as “Sword and Sorcery,” a term which, according to John Clute,

some critics use dismissively or pejorative for formulaistic genre fantasy (915), demotes “The Shadow Kingdom” to being a simple action story that features the standard tropes of pulp fiction in the form of violent action scenes and grisly monsters. In fact, I am claiming that “The Shadow Kingdom” is more than just a well-written pulp fiction story, as it features a trademark of the Kull series, namely Howard using the age of Atlantis as a setting to address very personal issues from his real-life environment in a small town in rural Texas. In case of “The Shadow Kingdom” it is the issue of Howard contemplating his role as a successful pulp fiction writer in an environment that neither accepts him and his choice to make a living with writing stories for the pulp fiction market, nor gives him the respect he feels he deserves.

In my opinion, Howard’s feelings of not being accepted by the community he was living in can most clearly be observed in Kull’s paranoia and distrust as it is described in “The Shadow Kingdom.” Kull, the exile from his native Atlantis, who became king by violently deposing his despotic predecessor, knows that his subjects and seemingly observant courtiers despise him as a hated usurper. Following the invitation of the Pictish ambassador, Kull is warned of an immediate attempt on his life. Together with his Pictish sidekick Brule, Kull discovers that snake people, hiding in secret corridors and chambers of the palace are trying to assassinate him. Furthermore, these snake people are shape-shifters that can take the form of any person. This throws Kull into a state of paranoia and distrust. He is already aware that human adversaries, who are plotting to dispose him off the throne of Valusia, surround him. The revelation of shape-shifting enemies causes Kull to further doubt whether his few supposed friends at court are real or snake people in disguise.

I regard Kull’s paranoia and feelings of not being able to trust anybody as corresponding to Howard’s own feelings towards the citizens of the small, rural community of Cross Plains he was living in. Howard expressed his feelings towards the citizens of Cross Plains in a letter to his friend Tevis Clyde Smith, dated February, 1930. His reference to his fellow citizens as “cringing, crawling, blind, senseless

reptiles” shows, in my eyes, parallels to the snake people threatening Kull in the “The Shadow Kingdom”:

“The people in this town treat me in several manners; contemptuously ignore me, which doesn’t bother me any; go out of their way to start trouble with me, which does; and assume a sort of monkey in a cage attitude. Those who deign to notice me at all, are forever on the lookout for some peculiarity, some difference that will stamp me as an eccentric. The infernal fools can’t seem to understand that a man can make his living some other way besides dressing tools or selling stuff and still be an ordinary human being with human sensations. The more money I make at my trade the more strangely they eye me. I can feel their damned lousy stares on me every minute I’m on the streets; eagerly watching for me to do something that they can garble and chatter and jabber among themselves. It’s the price a man pays for being any way different from the mob. Well, damn the mob. Let them stare and whisper behind my back, but let them do it, behind my back. Ninety nine men out of a hundred are brainless fools that were born to be failures. Fools. The cringing, crawling, blind, senseless reptiles. Damn the mob! There’s only one way they can break me—and that’s what I’m afraid of all the time. That some cursed slack jawed jackass-eyed damned fool will push me too far some day and I’ll lose control of myself. If they’ll let me alone, I’ll get along alright. It’s a cinch I’ll let them alone.” (*Collected Letters 2: 15-16*)

Howard’s biographers Mark Finn, Novelayne Price Ellis, and L. Sprague DeCamp agree that Howard felt that the citizens of his community regarded him, the son of the respected town physician, as strange as he was not working in a regular job but as a writer of indecent stories for disreputable pulp magazines. What Howard’s fellow citizens did not realize was, that Howard was a successful writer whose annual income made him one of the richest citizens in Cross Plains. In my

argument, the snake people Howard featured in “The Shadow Kingdom” could symbolize his fellow citizens who Howard felt would smile in his face but would then betray him by talking bad about him behind his back.

“The Shadow Kingdom,” besides depicting Howard’s perception of the attitude of his fellow citizens towards himself, can, in my opinion, also be understood as the description of Howard’s feelings of the loneliness of his existence as a successful writer in an environment where nobody gave him the respect Howard felt he was due. I would like to point out that there are apparent parallels between Howard, the pulp fiction writer living in Cross Plains, and Kull, the Atlantean exile turned king of Valusia. Kull had saved the people of Valusia from their former cruel ruler. Instead of receiving the gratitude of his Valusian subjects, Kull is despised as a usurper. Although Kull has become the ruler of Valusia, his ultimate success after having risen to this position from having formerly been an exile, slave, gladiator, and mercenary, he is at the same time a despised outcast at his own court. Like his literary creation Kull, Howard regarded himself exactly the same way: although he had made the career jump from having formerly been a struggling writer to successful pulp fiction writer, he felt that his fellow citizens in Cross Plains did not acknowledge this achievement and rather regarded him as eccentric. In spite of his success, Howard remained the misunderstood loner and outsider of his rural Texas community. This similarity between Howard and Kull supports my conclusion that Kull is Howard’s literary alter ego set in the age of Atlantis.

In the above-cited letter to Tevis Clyde Smith, Howard mentioned experiences in his real-life environment that he feared would one day let him lose his control of himself and resort to violence. Howard never went so far, though. Howard’s alter ego in the fictional age of Atlantis, Kull, is not bound by such restraints. In the finale of “The Shadow Kingdom” Kull confronts the snake people who plot against him and kills most of them. I regard Howard’s unleashing of Kull on his enemies as an act of catharsis in which Kull metes out a kind of justice that Howard would have secretly liked to inflict on those people who he perceived to have slighted him in his real-life

environment. As is obvious in the letter to Tevis Clyde Smith, Howard clearly understood that his real-life environment did not condone acts of violence and he explicitly expressed his worries of forgetting this and turning violent. The world of Kull is set in an utterly different environment, though: Kull's adventures play not in a small town in Texas but in a fantasy kingdom on a proto-European continent in the age of Atlantis. This fictive age of Atlantis is the background of an alternative reality in which Howard could finally let loose all of the restraints imposed on him in his real-life environment. Only in such an alternative reality could Howard's literary alter ego Kull inflict on his enemies a cathartic justice that was not possible in his real-life environment.

In this alternative reality environment of the age of Atlantis, Howard let his alter ego Kull fight his own impostor. In the climactic scene of "The Shadow Kingdom" Kull bursts into his palace's council room and sees another Kull standing there, impersonated by a shape-shifting member of the snake people. For a short moment this sight leads Kull to nearly losing his sanity, with Kull not knowing anymore what is reality or illusion and even doubting his very own existence:

He [Kull] stepped back, his mind reeling.

"This is insanity!" he whispered. "Am I Kull? Do I stand here or is that Kull yonder in very truth and am I but a shadow, a figment of thought?"

(46)

I regard the following confrontation between the real Kull and his impostor as Howard describing the conflict that occurred in his real-life environment between the real Robert E. Howard, the successful but socially not recognized pulp fiction writer and the false Robert E. Howard in the form of the wrong image Howard felt his fellow citizens had of him. Kull's killing of his impostor hereby amounts in my line of argument to the act of Howard destroying the twisted views he thought the citizens of Cross Plains had of him. In his real-life environment Howard never managed to change the negative image people seemingly had of him. He achieved this goal only in the alternative reality of the age of Atlantis.

Another story in which Howard takes the above-described approach of reflecting on his real-life situation in the alternative reality of the age of Atlantis is “The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune.” Howard wrote this story immediately after he sold “The Shadow Kingdom” to *Weird Tales*, which indicates to me that he felt that this approach of tackling real-life issues in the alternative reality of Atlantis setting offered him further topics to write about. In “The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune” Howard continued his exploration on the topic reality versus illusion which he had addressed in the climactic scene of “The Shadow Kingdom” when Kull faced his impostor.

In “The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune” Kull, disillusioned about his life as king of Valusia, learns about the magician Tuzun Thune and his collection of mirrors that show its beholder alternative realities. Kull, not realizing that a trap is set for him, visits Tuzun Thune and looks into these mirrors. Drawn into the alternative realities of his existence the mirrors show him, Kull begins to lose his grip on reality and faces the danger of being caught into a false alternative world.

Howard addressed the issue of reality versus illusion in a letter to Tevis Clyde Smith, written in August, 1925:

“I’ve been thinking. Did you ever stop and consider that we may be surrounded by things far outside the pale of our thoughts?

We know there are sounds which we cannot hear; they are pitched either too high or too low for our ear, attuned to ordinary noises. There are creatures too small for us to see with the mere eye. Why might there not be things neither too small nor too large, too low, nor too high, too light or too loud, for us to distinguish, but attuned to an invisible, soundless pitch, as far as our senses are concerned? Our senses are deceptive. We can never look at anything and be sure that we see it as it is exactly, or listen to music or any sound and be sure that we catch the exact timbre. In fact, we seldom ever do. Are there thoughts so high, so magnificent that they escape the mind? If a man could attune all his senses to the whole Universe, he would rule it.” (*Collected Letters 2*: 68)



In “The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune” Kull has become weary of ruling and has realized that the seeming splendor of his court is just an illusion: “. . . the gold of the throne is brass, the silk of the palace becomes drab. The gems in the diadem and upon the fingers of the women sparkle drearily like the ice of the white seas” (55). In order to escape from this environment, which Kull perceives as false and unreal, he ironically dives into other false realities that he views in the magician’s mirrors.

This escape of Kull into an alternative reality shows, in my eyes, again parallels to Howard’s life. Howard’s profession as a writer of fantastic stories made him the creator of alternative realities. I am claiming that the stories Howard wrote took him away, as he perceived it, from the reality of a drab life in a small town in rural Texas into the alternative reality of fantastic kingdoms and past ages where his imagination created adventures for the protagonists of these stories; adventures Howard himself could never have experienced in the community he was living in. Howard, like Kull, who stared into the mirrors of Tuzun Thune until he lost his grip on reality, immersed himself deeply into the persona of his literary heroic characters, their world, and their adventures.

Howard’s immersion of himself in his stories is also a feature that has been noted by other writers, especially H. P. Lovecraft with whom Howard was in steady contact from 1933 to his death in 1936. Lovecraft pointed out in the obituary he wrote for Howard what made Howard’s stories so appealing. Lovecraft’s answer to his question was that Howard was as follows:

. . . in every one of them, whether they were ostensibly commercial or not. He was greater than any profit-making policy he could adopt—for even when he outwardly made concessions to Mammon-guided editors and commercial critics, he had an internal force and sincerity which broke through the surface and put the imprint of his personality on everything he wrote. Seldom, if ever, did he set down a lifeless stock character or situation and leave it as such. Before he concluded with it, it always took on some tinge of vitality and reality in spite of popular

editorial policy—always drew something from his own experience and knowledge of life instead of from the sterile herbarium of desiccated pulpish standbys.

“No author—even in the humblest fields—can truly excel unless he takes his work very seriously; and Mr. Howard did just that, even in cases where he consciously thought he did not.” (Lovecraft 97-98)

Howard’s ability to lose himself in the reality of the stories he wrote is also mentioned by Howard’s girlfriend Price Ellis. She mentioned in *One Who Walked Alone* episodes, which prove that Lovecraft’s assumption was not off the target. For example, Price writes that when Howard composed his stories, he spoke them out loud while typing them (45), which is considered as Howard acting out his stories. This observation fits also with the extant photos on which Howard and his friends can be seen reenacting scenes of his stories, adding further proof to Lovecraft’s assumption that Howard lived his stories and his characters like Kull of Atlantis.

Kull, as I have demonstrated, was not just the simple protagonist of a fantasy story. In the Kull stories, Howard used the age of Atlantis in order to keep the necessary emotional distance to reflect on his role as a pulp fiction writer and perceived outsider in his real-life environment in a small-town in rural Texas. In my argument the age of Atlantis became an alternative reality for Howard, and Kull served as Howard’s literary alter ego. Kull the king was, at his own court of Valusia, the despised outsider as Howard, the successful, but not respected pulp fiction writer regarded himself in his Texas hometown Cross Plains. It was only in this alternative reality of the age of Atlantis that Howard could write about these deeply personal issues, something he could not achieve even when he wrote about them in a fictive setting that only slightly disguised his real-life environment such as in his fictional autobiography *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*.

In *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*, for example, its protagonist Steve Costigan takes on the role of being Howard’s alter ego. Costigan and his literary setting are too close to Howard and his real-life environment. In an earlier section of the book,

Steve Costigan feels the urge to use violence against a person insulting him, but does not take any action, as such a deed would also not be permitted in actual life. In the form of a fictional autobiography that only thinly disguised the events of Howard's life and his environment, Costigan is also bound by the many restraints Howard faced in his real-life environment. At the end of the book when Costigan turns indeed violent, the scene is unconvincing. It amounts to nothing more than being an easily divulged lie. It is also an embarrassing depiction of Howard's wishful thinking as, in my opinion, Howard was well aware of the fact that even in the thinly veiled disguised version of his real-life environment he could not resort to violence. The alternative reality of a fantastic age in a distant past, though, permitted Howard such an option. It also allowed him to express many feelings he could not express in real life, which must have been cathartic for him.

I would like to point out that Howard could have used the introduction of Atlantis in the story "Men of the Shadows" to immediately enhance the alternative history of the Picts he had written so far. He also could have immediately worked on a detailed setting of Atlantis that he could have used for further stories about his alternative history of the Picts. He chose not to do so and interrupted his process of creating an (alternative) history in his stories for this self-reflection in the Kull of Atlantis stories "The Shadow Kingdom" and "The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune," which indicates, in my opinion, the importance this step had for him.

Although the Kull series turned Howard into one of the star writers of *Weird Tales*, the pulp magazine where most of his stories were published, it was from a financial point of view seen as an unsuccessful undertaking, as Howard could sell only three out of the ten Kull stories he had written. Only in the first two stories of the Kull series, "The Shadow Kingdom" and "The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune," can Howard's self-reflection about his real-life situation be found. All the other unsold Kull stories, as well as "Kings of the Night," the third Kull story Howard managed to sell, are lacking this element of self-reflection. This allows my conclusion that after writing "The Shadow Kingdom" and "The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune" Howard

reached the end of this phase of self-reflection. With the loss of this underlying aspect of self-reflection, the later Kull stories were lacking a decisive element that made them so appealing for Howard to write. These stories also failed to receive the approval of Farnsworth Wright, the editor of *Weird Tales*. With these later Kull stories being rejected, the series from a business point of view was a failure and Howard did not continue to write any further Kull stories.

In the Kull series, Howard did not give any detailed descriptions of the continent of Atlantis. This does not mean that Howard had no image of the mysterious continent. Judging from the Kull fragment “Exile From Atlantis,” in which he gave glimpses of Atlantis as having been a place with no civilization and inhabited by Stone Age tribes, I regard it as apparent that Howard must have already had a clearer image of Atlantis by the time he wrote the Kull stories. I will explore this image of Atlantis in the following sections.

### 3. The Impact of Classic and Occult Sources on Howard’s Depiction of Atlantis

In the previous section I demonstrated that in the Kull series Howard used Atlantis, or rather the age of Atlantis, as an alternative reality in which he reflected on problems of his real-life environment. Although the Kull stories were set in the time of Atlantis, they did not take place on the continent of Atlantis and Howard did not give the reader any detailed depictions of the continent of Atlantis in these stories. In spite of this seeming lack of information concerning Atlantis, I would like to argue that Howard had a clear image of Atlantis when he wrote the Kull stories. In fact, in a formerly untitled fragment of a Kull story that remained unpublished for many years and was posthumously published as “Exile of Atlantis” (1926), there is a passage, in which Howard describes Atlantis as a place inhabited by barbarian tribes on the level of a Stone Age society.

Howard’s depiction of a Stone Age Atlantis is contrary to the classic image of Atlantis as being a highly civilized continent as it was seen by the most prominent

supporters of its existence like Plato and, later in the nineteenth century, by Helena Blavatsky and the members of her Theosophical Society.

Plato was the first person to mention Atlantis. He described Atlantis in his *Timaeus and Critia* dialogues (ca. 350 B.C.) as a great civilization that sank 9000 years before the Greek culture. According to Plato, Atlantis was an empire that was aggressively foraging Europe and Asia. The people of Atlantis were warriors, who were once wise and full of knowledge until their greed for wealth and lust for power corrupted them.

The myth of the mysterious continent of Atlantis that in the distant past had been swallowed by the ocean was adapted in the late nineteenth century by the Theosophical Society, an esoteric group founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891). In spite of the fact that, according to Gary Lachman, “after Plato most thinkers saw Atlantis as strictly a myth” (*Turn Off Your Mind* 362), Atlantis played a central role in Blavatsky’s publications *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), in which Blavatsky outlined the ideas of Theosophy.

According to Lachman, Blavatsky and her followers believed that Atlantis was also a highly developed civilization with the Atlanteans being mediums that came under the influence of an evil ruler who turned them into a nation of evil magicians. A battle between magicians led to the destruction of Atlantis.

Blavatsky’s image of Atlantis was enhanced by another Theosophist, W. Scott Elliot in his publication *The Story of Atlantis* (1896). Elliot added a group of white magicians who escaped from Atlantis and went to Egypt and England, where, according to Elliot, they founded the Egyptian culture and erected Stonehenge.

Although in the twentieth century serious science dismissed the idea of the existence of Atlantis, another Theosophist, Rudolph Steiner, added new information in 1904 to Blavatsky’s history of Atlantis. Steiner claimed in his publication *Akasic Records* that the destruction of Atlantis was brought on by technology the Atlanteans had no control of. With this, Steiner changed Blavatsky’s Atlantis image from being an occult, high civilization to a technologized Atlantis of high civilization.

Glimpses of the influence of Plato's and Blavatsky's Atlantis image on Howard's depiction of Atlantis can be found in the Solomon Kane story "The Moon of Skulls" (1929). In "Moon of Skulls" the story's 17th century protagonist finds in the heart of Africa remnants of an Atlantean colony. Kane meets the descendant of Atlanteans who describes Atlantis as a powerful nation that controlled the seas of the world of an unimaginable distant past. According to the Atlantean, "our golden spires split the stars; our purple-prowed galleys broke the waves around the world, looting the sunset for its treasure and the sunrise for its wealth" (144). The Atlantis depicted in this account is a high civilization, a powerful and greedy warrior nation that terrorizes the world in its lust for wealth and is reminiscent of the image Plato described.

The people of Atlantis also possess knowledge of deeper secrets. "The mysteries were known to us, the secret things of land and sea and sky. We read the stars and were wise" (145). This Atlantis, the high civilization full of knowledge of mysteries and "secret things" gets a dark undertone when the Atlantean tells Kane that "we worshipped Valkah and Hotah, Honen and Golgor. Many virgins, many strong youths, died on their altars and the smoke of the shrines blotted out the sun" (145). With the mentioning that the people of Atlantis worshipped deities and offered them human sacrifices Howard insinuates that Atlantis, in spite of having been a high civilization, was under the dominion of either priests (of a religion worshipping the deities Valkah, Hotah, Honen, and Golgor) or that it was ruled by magicians and their sinister, occult rituals that demanded human sacrifices. The latter scenario of Atlantis being ruled by magicians fits the Atlantis described by Blavatsky. It hereby makes Howard's depiction of an Atlantis that is a high civilization with the occult knowledge in the story "The Moon of Skulls," a combination of Plato's and Blavatsky's images of Atlantis. It also attests, in my eyes, the influence of Plato and Blavatsky on Howard's literary work.

I regard it as noteworthy that "The Moon of Skulls" is the only Atlantis story in Howard's work in which Atlantis is portrayed as such an occult, high civilization.

Howard could have developed this concept further and written more stories featuring such an occult and civilized Atlantis, but he did not. I am arguing that the possible reason for Howard's decision lies in his consistency of strictly sticking to the facts that he had established in work. The image of a civilized Atlantis with such a developed knowledge of architecture that allowed the Atlanteans to construct buildings whose "golden spires split the stars" ("The Moon of Skulls" 144) and nautical skills, which made it possible for their ships to reach all parts of the ancient world as depicted in "The Moon of Skulls" ran contrary to the Stone Age Atlantis Howard established earlier in the "Exile of Atlantis" fragment, which he wrote in 1926, three years before "The Moon of Skulls." I am claiming that Howard might have realized this inconsistency and decided not to continue writing any more stories in this setting. Furthermore, he might have also felt that more successful writers like Arthur Conan Doyle, H. R. Haggard, or Edgar Rice Burroughs had by his time sufficiently used the topic of lost civilizations. Had he written stories in the same line, they would have been difficult to sell on an already oversaturated pulp fiction market.

#### 4. Anthropology and Atlantis: Lewis Spence's Influence on Howard's Portrayal of Atlantis

By the twentieth century science had come to the conclusion that Atlantis had never existed and that the theories of groups like the Theosophical Society, which was claiming the existence of an Atlantis on which high civilizations had lived, were not valid. In spite of this, the Scottish folklorist Lewis Spence (1874-1955) approached the topic of Atlantis in the early twentieth century from a scientific angle. His Atlantis research tackled the topic not from an occult but an anthropological angle. Spence claimed in his books *The Problem of Atlantis* (1924) and *The History of Atlantis* (1927) that the origin of some European prehistoric peoples was the result of a migration from Atlantis, which was a point that interested Howard.

Howard described his own position concerning the existence of Atlantis in a letter to his friend Harold Preece in October 1928.<sup>1</sup> He wrote:

. . . about Atlantis—I believe something of the sort existed, though I do not especially hold any theory about a high type of civilization existing there—in fact, I doubt that. But some continent was submerged away back, or some large body of land, for practically all peoples have legends about a flood. (*Collected Letters* 2: 237)

Howard based his belief that Atlantis had existed on two points. The first reason for his assumption is expressed in the letter above: Howard regarded Atlantis as a part of a shared myth, in this case of an all destroying flood common to many different cultures, which is reminiscent of Carl Gustav Jung’s theories about archetypal phenomena or Joseph Campbell’s later theories about the mono-myth. From this overlapping of mutual points, Howard concluded the existence of Atlantis to be a possibility.

The second reason for Howard’s belief in the existence of Atlantis was based on his interest in anthropology; a field Howard had knowledge in.<sup>2</sup> This interest is mirrored in many of Howard’s stories in form of detailed descriptions of the racial features of their protagonists and side characters. For example, in “The Lost Race” Howard introduces the story’s protagonist Cororuc as “some six feet in height, strongly though leanly built, he was, with gray eyes, a pure Briton but not a pure Celt, his long yellow hair revealing, in him as in all his race, a trace of Belgae” (167).

In the letter to Harold Preece, Howard pointed out that

. . . the Cro-Magnons appeared suddenly in Europe, developed to a high state of primitive culture; there is no trace to show that they came up the ladder of utter barbarism in Europe. Suddenly their remains are found supplanting the Neanderthal Man, to whom they have no ties of kinship whatever. Where did they originate? Nowhere in the known world, evidently. They must have originated and developed through the different basic stages of evolution in some land which is not known to us.



. . . They say that the Atlanteans were highly developed. I doubt it. I think they were simply the ancestors of the Cro-Magnon man, who by chance, escaped the fate which overtook the rest of the tribes. (*Collected Letters 2: 237*)

Howard's assumption that the Cro-Magnon was a descendant of the Atlanteans was not one that Howard had come up with himself. It was a theory developed by Lewis Spence. According to Spence, it was these two cultures that migrated around 25,000 B.C. and 10,000 B.C. from Atlantis to Europe: the Cro-Magnon (the Aurignacian) and later the Azilian culture, the last group that managed to escape from Atlantis before it was swallowed by the sea (Shanks 20).

Howard took over Spence's theory in the story "Men of the Shadows," in which he explicitly pointed out this connection between the Atlanteans and the Cro-Magnon. The Atlanteans are mentioned in a passage of "Men of the Shadows" in which a shaman gives an account of the history of the Picts: "Now the Atlanteans were the Third Race" (25). Howard explains the ancestry of the Atlanteans to the Cro-Magnon in a rather blunt way: in the sentence that mentions the Atlanteans, the word Atlanteans is marked with a star indicating a footnote. This footnote identifies the Atlanteans as Cro-Magnons hereby establishing the connection between the Atlanteans and the Cro-Magnon man.<sup>3</sup> This footnote is also on Howard's extant original typescript, which proves that it was indeed Howard who put it there originally and that someone else did not add this information later.

Besides the relation of the Cro-Magnon with the Atlanteans, there is another Atlantis connection that Howard established based on Spence's theories as Jeffrey Shanks notices in his paper "Hyborian Age Archaeology": according to Shanks, Howard adapted the Azilian people of Spence's theories as the model for the Picts of his alternative history.

Shanks proves his claim by comparing passages from Spence's book with passages from Howard's essay "The Hyborian Age" that show clear similarities in the physical appearances and cultural development of Spence's Azilians and

Howard's Picts. In Spence's book the Azilians (who would become Howard's Picts) are compared with the Aurignacian culture (Atlanteans). Spence remarks, "[The] Azilian civilisation shows in some ways a marked inferiority to the Aurignacian. Its art-forms are distinctly cruder, its cultural remains of a more primitive kind generally" (21).

In a similar way Howard compared in "The Hyborian Age" essay the Picts with the Atlanteans, stating:

the Picts . . . had advanced more rapidly in the matter of population and warscience. They had none of the Atlanteans' artistic nature; they were a ruder, more practical, more prolific race. They left no pictures painted or carved on ivory, as did their enemies, but they left remarkably efficient flint weapons in plenty. (Shanks 21)

These similarities that are stressing the lesser development of the Azilians/Picts in comparison with the culturally more refined Aurignacians/Atlanteans indicate the influence of Spence on Howard's depiction of Atlantis.

Howard's use of scientific works like Spence's in order to populate the fantastic age of Atlantis leads, in my opinion, to another feature of his work. Although Howard wrote fantasy stories (or weird fiction as the different genres of fantastic fiction like horror, fantasy, and science fiction were called in the early twentieth century before they were later defined closer), he was careful to give his stories a sufficient touch of realism. In a letter to Clark Ashton Smith (July 23, 1935), when debating his freshly submitted fantasy story "Red Nails" and its protagonist Conan of Cimmeria, Howard wrote that the story was as follows:

. . . the grimmest, bloodiest and most merciless story of the series so far. Too much raw meat, maybe, but I merely portrayed what I honestly believe would be the reactions of certain types of people in the situations on which the plot of the story hung. It may sound fantastic to link the term "realism" with Conan; but as a matter of fact—his supernatural adventures aside—he is the most realistic character I ever

evolved. (*Collected Letters* 3: 367)

This striving for realism is also part of how Howard established a connection between his pseudo-history of the Picts, Atlantis, and modern science. In the previous section, I have pointed out that Howard based his version of the history of the Picts on Scott Elliot's *The Romance of Early British Life: From Early Time to the Coming of the Danes* (1909). By the time Elliot's book was published, its theories were scientifically accepted and hereby provided the realism Howard required.

Similarly, when it came to creating a realistic depiction of Atlantis, Howard also consulted scientific sources. In this case he took to Spence whose theory regarded Atlantis as a place that was not inhabited by highly civilized cultures. For his purposes of connecting his alternative history of the Picts with an even older past, Howard considered Spence's theory of the Aurignacian and Azilian people as having been on the level of Stone Age cultures as the most plausible possibility. Accordingly, he followed Spence's lead and took over this realistic image of an Atlantis on a Stone Age level for his own purposes instead of opting for the version of an Atlantis of a high civilization as described by Plato and the Theosophists.

##### 5. Populating the Age of Atlantis and Connecting It with the Alternative History of the Picts

Howard based the depiction of his version of Atlantis on Spence's anthropological theory and in doing so gave the Kull series and most of his other stories that mentioned Atlantis or that were set in this age a realistic historical ground. Nonetheless, in spite of his striving for realism—even in his fantastic stories—Howard did not stick exclusively to scientific sources as I have demonstrated with the example of “The Moon of Skulls” in which he experimented with ideas of Atlantis that were promoted by Plato and the Theosophical Society. In order to populate his version of the age of Atlantis, Howard especially used the fringe ideas formulated by the Theosophical Society.

Howard wrote in a letter (October 20, 1928) to his friend Harold Preece, referring to the Theosophical Society as occultists, that “the occultists say that we are the fifth—I believe—great sub-race. Two unknown and unnamed races came, then the Lemurians, then the Atlanteans, then we” (*Collected Letters* 1: 237). This passage is a clear reference to the Theosophist system of the root races from which according to Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, mankind had evolved. These root races had been living on the continents of Atlantis and Lemuria and, according to the Theosophists, there were five such root races: the bodiless Polarians, the Hyperboreans, the Lemurians, the Atlanteans, and the Aryans.

The root races also appear in the Kull stories where they are most prominently featured in the character of Kull, who is an Atlantean. Furthermore, in “Men of the Shadows,” when the Pictish shaman tells the history of the Picts, he calls the Atlanteans the “Third Race” (“Men of the Shadows” 25). Here Howard refers not only to the Theosophist system of the root races, but also to the Theosophists’ arranging these root races in the order of their evolution. In my opinion, these examples clearly indicate Howard’s familiarity with Theosophist theories and the influence of the idea of root races on Howard.<sup>4</sup>

However, Howard needed to undertake some changes in the original root races system in order to fit the Theosophist root races system to the alternative history of the Picts he had created so far, especially in “Men of the Shadows.” First of all, the Picts, on whom Howard had in his previous stories focused so much, were originally not a part of the root races. In “Men of the Shadows” the Pictish shaman, who recounts the Picts’ history, states, “to those islands came the Nameless Tribes. . . . [They] were the first men” (23). These “Nameless Tribes” or “first men” are the Picts. Howard changed the Theosophist’s root race system by substituting the first two races with the Picts and turning the Lemurians, who were formerly the third race of the Lemurians, into the second race. I am arguing that with this change he not only connected his alternative history of the Picts with the Theosophist system, but also made the Picts the center of this revised root races system.

This was not the only change Howard undertook. In the Theosophist's original root race system, the Aryans, the ancestors of present man, were the fifth race. Having already substituted the first two root races with the Picts, Howard replaced the Aryans (who had so become the fourth race) with the Celts, who originally were also no part of this system. This step of bringing the Celts into this mix of races was necessary, so that Howard could align his history of the Picts with the facts described in Scott Elliot's *The Romance of Early British Life: From Early Time to the Coming of the Danes* (1909): according to Elliot, the arrival of the Celts marked the end of the Pictish rule over the British Islands. The Celts conquered the British Islands and defeated the Picts. By adding the Celts, Howard could fit in his alternative history the Picts as the defeated tribe that was thrown back on the evolutionary ladder and explain the racial conflicts between the Celts and the Picts that appeared in his earlier stories "The Lost Race" and "Men of the Shadows."

"Men in the Shadows" mixed previously addressed scientific theories of historian Scott Elliot and William Spence with Howard's edited version of the occult Theosophist root races system. These root races and their arranging was based on Helena Blavatsky's unproven claim of having been the only person who had read a secret book titled *Akasic Record*, a chronology of the history of the cosmos written in a language that only Blavatsky could understand.

Howard's mixing these various sources added a new dimension to the past of his alternative history of the Picts. Thus, in the story "The Lost Race" this alternative history of the Picts went back in time to the Bronze Age, the settling of the British Isles and the arrival of the Celts. "Men of the Shadows" went even further back in time; from the known history of mankind to the mystic age of Atlantis. In this story, Howard made the Picts the first race. The Picts had become an even earlier race than the Atlantians. By giving the Picts an even older history, one that reached beyond the epoch of Atlantis, Howard significantly expanded the timespan of their alternative history and enhanced its grandeur.

With the step of having not only extended the alternative history of the Picts to

a much deeper past but also having made the Picts the first race of man, Howard required more data concerning the Picts' origins before the age of Atlantis. In "Men of the Shadows" the Picts had originally been located on islands west of Atlantis and then started their trek via Atlantis to the continent that would later become Europe. In order to plausibly explain this timespan before the era of Atlantis, Howard once again used Theosophist theories concerning Atlantis. In this case it was Theosophist William Scott-Elliot's theories concerning the geography of the time before and after the sinking of Atlantis

In "Men of the Shadows" the Pictish shaman describes the ancient world before and after the cataclysm like this:

So mighty are these continents that they span the world, from the snows of the north to the snows of the south. And beyond them lies the great ocean; the Sea of Silent Waters (Pacific Ocean). Many islands are up on that sea, and those islands were once the mountain peaks of a great land—the lost land of Lemuria.

And the continents are twin continents, joined by a narrow neck of land. The western coast of the northern continent is fierce and rugged. Huge mountains rear skyward. But those peaks were islands upon a time and to those islands came the Nameless Tribe. (23)

These twin continents are North and South America and the huge mountains on its western coast are the Rocky Mountains. The Rocky Mountains were once the islands on which the Picts had lived before a cataclysm raised the American continent. In the west, roughly the area of the Indian Ocean and Australia, laid the lost land Lemuria.

In his paper "Hyborian Age Archaeology," Jeffrey Shanks points out that this description of the world in "Men in the Shadows" shows strong similarities to the views found in William Scott-Elliot's *The Story of Atlantis*. Shanks supports his claim by comparing the passage of "Men in the Shadows" with two maps found in *The Story of Atlantis* (Fig. 1 and 2) and writes this:

. . . in the first of Scott-Elliott's maps . . . we see the Rocky Mountains as an island west of the large continent of Atlantis, just as Howard described the Pictish Isles; further west, we find the Lemuria in the Pacific.

. . . In Scott-Elliott's second map, after the cataclysm, Lemuria has sunk; North America has risen out of the sea; and Atlantis, though smaller, is still in existence. Again this is almost identical to the description of the cataclysm in "Men of the Shadows." (Shanks 22)

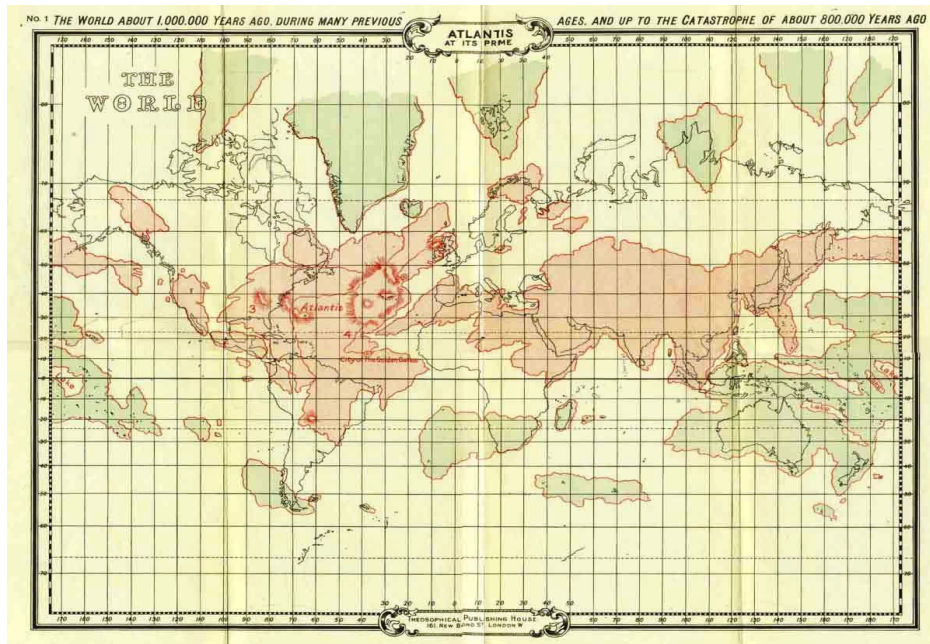


Fig. 1: Scott-Elliott's depiction of the world before the first cataclysm. To the left there are the three islands that will become the Rocky Mountains referred to in Howard's "Men of the Shadows." (*The Story of Atlantis*)

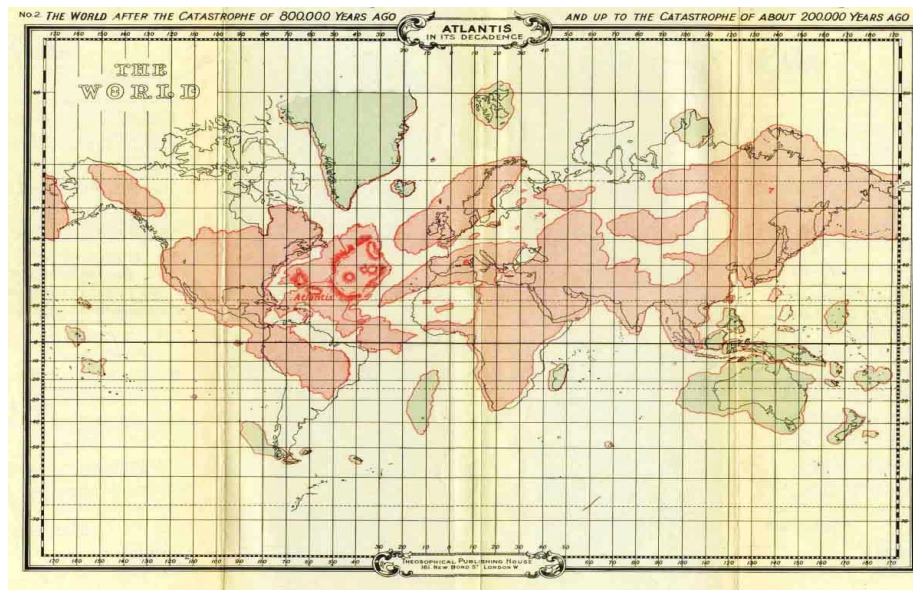


Fig. 2: Map by Scott-Elliot depicting the world after a cataclysm and the rise of North America. (*The Story of Atlantis*)

By Howard’s time, science did not take Scott-Elliot’s ideas seriously. In spite of this and Howard’s striving for realism in his work, Scott-Elliot’s theories were a convenient means for Howard to connect his alternative history of the Picts with the history of Atlantis. Furthermore, Scott-Elliot’s theories made it possible for Howard to take this alternative history of the Picts into an even further past—a past beyond the age Atlantis.

I would like to point out that by linking the history of the Picts to Atlantis, Howard had undertaken the step from having created an alternative history of the Picts to creating the pseudo-history of a new age. He had based his alternative history on the history of the real world, on the history of the Picts. In order to give his alternative history of the Picts a realistic touch, he connected it with the real history of the Celts in Britain. This alternative history of the Picts was at first set in the frame of the known world history. The story “The Lost Race” was set in the Bronze Age and “Men of the Shadows” during the time of the Roman occupation of Britain. I am arguing that when he linked the alternative history of the Picts to Atlantis and the



times before the sinking of Atlantis, Howard left this frame of known world history and thus could rewrite and re-imagine history on a wider scale that allowed him to go back in time beyond the dawn of mankind to a time where mythologies and legends of the modern world might have had their origins.

Accordingly, Howard could freely combine facts of the real history with fictitious elements in his own way. While writers of any sort of historical fiction have to stick strictly to historical facts and details in order to avoid anachronisms, Howard's already established alternative history of the Picts and his leaving the known timeframe of world history now put him fully in charge of the facts of the history he would create from this point on. Howard had finally become the creator of a pseudo-history and the result of this effort would be an essay titled "The Hyborian Age."

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued and proven that the appearance and referencing of Atlantis in Howard's work is not simple name-dropping in order to evoke with the readers a sense of mysticism and ancient times. In Howard's work, Atlantis was not so much the continent of Atlantis, but the age or the epoch of Atlantis. The Picts were for Howard a means to connect with ancient times and Atlantis was a means to create an even older history, an endeavor he started earlier with the creation of the alternative history of the Picts.

When Atlantis was mentioned in the story "Men of the Shadows," Howard connected this alternative history of the Picts with the age of Atlantis, enhancing hereby the Picts' alternative history back into an even deeper past. He combined scientific and occult sources about Atlantis that had a ring of truth or possibility to them. Howard then adapted these sources so they would fit into his alternative history of the Picts. In this process he created his own version of the age of Atlantis, a time before time. Although in the early twentieth century the existence of Atlantis

was regarded as nothing more than a myth, Howard's mix of outdated scientific theories and occult beliefs still had an acceptable touch of plausibility for his readers. The effect of Howard's creative process is summarized by Jeffrey Shanks, who writes:

Howard drew on information that he read in a number of works on history and anthropology. . . . He mixed in more fanciful ideas like the lost continents of Atlantis and Lemuria. . . . The result was a secondary world that would have seemed at least somewhat believable and plausible to an audience of the 1920s and 1930s, yet still mysterious and exotic. (vii).

With the introduction of Atlantis in his work, Howard reached the stage where he could write his own history. He could develop and establish data and material—like races and people he had adapted from the Theosophist root races—that he needed for further detailing his pseudo-history and the populating of the world of this age. This material was the fundament of “The Hyborian Age” essay, which Howard wrote in 1932. Atlantis in Howard's work, his depiction of the age of Atlantis was the final phase of his creative process before composing “The Hyborian Age” essay, the first pseudo-history in fantastic fiction.

## Chapter III: Robert E. Howard's Historical Short Stories

### 1. Introduction

In the stories “The Lost Race” and “Men of the Shadows,” Robert E. Howard created an alternative, re-imagined history of the Picts, that deviated significantly from historical facts and which spanned from the times before the sinking of Atlantis into the early twentieth century. The alternative history Howard had created was a chronicle that described in very broad strokes only key events such as geography changing cataclysms or events that led to the evolutionary deterioration of the Picts. For Howard, the uncharted chapters of this alternative history offered a lot of material to write about. Yet, Howard stopped writing in his alternative history and turned to working with real history, producing historical short stories.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that this period in which Howard wrote historical short stories was an important one as during this time Howard grew significantly as a writer. I will discuss Howard's literary influences and show which new aspects of the craft of writing Howard acquired and how he began to produce his very own kind of historical stories after he left these influences behind.

### 2. Howard and History

Many of Howard's letters reveal that from an early age he had a strong interest in history. With no formal education in history—Howard had never attended a university—he gained deeper knowledge of this field by extensively reading works about various historical periods and aspects of history. This can be seen from the list of books within Howard's well-stocked private library, which his father Dr. Isaac M. Howard donated to Howard Payne College (now: University) in Brownwood, Texas after his son's death. This donation was mentioned in the *Brownwood Bulletin*, 29 June, 1936, which reported that Howard's collection consisted of “some 300 books,

the great majority of which deal with history and biography” (Laughlin 24).

Howard’s letters in which he addressed aspects of history also prove that his knowledge in this field put him above the level of a simple layman. This fact becomes especially obvious in the letters he wrote to fellow *Weird Tales* author H. P. Lovecraft in which both writers, during their debates of various aspects of history, backed up their opinions with scientific theories.

In addition to Howard’s knowledge of history came his love for the genre of historical fiction. Howard was an especially big fan of the works of Harold Lamb (1892-1962), a historian and one of the leading pulp fiction writers of historical fiction.

In June, 1930, Howard received an offer from *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright, who invited Howard to contribute stories to the magazine *Oriental Stories*, a newly launched sister publication to *Weird Tales*. For *Oriental Stories*, Farnsworth Wright was looking explicitly for “historical tales—tales of the Crusades, of Genghis Khan, of Tamerlane, and the wars between Islam and Hindooism” (*Collected Letters* 2: 47).

For Howard, this offer to write historical fiction was not simply an open door to a new genre in the pulp fiction market and extra income. In fact, the chance to write historical fiction was a welcome opportunity for Howard to produce and sell stories of a genre that he sincerely felt he had a talent for. In a letter to Tevis Clyde Smith, Howard euphorically told his friend about his plans to write a novelette about Tamerlane (Timur), the Turko-Mongol conqueror who in the 14th century A.C. ruled central Asia and parts of the Muslim world and India. In the same letter, Howard also listed all the historical events he could use for his stories, which ranged from the rise of the Ottomans to events like the conquest of Constantinople or the destruction of Outremer (*Collected Letters* 2: 222).

Howard’s enthusiasm about the opportunity to write historical fiction becomes especially clear in a letter to H. P. Lovecraft, to whom he wrote “there is no literary work, to me, half as zestful as rewriting history in the guise of fiction. I wish I was

able to devote the rest of my life to that kind of work . . .” (*A Means to Freedom* 651).

### 3. Robert E. Howard and Historical Fiction in the American Pulps

During the period in which Howard was writing (1924-1936), there were about 460 magazines on the American pulp fiction market,<sup>1</sup> which were catering to virtually any possible taste of the readership. On this background, I regard it as a surprising fact that there were no pulp fiction magazines on the market that published exclusively historical fiction. Historical fiction appeared only as part of the line-up of pulp magazines that published action or adventure stories.

Howard, who felt that historical stories offered him an abundance of material he could use for stories expressed his frustration about this lack of magazines dedicated to historical fiction, claimed that “I could write a century and still have tapped the reservoir of dramatic possibilities. I wish to Hell I had a dozen markets for historical fiction—I’d never write anything else” (*Collected Letters* 2: 222).

It was not only the restricted market for historical fiction that posed a problem for Howard. The leading magazines among those pulps that published historical fiction were *Argosy*, *Adventure*, *Blue Book*, *Short Stories*, and *The All-Story*.<sup>2</sup> These magazines, printed on better paper and also called “slicks,” paid their authors a much better rate than other pulp magazines and featured stories by established star writers like Edgar Rice Burroughs or Abraham Merritt. Consequently, only accomplished writers of historical fiction, such as Harold Lamb or Talbot Mundy, were published in these magazines. In the past Howard had unsuccessfully tried to sell stories to these magazines. The rejection of his stories was a bitter experience which led to him giving up on submitting further material to these magazines. In a letter to H. P. Lovecraft (June 15, 1933) Howard had mentioned these fruitless attempts and concluded bitterly that “I have never been able to sell to *Adventure*; I guess my first attempt cooked me with them forever!” (*A Means to Freedom* 603).

Pulp fiction has the justified reputation of being low quality entertainment literature. Experts in Pulp Fiction studies, such as Ed Hulse and H. P. Lovecraft researcher S. T. Joshi, agree with this assessment. For example, Hulse writes that “no pulp scholar denies that a large percentage of rough-paper fiction is forgettable and that a substantial portion is barely readable” (22), and S. T. Joshi comments that the stories which were published in the first edition of *Weird Tales* were a “rag-tag farrago of crude and outlandish stories largely written by beginning writers” and “a mass of rubbish” (*I Am Providence* 452).

The historical fiction that was published in the pulps had its share of stories whose content fit the verdict of Hulse and Joshi, too. There is ample proof that not all historical stories published as such took the correct depiction of historical events and periods seriously. Talbot Mundy’s *Tros of Samothrace* series, published in *Adventure* from February, 1925 to February, 1926, is such an example; the series describes the fight of the Celtic druid Tros against Julius Cesar’s attempts to bring Britain under the rule of the Roman Empire. At one point, the series features Vikings who are plundering the British coast although the first historically recorded attacks of Vikings on British soil took place several centuries after the Roman Empire’s attempt of occupying Britain.<sup>3</sup>

Considering that even canonized classic literature has sufficient examples of anachronisms, such as Shakespeare’s mentioning of a mechanic clock in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, the fact that anachronisms made it into pulp fiction stories is, in my eyes, no surprise. Most editors of pulp magazines were no historians and hereby naturally lacked the necessary knowledge to spot every single anachronism, only noticing the most obvious blunders an author made. Furthermore, editors of the pulp magazines did not have a universal guideline or policy on how they approached submitted historical stories. One magazine’s editor could find an anachronism in a story, but decide to accept the story, as it was sufficiently entertaining, while the editor of another pulp magazine would reject the same story the moment he noticed the same anachronism that the other editor let pass.

There was a quality control, though, beyond the hands of the pulp magazines' editors that took strict care that writers of historical fiction did their utmost to deliver stories free of anachronisms and avoid the wrong depiction of historical details. This quality control was taken over by the magazines' readers, many of whom were quick to point out mistakes made by authors and who did not hesitate to contact the editors about such blunders. Furthermore, many pulp magazines had given their readers platforms where they could publicly give praise to a story or harshly criticize the sloppy research of an author. These platforms were the readers' columns most magazines featured in their issues.

Such readers' columns had their origin in *Adventure* magazine. Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, the editor of *Adventure* established a column called "The Camp-Fire" in May, 1912, and according to Hoffman it was "a Meeting Place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers" (Goulart 28). Here, the magazine's readers could communicate with the editor and the magazine's authors as well as with fellow readers. Pulp fiction researcher Robert Weinberg writes about "The Camp-Fire" and the readers sending in letters to this column that:

"The Camp-Fire" was perhaps the best letter column in any magazine, ever. Usually, authors of stories in the issues wrote long essays where they detailed the background of their work. Letters from readers argued over facts in previous stories. In an America, just emerging from the Wild West and the First World War, the readers of *Adventure* weren't just arm-chair adventurers sporting theories. A typical letter began, "I enjoyed Hugh Pendexter's story about the gunfight at the O. K. Corral, but he got some of the details wrong. I was there and remember quite distinctly . . ." and continue on for three pages about the famous gun battle. (Weinberg xiii-xiv)

It was in such a readers' column that Robert E. Howard also became the target of criticism condemning his seeming lack of sufficient research for one of his historical stories. In the readers' column "The Souk" in the summer 1932 issue of

*Oriental Stories*, reader Francis X. Bell of Chicago complained that Howard incorrectly depicted Moslems as heavy drinkers of alcohol. Bell did not simply resort to protesting Howard's seemingly sloppy research, though. He presented his case by admitting that there were indeed Moslems who had drunk alcohol, listing examples such as "Baibars, the Panther may indeed have drunk to excess, as he was a heretic anyway," or "Omar Khayyam was of course a heretic, and his poetry is disapproved by pious Moslems everywhere, who deplore his drunkenness" ("The Souk," *Oriental Stories* 425). Bell then attacked Howard by writing:

Timur (Tamerlane) was an orthodox Moslem, and consequently never drank at all. Mr. Howard should know, if he has studied the history of Islam, that drinking alcoholic liquors is expressly forbidden by the Koran; and certainly neither Timur nor any other important Moslem touched liquor at all." (425)<sup>4</sup>

The large amount of examples Francis X. Bell put into his letter to support his complaint about Howard's mistakes adds further proof to Weinberg's claim that the readers of historical (pulp) fiction did have a rather deep knowledge of the subject matter.

This fact that many readers of historical stories had such substantial knowledge and were not hesitating to point out the mistakes made by an author posed severe problems for Howard. I would like to point out that first and foremost, until Wright's invitation to submit historical stories, Howard had no former experience of writing in this field. So far, Howard's stories that featured the Picts and their king, Bran Mak Morn, were set on the background of an alternative history for the Picts that Howard had created. I have demonstrated that this alternative history was a mix of scientific and occult theories, as well as historical data, which Howard had adapted to his needs and also based on his imagination. It is important to stress here that in order to write accurate historical fiction Howard had to restrain his imagination and give up his artistic freedom to alter historical facts and data. Instead, Howard had to work with historically proven facts. In order to correctly depict the historical settings of his



stories as well as avoiding anachronisms, thorough, disciplined and time-consuming research was obligatory. For a pulp fiction writer such as Howard whose income was dependent on how many stories he could write and sell, this time factor was of great importance. In the end, the time spent for the research of a story could as well be used to write another story that could be turned into money.

Another point I regard as important to point out is that the research for historical stories required specialist literature to which Howard had no access: there was no library in his vicinity that had such literature available. In the end, when it came to writing historical stories, Howard had to use the books in his own collection and rely on his knowledge of history in order to correctly describe the historical details in his stories.

I would like to argue that the reasons that the average pulp fiction hack writer preferred to stay away from the historical fiction genre were this necessary amount of research, the required eye for detail and the mentioned well-informed readership. In fact, there were many experts with impressive backgrounds among the ranks of writers who produced historical stories for the pulps, such as the above-mentioned Harold Lamb (1892-1962), Talbot Mundy (1879-1940), H. Bedford-Jones (1887-1949), and Hugh Pendexter (1875-1940).

Among these writers, especially Lamb, was much more than just a simple pulp fiction writer. He was an accomplished expert on the history of Asia and the Middle East, who beside fiction also wrote non-fiction books about the Crusades. Among his non-fiction work was also a critically acclaimed biography about Genghis Khan. Lamb's work about the Crusaders drew the attention of filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille, who hired him as a technical advisor for his production of the 1935 movie *The Crusades*. This position then paved the way for Lamb to become a screenwriter for Hollywood productions. I will demonstrate in the following section how influential Harold Lamb's work was on Howard and the historical fiction he produced.

#### 4. Harold Lamb's Influence on Howard's Historical Fiction

I have pointed out the fact that Howard had no former experience in writing historical fiction by the time Farnsworth Wright asked him to submit such stories to *Oriental Tales*. Up to then, most of Howard's output, such as the Bran Mak Morn stories which I discussed in the previous chapter or the Solomon Kane stories which featured a Puritan swordsman wandering during the 17th century through Europe and Africa were fantastic fiction that mixed historical settings with supernatural elements.

An essential aspect for the enjoyment of fantastic fiction is the preamble that readers of such stories suspend their disbelief and accept the existence of all the fantastic and supernatural elements that appear in these stories. For example, in the Bran Mak Morn story "Kings of the Night" the readers' suspension of disbelief permitted Howard to let Kull of Atlantis, one of the story's protagonists, undertake a time travel from an antediluvian past into the future. Furthermore, Howard even got away with the anachronism of Viking mercenaries fighting together with an alliance of Picts and Irish against Roman legionnaires.

I have addressed the fact that the attitude of readers of historical stories is drastically different: The readers of historical stories that appeared in pulp magazines were not willing to suspend their disbelief at all and expected historical stories to present the facts correctly. For them, historical fiction had no place for supernatural elements and anachronisms were anathema.

In spite of the enthusiasm of having the opportunity to write historical fiction, Howard was obviously aware that he needed to learn the craft of writing historical fiction in order to stand a chance on the market. He tried to accomplish this by learning from the best in this field, in this case from Harold Lamb, whom Howard counted among his favorite authors.

The importance of Harold Lamb for Howard's work is observed by Patrice Louinet, who in his introduction to *Lord of Samarcand and Other Adventure Tales of the Old Orient* writes that "one can see the strong affinity between Howard's and

Harold Lamb's fiction" (ix). Louinet also provides an example that proves how Howard practiced writing historical fiction by using a story by Lamb: "Howard's first attempt at writing an Oriental story was contemporary to his reading Lamb's 'The Wolf Chaser.' . . . The Texan first wrote a short recap of Lamb's story, then proceeded to write a short story, or rather outline of a story, which apparently didn't go beyond the second page" (ix).

Howard Andrew Jones, editor of the University of Nebraska edition of Lamb's works, finds also proof of Lamb's impact on Howard, and observes that "Howard sometimes used Lamb's histories and historical fiction for research, and there are obvious signs of Lamb's influence on Howard's historical fiction" (x). In my opinion, the fact that Howard owned Lamb's non-fiction books about the Crusades and Tamerlane strongly supports Jones' claim.

I am regarding Howard's decision to write stories set in the time of the Crusades as based on Lamb's influence: not only did Howard admire Lamb's work, he even used Lamb's fiction to practice writing historical fiction. Also, Howard had Lamb's non-fiction books about the Crusades in his collection. All of this sufficiently supports, in my eyes, the claim that Howard's choosing the time of the Crusades as the stage of many of his historic stories goes back to Lamb's influence.

In my argument, Lamb's historical adventure stories provided Howard with the characters, tropes, and plot elements he could use for his own stories, while Lamb's non-fiction work was the reliable source Howard could turn to in order to correctly depict the historical background and details of his stories.

As Jones pointed out, Lamb's literary and non-fiction work left its traces in Howard's historical stories. One such example is that many historical personalities whom Lamb mentioned in his non-fiction books, are also featured in Howard's stories or are at least name-dropped.

Howard even took over Lamb's descriptions of such historical persons for use in his own work. This becomes evident in Howard's depiction of Genghis Khan's general and military adviser Subotai, who features in several of Howard's stories.

Subotai's physical appearance in Howard's first historical story "Red Blades of Black Cathay" (published in *Oriental Stories*, February-March 1931) shows striking similarities to Subotai's description in Lamb's story "The Sea of Ravens" (1927).<sup>5</sup> Even the setting in whose frame Subotai's description is being delivered is similar to Lamb's, as Brian Leno in his essay "Kingdoms of Clouds and Moonmist" demonstrates. In both Lamb's and Howard's stories a Crusader faces Subotai in a fight, with the knight mustering his Mongolian opponent. In "The Sea of the Ravens" Subotai is described as "tall as the Crusader, his limbs were massive as a bear's, and his mighty body seemed to roll forward on his bowed legs as if driven by the wind . . . his armor was black lacquer, his under tunic, wide-sleeved, was soft shagreen" (Leno 36). Leno observes how Howard picks up the aspects of height, mighty, and massive in Lamb's description of Subotai's appearance and how Howard's protagonist "took in the height of the man, the mighty sweep of his chest and shoulder, and the massive arms" (Leno 36). Leno finds even more similarities in the description of Subotai in Lamb's and Howard's stories. In "Red Blades of Black Cathay" Howard takes over not only Lamb's depiction of Subotai having red hair and blue eyes, but also the armor of black lacquer that Lamb mentioned Subotai was wearing.

Another example that proves Lamb's influence on Howard is his description of the era of the Crusades. A letter by Lamb, published in the August 8, 1926 issue of *Adventure*, shows that he had a very differentiated view of the time of the Crusades. Lamb strongly disapproved of a one-sided depiction of this time—be that in scientific literature or in fiction—in which history was reconstructed through an exclusively western lens that was based on sources such as Church chronicles. Lamb wrote that "it is so absurd to . . . white wash some individual or people and call it history. . . . But it's so tiresome to look for history in many modern publications and find only personal opinions, deductions, vilification, or deification, and references to faulty authorities" (*Swords from the East* 289). Lamb suggested reading Arabic sources as well, going so far to say that "it's been awfully refreshing read about the crusaders from Arabic sources" (289).

Consequently, Lamb did not depict the time of the Crusades through a romantic lens, with the Middle East being a place filled with noble knights in shining white armor, who in the spirit of King Arthur's knights of the Round Table follow a codex based on idealism, chivalry, and Christian beliefs. I am arguing that Howard very much took over this depiction, as the background story of Godric, the protagonist of Howard's story "Red Blades of Black Cathay" reveals: As a young man Godric was lured into joining the Crusades by the wrong promise that he would be part of rightfully taking back the Holy Land out of the hands of Islam. Godric realized too late that his idealism had been cruelly abused. In the end, in order to be able to pay for their passage to the Holy Land, Godric and his comrades have to sell themselves as mercenaries and find themselves killing fellow Christians in this process.

Finally, I also regard Lamb's depiction of Arabs and Moslems in his stories and non-fiction work as influential on Howard's historical stories. Howard has received justified (as well as unjustified) criticism for the stereotypical and racist depiction of Asians, African Americans, and Middle Eastern people in many of his stories. I regard it as very noteworthy that such stereotyping does not occur in Howard's historical stories, where Moslem leaders, who are the enemies of the Crusader protagonists, are being featured. When in Howard's stories "Gates of Empire" or "Hawks of Outremer" the Moslem forces defeat the crusaders, the Moslem leaders show their noble greatness. Shirkuh replies to the wish of the defeated knight and protagonist to kill him with praise for his opponent's courage: "I would not harm a hair of such a stout fighter and noble toper" ("Gates of Empire" 269). In "Hawks of Outremer" the victorious Saladin honors the surviving crusader knight by stating "you are rough and savage, but I would fain have men like you in mine own train. There is a fierce loyalty in you, and for this I honor you" (59). In fact, the Moslem's noble conduct results in the knight full of shame realizing "his own innate barbarism" (59) and admitting to being wrong by saying "I have misjudged you, Moslem. . . . There is fairness in you" (59).

I am arguing that Howard's image of the noble and wise Moslem leaders as shown in the examples above mirrors exactly Lamb's positive view of Arabs. According to Lamb "a crusader's code of ethics was much less formidable than that of a clean-strain Arab . . ." (*Swords from the Desert* 288) and Arab and Persian historians "are very fair . . . in giving an enemy credit for gallantry" (288).

In my opinion, all the above given examples, such as Howard's taking over the historical details or the genre tropes found in Lamb's stories, again distinctly prove Harold Lamb's influence on Howard's historical short stories.

I would like to clearly point out, though, that it is not correct to conclude from the evidence I presented that Howard was simply copying Lamb. In fact, I am arguing that Howard gave his historical stories a distinctly individual note and so made his historical fiction his own work. I will discuss this claim in the following section.

## 5. Howard's Creation of Authentic Characters

A striking similarity between the crusader tales of Harold Lamb and Robert E. Howard is that the protagonists of these stories are loners of Irish descent.<sup>6</sup> In my opinion, though, in spite of this seeming similarity, Howard's knight protagonists are fundamentally different from Lamb's.

It is a fact that Lamb was an expert in history and the historically accurate details found in his stories are proving Lamb's knowledge. Furthermore, in his historic stories Lamb tried to present characters that were not based on clichés. I am claiming, though, that in spite of this premise and Lamb's efforts, the protagonists of his stories display, in my eyes, a significant lack of personality and remain surprisingly pale. This is the result of Lamb focusing more on correctly depicting the historic scenario than on the conflicts of his stories' protagonists.

I would like to argue that Howard, in contrast to Lamb, focused more on the protagonists of his stories than the historical background and so featured in his

historical stories knights full of a dark and brooding bitterness. I regard this as especially evident in Howard's first published historical story "Red Blades of Black Cathay" (*Oriental Stories*, Spring 1931) in the story's protagonist, the knight, Godric de Villehard. Godric is a former Crusader, who finds himself involuntarily involved in defending the kingdom of Cathay from the invading Mongolian army led by Genghis Khan. Howard describes Godric's physical appearance in a way that leaves no doubt that Godric is a broken and disillusioned man:

The Norman was not past thirty, but his hard life had carved his face into inflexible lines. Rather than the beauty that appeals to women, there was in his features the lean strength of the hunting wolf. The forehead was high and broad, the brow of a thinker, and once the mouth had been kindly, the eyes of a dreamer. But now his eyes were bitter and his whole appearance that of a man with whom life has dealt hardly—who has ceased to look for mercy or give it. (228)

Howard depicts the lives of the knights featured in his stories not as a romantic adventure. In fact, I would like to point out that life in Howard's historic stories is not fair at all and a never-ending struggle: "Red Blades of Black Cathay" begins with Godric and a handful of men being sent by his liege lord on an expedition to find the mysterious kingdom of Prester John, a legendary king and priest. Godric's liege lord, whose duty to his sworn knights is to care and protect them in return for their selfless services, does not fulfill this duty at all. Instead, he sends his knights on a hopeless mission in the selfish hope of gaining material wealth. Godric is fully aware that this expedition is actually a suicide mission: should Godric find against all hope the mysterious kingdom, the spoils of his effort will be his liege lord's, while in case of Godric failing, he will die without anyone even remembering him. Yet, Godric takes on the mission. This does not mean that Godric has given up on life and is seeking death or that he has come to terms with his fate. On the contrary, Godric's behavior displays an attribute that I am regarding as an essential aspect of all of Howard's

characters. They move on, even when there is no hope and overwhelming odds stand against them.

Godric, unwilling to be defeated struggles on in his mission, not knowing and not caring where the journey to the east will take him and what it will bring him. In my view this makes him, together with many of Howard's protagonists, an existentialist in the way Charles Hoffmann has described it in his essay "Conan the Existentialist." According to Hoffman, existentialism does not give man a true purpose: "Man is not acting out a role in the play of the cosmos with some ultimate end in view" (Hoffman 6). In case of Howard's protagonists, this means that these men have no prescribed destiny that will eventually lead them on a fated path to become benevolent kings or heroes whose coming ancient prophecies have announced.

Another example for such an existentialist protagonist is the knight Gottfried von Kalmbach in "The Shadow of the Vulture." He is also a disillusioned protagonist on the background of the historical clash between East and West. "The Shadow of the Vulture" is set during the siege of Vienna in 1529 by Turkish troops and Kalmbach finds himself caught in the besieged city, with no possibility to escape. Although this Turkish siege of Vienna is an important event in European history, Howard focuses not on the wider conflict, the possible scenario that with the fall of Vienna Christian Europe would fall prey to the forces of Islam and might cease to exist. Howard's interest lies in the fate of the men and women who are caught in the besieged city and whether Gottfried von Kalmbach will survive the siege.

Kalmbach himself is not a man of special virtues or martial skills. He does not wish to die, but has come to terms with whatever fate may hold for him and spends the time between the fighting with excessive alcohol consumption. This makes him in my argument again a character vastly different from the clichéd knights full of pathos, hollow ideals, and unrealistic heroism.

Concerning the heroes in Howard's oriental stories, Don D'Amassa claims:



[Howard] obviously felt that a single individual, no matter what his rank or background, could exert influence on the course of history, that no matter how inconsequential a person might appear, he or she could leave behind at least an anonymous legacy. His protagonists are not kings, but they are kingmakers. History was more than just a collection of dusty facts and old stories to Howard; they were a tapestry of human striving and accomplishment despite the sometimes overwhelming weight of chaos and barbarism. (123)

I regard D'Amassa's claim that in Howard's view individuals could have an influence on history as not correct: Howard's pessimistic worldview had no place for individuals aspiring to change history or to leave a legacy. In Howard's line of thinking average people toiled through life and gave up when the struggle became too much for them. I would like to argue that the knights and heroes Howard featured in his stories are different. They never give up when life deals them a bad hand. They stand up and fight, even when the odds are overwhelmingly against them. When these men and women die, they die fighting. They also do not fight based on their ambitions, or their ideals, or for a greater good in first place: they fight for themselves, their own wellbeing and their own profit. In my opinion, any possible positive resonances that affect others in the vicinity of these men and women amount to nothing else than being a simple, unintended side effect of the struggles of Howard's heroic characters.

Howard explicitly expressed this point when talking about his historical story "Lord of Samarcand." To his friend Tevis Clyde Smith, he admitted that he did not believe his readers would enjoy the story, as "there isn't a gleam of hope in it. It's the fiercest and most somber thing I ever tried to write. . . . But it's the sort of thing I like to write—no plot construction, no hero or heroine, no climax in the accepted sense of the word, all characters complete scoundrels, and everybody double-crossing everybody else" (*Collected Letters* 2: 277-78). This description certainly fits the protagonist of "The Shadow of the Vulture," Gottfried von Kalmbach, whom

Howard described in a letter to H. P. Lovecraft (March 6, 1933) as “a more dissolute vagabond than Gottfried never weaved his drunken way across the pages of popular magazine: wastrel, drunkard, gambler, whore-monger, renegade, mercenary, plunderer, thief, rogue, rascal—I never created a character whose creation I enjoyed more” (*A Means to Freedom* 550).

I regard that what D’Amassa regards as kingmakers are in fact not kingmakers at all. In fact, I am arguing that the protagonists of Howard’s historical stories are not at all interested in achieving such a feat: Gottfried von Kalmbach is stuck in a Vienna, besieged by a superior Turkish army, without any hope to get out of the seemingly doomed city. He does nothing at all to change this situation, but sticks to waiting for events to unfold and spends his time with heavy drinking, which is his only option to enjoying life in his given situation. Patrice Louinet correctly notes that “his [von Kalmbach’s] alcoholism seems to be just another means to escape reality, in this case the Armageddon that is taking place around Vienna” (*Lord of Samarcand* xi).

I think it is hard to assess von Kalmbach’s surviving of the Turkish siege as something that according to D’Amassa would “leave behind at least an anonymous legacy.” I am claiming that von Kalmbach does not leave the battlefield a better or wiser man, whose further deeds will have an impact on history or whose name will be remembered in history books. He is just a simple man who escaped death and whose journey continues to the next struggle he will have to face. This turns him into a realistic and authentic character with whom the readers can relate to.

In comparison with Lamb’s work, I regard criticism of the lack of the historic details in Howard’s historic stories as valid. In my eyes, this missing of historic ornament clearly indicates that Howard kept such detailed information to a minimum out of worries of making unintentional blunders such as anachronisms. It may also be a sign that Howard did not have sufficient reference literature about the historic period he was writing about at hand. On the other hand, I would like to point out that Howard efficiently remedied this lack of details: He created a new kind of

protagonist for his stories in form of dark and brooding Irish knights and focused his attention on the struggles of these men on historic backgrounds such as the Crusades or the siege of Vienna.

In a letter published in *Adventure's* readers' column "The Camp-Fire," Harold Lamb tried to come up with the meaning of the term history and wrote "what is history but the uncovering or unfolding of the past? The story of what certain men did—their adventures, because it is more interesting to read about what they did than what they were" (*Swords from the Desert* 289). In his historical stories, Howard managed to mix "what his protagonists were" and "what they did." He created flawed protagonists in the form of dark, brooding existentialists and depicted their personal fight on the background of a historic setting. In my view, with this Howard stepped out of the shadow of Lamb and his work and created his own kind of historical fiction.

The characters Howard created for his historical stories demonstrate Howard's growth as a writer. In the previous chapter that dealt with Howard's creation of an alternative history of the Picts, I have shown that although Howard had succeeded in creating a convincing fictive version of history, he had at first missed adding individual drama and conflicts into it. When the story "Men of the Shadows" was rejected due to the lack of drama and conflict, Howard created the character of Bran Mak Morn, the last Pictish king.

I am arguing that Howard managed with the character of Bran Mak Morn to give his alternative history of the Picts a face. Hereby Howard infused in his alternative history the up to now lacking individual conflict and drama. Bran, like the Irish knights Howard featured in his historic stories, is a dark and brooding character, but this is where the similarities to the protagonists of Howard's historical stories end. I have shown that Bran displays an unpleasant selfish character streak, as he is willing to sacrifice his virtues and allies in order to fortify his position as king of the Picts in order to achieve his self-chosen mission of raising the Picts out of their state of savagery. Throughout the Bran Mak Morn stories there is an ambiguity in Bran's

character: Is Bran's acting based on the selfish motivation to accumulate the power to rule the Picts, or is Bran a tragic king who sacrifices, by intention or not, everything to help take the once great race of the Picts, who have turned into savages, back to their old glory?

In my opinion, the knights that Howard featured in his historical stories are a consequent development of Bran Mak Morn's character. Bran is a king, with the aspirations of a ruler, which means gaining power and professing to help his subjects. Howard's knights on the other hand are unassuming men. They have much simpler aspirations, desires, and yearnings. They just want to survive and try to make a living in an environment that is strange and hostile to them. I also would like to point out that while Bran knows his destiny, as it has been prophesied to him in "Men of the Shadows," knights like Godric and Gottfried do not know what the future will bring them. In my argument, all of this makes Howard's knights more authentic and realistic characters, which I am arguing here was something new in Howard's literary work.

Howard had learnt from Lamb the importance of correctly depicting the historic background of his historical stories and with this he reached a new level as a writer. This resulted in him creating, in a next step, existentialist protagonists whose conduct and conflicts gave Howard's stories their own, distinctive note and prevented that Howard's stories were simple copies of the work of his peer Howard Lamb.

#### 6. Howard's Realization of the Importance of Realism for His Historical Fiction

Hand in hand with the fact that the protagonists of Howard's historical fiction are not one-dimensional characters full of pulp fiction stereotypes and clichés comes, in my opinion, another feature of Howard's historical stories that is new to his literary work. I am arguing that this feature is the realism Howard attempted to lend his stories.

Howard repeatedly stressed the importance of realism for his work in his correspondence. To H. P. Lovecraft he wrote in 1933:

[There] is no literary work, to me, half as zestful as rewriting history in the guise of fiction. . . . I try to write as true to the actual facts as possible, at least, I try to commit as few errors as possible. I like to have my background and setting as accurate and realistic as I can, with my limited knowledge: if I twist facts too much, alter dates as some writers do, or present a character out of keeping with my impressions of the time and place, I lose my sense of reality, and my characters cease to be living and vital things. . . . (*A Means to Freedom* 651)

How much importance the aspect of realism had for Howard and his stories becomes evident in a statement he made in connection with his story “The Shadow of the Vulture,” about which Howard assumed that “a lot of milksops—maybe—will say it’s too savage to be realistic, but to my mind it’s about the most realistic thing I ever attempted” (*Collected Letters* 2: 277-78). In my eyes, in this statement Howard makes an important point about his literary work: I am arguing that he regarded the realism of his stories as important to the extent that he was willing to even risk his popularity with his readers. I regard Howard’s stance as very remarkable: the elementary purpose and sales point of pulp fiction was to deliver entertainment; to offer its readers the possibility to shortly escape from the dreary realities of unsatisfying work in factories and offices, and the worries of the Great Depression, which had begun to set in when Howard wrote his stories. Confronting such readers with another dreary reality of a nihilistic medieval scenario, furthermore realistically depicted, could easily result in the rejection of Howard’s stories. It was a risk that Howard obviously willingly took and where I think it is fair to say that he put his art over his possible income.

Moreover, I would like to regard the above stated importance of realism for Howard’s work not simply restricted to just having all the historical facts and data correct. More important, I understand it also as including that the protagonists and

characters featured in his stories are depicted as realistic. Howard addressed this point when he referred to the protagonists of “The Shadow of the Vulture,” writing “they may not seem real to the readers; but Gottfried von Kalmbach and his mistress Red Sonya seem more real to me than any other character I’ve ever drawn” (*A Means to Freedom* 550).<sup>7</sup>

The notable frequency with which Howard raised the point of realism in his letters written during the phase in which he authored historical stories allows one conclusion: It was during this period of his career that Howard discovered the element of realism and realized its importance for the quality of his work.

My conclusion is supported by the fact that realism continued to play a key role in Howard’s future literary work. Shortly before he stopped writing historic stories, Howard began the work on several fantasy stories. About Conan of Cimmeria, the barbarian adventurer and protagonist of this projected series Howard wrote in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith (July 23, 1935) that “it may sound fantastic to link the term ‘realism’ with Conan; but as a matter of fact—his supernatural adventures aside—he is the most realistic character I ever evolved” (*Collected Letters* 3: 367).

In the same letter Howard referred to the Conan story “Red Nails” as “the grimmest, bloodiest and most merciless story of the series so far. Too much raw meat, maybe, but I merely portrayed what I honestly believed would be the reaction of certain types of people in the situations on which the plot of the story hung” (*Collected Letters* 3: 367). In my view this clearly demonstrates Howard’s effort to depict plausible, realistic scenarios and people, regardless of whether the genre was fantasy or not.

In fact, I am arguing that realism became a key feature in Howard’s future work: in his stories with a realistic setting like his westerns or detective stories, as well as in the fantasy genre to which Howard returned after he stopped writing historical fiction.

## 7. Conclusion

It appears to be a strange career move that Howard, after he had painstakingly created an alternative history that stretched from the times before the sinking of Atlantis to the twentieth century, suddenly turned to writing historical fiction. This is especially notable as Howard had no previous experience in writing in this genre. Furthermore, this move from writing an alternative history to writing historical fiction meant for Howard the loss of artistic freedom. Howard's alternative history of the Picts was a mix of Howard's imagination and an amalgam of theories from fields like anthropology and occultism that by Howard's time still had a ring of truth to them. This put Howard in charge of the facts of this alternative history. In case of writing historical stories, Howard had to give up this freedom and stick to the facts of official world history.

I regard Howard's having to artistically restrain himself and working in a new genre as an important period of his career. In my opinion, Howard grew in this time significantly as a writer. Howard's first step in writing historical fiction was to learn from Harold Lamb, an author whose work Howard deeply admired. Lamb's stories served Howard as the source of the tropes for the genres and as a source for the research that was necessary to correctly depict the historical period which Howard then used as the setting for his stories. Howard also took Lamb's stories as a means to infuse authentic details in his stories, such as in the description of historical personalities.

Howard then developed dark and brooding characters as protagonists of his stories. These protagonists were not cliché filled cardboard characters, but realistic characters that also can be regarded as existentialists, a character trait that lent them further authenticity and gave Howard's historical stories their individual touch.

Howard stopped writing historical stories in 1933. One reason for this decision was that his only customer *Magic Carpet* (which was the renamed follow-up version of the former *Oriental Stories* magazine) went out of the market due to weak sales and Howard had no other magazines that bought his historical fiction stories.

Another reason that Howard did not continue writing in the historical stories genre was a point that he had addressed in his correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft, writing “I could never make a living writing such things though; the markets are too scanty, with requirements too narrow, and it takes me so long to complete one [story]” (*A Means to Freedom* 651).

Although Howard did not write any further historical stories, he did not turn his back on history. In the next phase of his career Howard created his very own history and together with it an iconic character of the fantasy genre.



## Chapter IV: “The Hyborian Age”: Creating a Fictive Age and Pseudo-History

### 1. Introduction

A distinct feature of Robert E. Howard’s work is his fascination with history and ancient times. Based on his interest in the subject matter and his fascination with the Picts, Howard had created for this mysterious people an alternative history, a history that was set within the frame of known history but varied substantially from real historic events.

The creation of such an alternative history was not enough for Howard. After an interlude of writing historical short stories set during the time of the Crusades, Howard went on to create his very own pseudo-history, an utterly new version of history in which he fully changed historically proven facts. He achieved this with writing an essay titled “The Hyborian Age.”

“The Hyborian Age” has a special position among Howard’s work. It is not a story but a pseudo-scientific essay that describes a fictive age which was set between the sinking of the mystic continent of Atlantis and the beginning of the world’s official time-reckoning. Also, although “The Hyborian Age” was devised to be an outline of the world for Howard’s most famous literary creation, the barbarian adventurer Conan of Cimmeria, Conan never appears in this essay.<sup>1</sup>

Due to this “The Hyborian Age” is difficult to access for readers who expect a typical Howard action story. In my opinion though, this essay is of utmost importance in Howard’s work. In this chapter, I will analyze Howard’s creative process of the composing of “The Hyborian Age” and address the importance of this essay for his work.

### 2. Conan of Cimmeria: A Barbarian Adventurer and His World

Although Howard was still writing historical fiction in 1932, he also began

again to write fantastic fiction. One of the reasons for Howard's return to this genre can be traced back to his expressed worries about inadvertently making mistakes in the form of anachronisms when writing historical stories. In fact, Howard had faced readers' criticism for seemingly not having sufficiently researched the background for one of his historical stories. One way for Howard to avoid such criticism was writing stories set in a fantastic secondary world that was based on his own concept and where he was in charge of the facts of this secondary world. Writing fantastic fiction offered such an opportunity.

Howard's return to fantastic fiction began in February 1932, when he wrote the poem "Cimmeria" during a short vacation to the southern parts of Texas. "Cimmeria" describes a dark and somber land, full of dense forests and hills. In his essay "Hyborian Genesis," Patrice Louinet points out that the poem is showing the influence of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*: "like Howard, Plutarch linked the Celtic Cimbri to the Cimmerians, saying they 'live in a dark and woody country hardly penetrable by the sunbeams, the trees are so close and thick, extending into the interior as far as the Hercynian forest'" ("Hyborian Genesis" 430). The lines in Howard's poem, saying, "[It] was a gloomy land that seemed to hold / all winds and clouds and dreams that shut the sun, / with bare boughs rattling in the lonesome winds, / and the dark woodlands brooding over all, / not even lightened by the rare dim sun" ("Cimmeria" 3), show distinct similarities to the above quoted passage from Plutarch and, in my eyes, sufficiently support Louinet's assessment.

With the land of Cimmeria, Howard had not just described poetically a dark and mystic land. Cimmeria was also the home of his new literary creation, the barbarian adventurer Conan of Cimmeria. Howard noted about Conan's creation in a 1935 letter to Alvin Earl Perry, "Conan grew up in my mind a few years ago when I was stopping in a little border town on the lower Rio Grande. I did not create him by any conscious process. He simply stalked full grown out of oblivion and set me at work recording the saga of his adventures" (*Collected Letters* 3: 287-88).

I would like to point out that Howard's above statement concerning the

spontaneous creation of Conan needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Howard tended in his correspondence to make his creative process of developing literary characters appear much easier than it actually was. The fact that Howard submitted two Conan stories (“The Phoenix on the Sword” and “The Frost-Giant’s Daughter”) to *Weird Tales* only one month after he had composed the poem “Cimmeria” in February 1932, allows the conclusion that Howard had in fact begun to develop the character of Conan either before he wrote “Cimmeria” or around the same time.

I am arguing that a look at Howard’s previous work proves that behind Conan’s origins lies more than just the sudden flow of inspiration that Howard had claimed in his letter. In fact, “The Phoenix on the Sword” (1932), the first Conan story Howard authored, was a revised version of the unpublished 1928 story “By This Ax I Rule,” which Howard had written as part of the Kull of Atlantis series.<sup>2</sup> Both “By This Ax I Rule” and “The Phoenix on the Sword” featured as their settings fabled kingdoms in a world of the distant past and a plot in which a barbarian king fights the scheme of a group of nobles who intend to remove him from the throne. “By This Ax I Rule” contained an unconvincing subplot in the form of a love story, which Howard deleted when he rewrote the story into “The Phoenix on the Sword.” Instead, Howard added the ghost of a king as a supernatural element to this new version.

On its submission to *Weird Tales*, “The Phoenix on the Sword” was immediately accepted. In his reply, editor Farnsworth Wright attested the story in his reply “points of real excellence” (*The Last Celt* 374), but also asked Howard for revisions. A comparison between the originally submitted version of the story and its revised, final version that saw publication in *Weird Tales* shows that Howard improved two points. He significantly changed the introduction of Conan, deleting one section in which Conan appears to consider for an instant committing suicide. The second revision is more important for our purposes as it concerns the setting of Conan’s world. The original version of “The Phoenix on the Sword” begins with the meeting of several men who conspire to assassinate Conan, the king of Aquilonia.

Although Howard describes the motivation of the conspirators, the story's setting is otherwise unclear. The names of the men such as Ascalante, Dion, or Rinaldo evoke the image of a Renaissance setting or a play by Shakespeare. The mentioning of such titles as minstrel, count, and king hint at an artificial medieval setting such as in the novels of William Morris. Furthermore, the name of the kingdom in which the story is set, Aquilonia, allows for the assumption that the story is set in a fantastic secondary world, or even possibly on another planet than earth.

The world that is the stage of "The Phoenix on the Sword" is described in more detail much later, by the end of the story's second chapter. It is a lengthy passage that ranges over two pages in which Conan and his adviser Prospero talk about the various nations and the people of these nations.

"By Mitra," said Prospero, . . . "All know that east of Aquilonia lies Nemedra, then Brythunia, then Zamora; south lies Koth and the lands of Shem; west beyond the Bossonian marches stretches the Pictish wilderness; beyond the northern Bossonian marches lies Cimmeria. Who knows what lies beyond that country?"

"I know," answered the king. . . .

"Asgard lies to the north, and Vanaheim to the northwest of Cimmeria, . . . . The western part of Vanaheim lies along the western sea, and east of Asgard is the country of the Hyperboreans, who are civilized and dwell in cities. East beyond their country are the deserts of the Hyrkanians." ("The Phoenix on the Sword (First submitted draft)" 359-60)

In this draft version, Howard's secondary world-building is restricted to a very rough mapping of the lands and nations of Conan's world. To readers familiar with Howard's earlier work that featured the Picts, the mentioning of the Pictish wilderness might have been a hint that Conan's world is set in the antediluvian, pre-prehistoric time of this earth that Howard had mentioned in his earlier Kull of Atlantis or Bran Mak Morn stories. Other readers, though, would be in the dark as to

the setting of the “Phoenix on the Sword.”

In the story’s revised version, Howard compressed the section that described Conan’s world. Howard also moved this newly written part to the beginning of the story and turned it into the following introduction.

Know, oh prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars—Nemedias, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold.

But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west. Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandalled feet.

— The Nemedian Chronicles. (“The Phoenix on the Sword” 7)

With this short introductory passage, Howard established not only the geography of Conan’s world in a much clearer and more efficient way than the confusing description in the original draft whose mentioning of the directions such as north and northwest was not much help for the reader to visualize this world. Howard added short attributes that described the nations, for example the “shadow-guarded tombs” (7) of Stygia or the “chivalry” (7) of Zingara. Howard also gave a short description of the mentality of the people of these nations lending each of them a credible individuality. Moreover, in this new passage Howard also introduced the character of Conan of Cimmeria with all his positive and negative attributes.<sup>3</sup>

Most important though, Howard clarified in this revised passage that the story

was set in a fictive, ancient past of the earth by including the line “between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the sons of Aryas” (7) .

With the mentioning of this “Age undreamed of” (7), Howard had begun to create his very own fictive age. This was Howard’s first step of developing a pseudo-history in the way I defined it, as being a form of history that had never taken place.

### 3. Creating Pseudo-History: “The Hyborian Age” Essay

The creative process of detailing the world of the Conan of Cimmeria series is an interesting one. There is no universal handbook or guidelines that dictate how to create the secondary world of a Fantasy series to authors. The assumption that an author would at first set up a stage before writing a series set on this stage seems to be more practical, as having some basic data ready may guarantee a conformity of the background. Creating a secondary world for a series after several stories of this series had already been written appears to be a working process starting from the wrong end. In spite of this assumption, Patrice Louinet points out in “Hyborian Genesis” that Howard’s work of detailing the secondary world of the Conan stories in the essay that became “The Hyborian Age” began indeed only after he had already written three Conan stories (“The Phoenix on the Sword,” “The Frost-Giant’s Daughter,” and “The God in the Bowl”).

I regard the utterly different settings of these three stories as one reason for Howard’s belated step to detail the secondary world that the Conan series lies in: “The Phoenix on the Sword” plays in a medieval setting at Conan’s court, the kingdom of Aquilonia. Conan is introduced as a middle-aged/older man and the story’s plot that courtiers conspire to dethrone Conan is reminiscent of the historical stories Howard had been writing at this time.

“The Frost-Giant’s Daughter” is set in the northern border region of Cimmeria.

This story features a younger Conan who is still wandering the region of his home. After a battle of which Conan is the only survivor, he wakes up gravely injured among the slain and sees a girl approaching him on the frozen ice field. The girl teases Conan, who then follows her. It turns out that the girl is luring Conan into a trap, with two giants waiting to sacrifice Conan to their god. “The Frost-Giant’s Daughter” is utterly different from “The Phoenix on the Sword” as it has a dreamlike, or fairytale-like atmosphere, as if the story were an episode taken from an ancient mythology.

“The God in the Bowl” is a mixture of detective and horror story themes set in an environment that evokes association with ancient Babylon. Conan, in this story older than in “The Frost-Giant’s Daughter,” is a thief who has been hired to steal an item from a temple, but is caught by the city guards. As the guards also find in the temple the corpse of a murdered man, Conan becomes the main suspect.

Although “The Frost-Giant’s Daughter” and “The God in the Bowl” were rejected, Howard continued working on the Conan series. Howard had realized that the streamlining of all these utterly different settings that had featured so far in the Conan stories was a necessity, as otherwise their various stages with the same protagonist made no sense to readers and the editors of the pulp magazines to which he intended to submit future Conan stories.

At this point the influence of Howard’s experience in writing historical stories becomes apparent. Howard had gone on record that it was of utmost importance to him to depict the background of his historical stories correctly, and he approached his work to create the background of the Conan series with the same attitude, in spite of the Conan stories being set in a fantastic environment. The work of creating this background began in early March, 1932. Howard stopped writing further Conan stories and focused on working on an essay which specified the setting of the world and age in which Conan’s adventures played. This essay became “The Hyborian Age,” and in April, 1932, Howard reported to H. P. Lovecraft that he had “been working on a new character, providing him with a new epoch—the Hyborian Age,

which men have forgotten, but which remains in classical names, and distorted myths” (*A Means to Freedom* 279).

There is a misconception according to which the “The Hyborian Age” essay is nothing more than a matter of Howard letting his imagination roam free, and simply combining elements of various historical periods and cultures to one mix. The leading example for this incorrect image of Howard’s creative process is the accusation leveled by Michael Moorcock, who claimed:

[Howard] did not bother to rationalize or disguise the different lands and cultures of his Hyperborean [sic] world. Anachronisms are everywhere.

. . . It is as if Conan is trapped in a movie studio, or a movie library of old clips, shifting from 17th century Russia, to Rome in the first century B.C., to 19th century Afghanistan, to the Spanish Main of the 18th century to the court of Lorenzo the Magnificent, all the way back to the Stone Age. (83)

I am regarding Moorcock’s accusation as incorrect and will prove in this chapter that Howard’s creative process of developing this fictive age and putting it down on paper was a conscious, disciplined effort. One proof of Howard’s effort to create a sound foundation for the Conan series is the fact that there are four extant draft versions of various length of “The Hyborian Age.” The original typescripts of the first three drafts were typed, single spaced and had the following page count: Draft A had two pages, Draft B seven pages, and Draft C twelve pages. The page count of the typescripts of the final draft that became the published version is unknown due to the first page of this final draft missing (Personal communication with Patrice Louinet. March 2, 2018).

In 2011 the Robert E. Howard Foundation published the publicly not available collection “The Hyborian Age” in a small print run of about 100 copies which were given exclusively to a limited number of Foundation members. This publication contains the three drafts A, B, and C together with the final draft and gives insight into Howard’s creative process. In the following sections I will be using these



materials in order to summarize their content and analyze the various steps that led to the creation of the “The Hyborian Age” essay.

(a) Draft A

This first untitled draft was an outline in which Howard established the timeframe of his essay. It is noteworthy that Howard did not focus this timeframe exactly on the fictive age in which he intended to set the adventures of Conan. Instead, Howard went for a much wider timeframe that begins before this age of Conan with a reference to the time before the sinking of Atlantis and ends with the settling of the British Isles.

I am regarding it as evident that for this first draft of “The Hyborian Age” essay, Howard used his alternative history of the Picts as the draft’s base. The Picts are again featured prominently, and many events that Howard mentions in this first draft can be found in the sections of the story “Men of the Shadows” in which a Pictish shaman narrates the alternative history of the Picts.

Draft A opens with a summary of the last days of Atlantis and describes the world before the sinking of the continent, mentioning the kingdoms of Kamelia, Valusia, and Verulia as the dominating nations. Besides these civilizations three barbarian races, the Picts, Atlanteans, and Lemurians existed. In this context ‘barbarian’ assumes Howard’s meaning of being a race or people one evolutionary level before becoming a civilization.

Repeating the facts Howard had already established in “Men of the Shadows,” the Picts lived on islands in the western part of this antediluvian world, the Atlanteans on a continent between these islands and a main land whose name Howard does not mention. The Lemurians inhabited the eastern part of the world of this era. When Atlantis sank, only these barbarian races survived. In the west, the Pictish islands rose and became the mountains of a new continent (North America). As a result, the Picts scattered over the newly formed geography. One group of Picts came to live on the main continent where formerly Valusia was located. Atlanteans

who survived the sinking of Atlantis also settled on this main continent. The Lemurians in the eastern part of the world were separated from the west because of newly risen mountain chains.

Howard enhanced in Draft A the alternative history of the Picts by adding to the population of this main continent another group of unidentified blond savages on a slightly higher evolutionary level than the Neanderthal, who escaped the aftermath of the sinking of Atlantis by moving into the northern part of the main continent. These savages fought snow-apes, who themselves turned thousands of years later into a new race. In the south, the Picts and Atlanteans fought centuries long wars against each other. The result of this conflict was that both races were thrown back on their evolutionary level. The Lemurians in the east eventually developed a semi-civilization.

Ten thousand years after the sinking of Atlantis, the blond savages in the north had become the Hyperboreans, who migrated southwards and dominated the western part of the continent. Not aware of the existence of the descendants of the Atlanteans, they encountered the Picts and drove them to the western part of the continent. In the south, the Lemurians had by then established a new kingdom called Stygia (a proto-Egypt).

Another five thousand years later, the Hyperboreans ruled over the continent and several new kingdoms and people had emerged: Aquilonia, the most powerful kingdom, Nemediia, Brythunia, Hyperborea, and Koth. Howard hints at the existence of more kingdoms in this draft but does not give any further details or names. All these kingdoms and their people descended from the Hyperboreans, except for the two kingdoms of Zingara and Zamora, located in the east and southwest, whose origins were different (although Howard does not elaborate on this). In the southeast, the people of Shem rose up against the Stygians and founded their own kingdom.

By this time the Picts had risen to a state of being savages in the meaning of being unorganized and uncivilized tribes/people that are one evolutionary level below barbarians. In the north, the Cimmerians, descendants of the Atlanteans, have

emerged. The descendants of the snow-apes that were driven farther north by the ancestors of the Hyperboreans have developed into the tribes of the Vanir and Aesir, living in a country named Nordheim. In the east, other descendants of the Lemurians had turned into a race of horse warriors called Hyrkanians.

The following five thousand years led to the beginning of the known history of mankind: Hyrkanians coming from the east and Picts and other peoples invading from the north destroyed the Hyperborean kingdoms. By the end of this time, the Cimmerians had evolved into the Celts settling in an area that is nowadays the Mediterranean Sea. The Nemedians settled in what would become Ireland, and the Brythunians turned into the Britons. At this point Draft A ends.

In my eyes, the content of Draft A distinctly indicates that Howard did not intend to create the world of Conan based on a fictive geography. This was Howard's approach in the originally submitted version of "The Phoenix on the Sword," in which Conan's world was introduced by pointing out the locations of the various lands during Conan's reign. Draft A utterly changed this approach. In Draft A, Howard's secondary world-building is based on the features of 'history' or 'time' as the draft's content clearly shows that at this point Howard's secondary world-building is mainly concerned with the depiction of the evolution of races and people over the run of unimaginable time spans.

Howard's eye for detail in the depiction of the evolution of the various races and people of his secondary world elevates his vision above being a simple mentioning of the passing of thousands of years or the name-dropping of mystic sounding names of imaginary kingdoms. The races and people of Howard's antediluvian, pre-prehistoric world do not simply show up out of nowhere and populate the world. Howard documents the evolution of each of these races and people, hereby managing to depict within the short outline of two pages complex evolutionary cycles in which formerly glorious races were thrown down the evolutionary ladder onto the level of becoming ape-men, while other races went the opposite way of evolution, turning from apes into savages and then into barbarians

who become civilizations.

In the following revisions, Howard added more details to this framework.

(b) Draft B

Draft B extended the original two page outline to seven pages. Draft B begins again in the age before the sinking of Atlantis and adds three more kingdoms (Grondar, Thule, and Commoria) to the pre-Atlantean age. Furthermore, the draft hints at the existence of more kingdoms of “an older race” (“The Hyborian Age: Draft B” 5).

A more notable addition to Draft B that I would like to point out is the new version of the history of the Lemurians after the cataclysm that caused the sinking of Atlantis. In Draft A, the surviving Lemurians escaped to the eastern hemisphere of the world and continued to live there. Draft B added drama to the fate of the Lemurian survivors as Howard turned the Lemurians into the slaves of an unspecified older race for the next 5000 years. Howard kept this history of the enslavement of the Lemurians in the following drafts. Strangely though, in spite of the commercially exploitable possibilities this new background story offered in drama, it remained undeveloped and neither added nor contributed to the history Howard created. This history of the Lemurians’ enslavement is of interest, as its introduction marks the point from which Howard began to infuse detail and individual drama into his by then still broadly written fictive history.

The Lemurians’ history was not the only detail that Howard included into this Draft B. He also introduced the race of the Hyborians and a meticulous description of their rise to dominating the world together with a depiction of the development of the kingdoms and nations of this age.

Another new feature of Draft B is a section with close physical descriptions of the different races of the age after the Hyborian kingdoms have been established. Following this description of the people living during the Hyborian Age, Howard then outlined the invasions of the Picts that led to the fall of this age.

I am regarding it also as noteworthy that in Draft B, Howard began to link his fictive history with the known history of mankind. Howard's fictive age ends with a cataclysm that changes the geography of this pre-prehistoric world—a proto-European landmass—into the geographic shape of the world the reader is familiar with. The essay closes with Howard establishing a connection between this fictive age and the world of the reader. He achieved this by listing which people of the Hyborian Age were the ancestors of the people in the reader's world. Here it is revealed that the Celts are the descendants of the Cimmerians.

(c) Draft C

Draft C adds further details and extends the essay to a length of twelve pages with the first page missing. Editor Rob Roehm assumes that the first page of Draft B is identical with the missing first page of Draft C, but does not give any reason or evidence for his assumption (“The Hyborian Age: Draft B” 7).

The most notable feature of this Draft C is that Howard gives away much more information about the key events of the history of the era that became the Hyborian Age. In Draft C, the origin of the Hyborian kingdoms and their dominance of the age to come are explained in more detail. I regard it as interesting to see that Howard—whom critics such as Alpers accuse of promoting violence and fascism—did not base the dominance of the Hyborians on superior military strength in the first place, but on their discovery of architecture. The Hyborians' dominance began with them leaving their caves and tents, and learning how to build simple stone structures. The crude stone houses turned slowly into fortresses, which only later became the key to military supremacy over other people and races.

I would also like to point out that in Draft C, Howard continues to take steps to establish a literary universe which loosely connects his stories. At the end of Draft B, the Cimmerians were revealed to be the ancestors of the Celts. Howard had, in this way, established a link to the modern world of the reader. In Draft C, Howard traces the ancestry of the Cimmerians back in time, into the era before the sinking of

Atlantis, and made the Cimmerians the descendants of the Atlanteans. With this step, Howard turned Conan into a descendant of Kull of Valusia (“The Hyborian Age: Draft C” 24). This connection is an ironic development if one considers the fact that the first Conan story was a rewritten Kull story and Kull was already the literary ancestor of the character of Conan of Cimmeria.<sup>4</sup>

Draft C also adds extensive information about the end of the Hyborian Age. Howard introduces the names of key persons who were involved in causing the downfall of the Hyborian Age. The mentioning of these individuals as especially striking as up to this point, the Hyborian Age was devoid of the names of any individual persons. In fact, it focused on groups such as races and people rather than on individuals. As I already pointed out, the name of Conan of Cimmeria is not mentioned in all these drafts, although the essay was written as the background for the Conan series.

With the description of the fall of the Hyborian Age, Howard forms again a connection with his alternative history of the Picts, as the Picts are the key figures in the fall of this age: the era before the end of the Hyborian Age and its civilized nations was full of wars among these nations. During this period the Nemedian priest Arrus tried to convert the Picts, who in their isolation had grown in power and population. Arrus’ attempt to convert the Picts failed. The Pictish leader Grom united the scattered tribes of the Picts and used Arrus’ knowledge to acquire the superior technologies of the civilized nations. Having gained sufficient knowledge and built up military power, the Picts defeated Aquilonia and the western nations. With this the western world became Pictish, a barbarian empire, whose only threat were the descendants of the Hyrkanians from the east and the Cimmerians in the north.

The rest of the essay is once again dedicated to describing how the post-Hyborian age morphed into the known world history. It also features a more detailed depiction of which Hyborian Age people were the ancestors of the people of our world, extending the list given in Draft B. With this Draft C, Howard had successfully linked his imaginary pre-historic age with the known history of the

world.

(d) The Final Draft

This final draft is the most polished version, in which Howard improved the essay's style from formerly having been a rough outline suited for personal use into a more prosaic and publishable form. The essay's content remained the same as in the previous Draft C, although with the stylistic changes came also more details in the depiction of the various races and people. This final draft version also features, for the first time, the title "The Hyborian Age."

The final draft has an introduction added, in which Howard clarifies that "The Hyborian Age" is not "to be considered as an attempt to advance any theory in opposition to accepted history" ("Hyborian Age" 41), and that the essay is "simply a fictional background for a series of fiction-stories." Howard also points out that he wrote the essay with the intention of giving Conan and his stories "a greater aspect of realness" ("Hyborian Age" 41). I have shown in the previous chapter about Howard's historical fiction how important this aspect of 'realness'—or realism—in his stories had become for Howard. The introduction to "The Hyborian Age" proves that Howard continued to keep this aspect of realism, be it for his fantastic stories or the essay that described this fictive age and history.

The impact of Howard's experience of writing historical short stories becomes even more apparent when he states in the introduction: "in writing about him [Conan] and his adventures, I have never violated the 'history' here set down, but have followed the lines of it as closely as the historical-fiction writer follows the lines of actual history" ("The Hyborian Age: Final Draft" 41). In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated that the period in which Howard wrote historical fiction had a great influence on his literary work and growth as a writer. The above statement clearly supports my claim that during the phase of writing historical fiction Howard had understood and learned the importance of sticking to facts. Although he was writing a pseudo-history, a history of whose facts he was fully in charge of,

Howard decided to approach the pseudo-history he created in the same way as writing historical fiction, and wrote with “The Hyborian Age” an essay in which he put up the frame of his very own history. Howard’s statement, together with the fact that he created his fictive Hyborian Age with an essay that went through four significant revisions, also proves my claim that Howard’s creation of his pseudo-history was a conscious process of considering and arranging fictive facts in such a manner that they became convincingly plausible to the author and the reader.

#### 4. From Mythology to a Multi-Ethnic Pseudo-History

##### (a) Howard’s Naming Process to Evoke Mythological Times

I would like to stress the fact that Howard writing four drafts of significantly differing lengths of “The Hyborian Age” when he created the fictional background for his Conan of Cimmeria series, proves my claim that Howard was not the sloppy creator of fantastic worlds which critics portray him as, like Lin Carter in *Imaginary Worlds* (194-95).

In my eyes, the complexity of “The Hyborian Age” is often overlooked as the criticism of H. P. Lovecraft, who was an admirer of Howard’s work, confirms. Although Lovecraft praised Howard for having “the most magnificent sense of the drama of ‘History’ of anyone I know” (*Hyborian Age Facsimile Edition* n. pag.), he also had strong reservations about Howard’s secondary world-building. When Lovecraft passed the manuscript of “The Hyborian Age” to Donald A. Wollheim for possible publication in Wollheim’s fanzine *The Phantagraph*, Lovecraft wrote in the letter sent together with the manuscript:

The only flaw in this stuff [“The Hyborian Age” essay] is R. E. H.’s incurable tendency (sic) to devise names too closely resembling names of ancient history—names which for us, have a very different set of associations. In many cases he does this designedly—on the theory that the familiar names descend from the fabulous realms he describes. . . .



The only thing to do is to accept the nomenclature as he gives it, wink at the weak spots, and be damned thankful that we can get such vivid artificial legendry.” (*Hyborian Age Facsimile Edition* n. pag.)

Lovecraft’s naming of Howard’s kind of secondary world-building as artificial legendry is a well thought term, which Lovecraft may have based on a remark in Howard’s April, 1932, letter in which Howard described his concept of the fictive Hyborian Age as a time “which men have forgotten, but which remains in classical names, and distorted myths” (*A Means to Freedom* 279). Although Lovecraft’s term for Howard’s secondary world-building is, in my view, correct, I regard it, nonetheless, as lacking in precision as it only covers one aspect of Howard’s creation: mythology.

As can be gathered from Howard’s letter to Lovecraft, he did indeed originally conceive the Hyborian Age as an age in which the myths and legends of modern man were alive and existing. The Conan of Cimmeria stories, as well as the racial memory stories about James Allison, a man who can remember his previous lives are featuring creatures that have become the origin of modern myths and legends. In the James Allison story “The Valley of the Worm,” set in the aftermath of the cataclysm that ended the Hyborian Age, the narrator establishes a connection between the creature which gave the story its title and the legends of dragons:

I will tell you of Niord and the Worm. You have heard the tale before in many guises wherein the hero was named Tyr, or Perseus, or Siegfried, or Beowulf, or Saint George. But it was Niord who met the loathly thing that crawled hideously up from hell, and from which meeting sprang the cycle of hero-tales that revolves down from ages until the very substance of the truth is lost and passes into the limbo of all forgotten legends. I know whereof I speak, for I was Niord. (“The Valley of the Worm” 15)

I would like to point out that Howard’s original approach of conceiving the Hyborian Age as an age of living mythology is apparent in some of the names Howard used in a list that he had put together in March, 1932, as part of his work on

“The Hyborian Age.” To give just one example, country names such as Asgard or Vanaheim, whose people are the Aesir with names like Heimdall, were obviously taken directly from Norse mythology (“Hyborian Names and Countries” 417-19).

When Howard worked on creating his age of mythology, he used an apt source for naming the lands and people of his Hyborian Age. This source has been identified by Patrice Louinet as Thomas Bulfinch’s *The Outline of Mythology* (1867).

*The Outline of Mythology* collects three books by Thomas Bulfinch (1796-1867) which are prose retellings of classical myths and heroic tales. Louinet lists several names found in Howard’s essay and Conan stories that appear to have been taken directly from Bulfinch’s work. There is Hyperborea, a land that Bulfinch as well as Howard placed in the northern part of the world. Moreover, on Howard’s list are the names Stygia and Brythunia that together with the Picts also receive mentioning in Bulfinch’s work. In some cases, Howard slightly changed the spelling of certain names from Bulfinch’s version. Therefore, Bulfinch’s Hyrcania became in Howard’s “The Hyborian Age” the land of Hyrkania.

In other cases, names found in Howard’s work were obviously taken from Bulfinch but significantly changed. Louinet gives two such examples, the origin of Conan’s kingdom of Aquilonia and Howard’s creation of the name Hyborea/Hyboria. Quoting from Bulfinch, Louinet writes: “when so many less agencies were personified, it is not to be supposed that the winds failed to be so. They were Boreas or Aquilo, the north wind” (“Hyborian Genesis” 437). Louinet then explains that “since ‘Hy’ is Irish for ‘country of,’ and given Howard’s interest in things Celtic, Hyboria would thus be ‘the country of Borea’ or ‘the country of the north wind’” (437).

Howard’s naming process for his fictive age did not sit well with H. P. Lovecraft, whose own work focused on the experience of an indescribable terror of such extent that it could not be grasped by the human mind, and that those experiencing such terror ended up mad. In order to reach this effect in a plausible

manner, Lovecraft intentionally kept the description of those terror causing creatures and entities from other cosmic dimensions as vague as possible. When Lovecraft referred to them, he gave them as strange and alien sounding names as possible such as Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, or Yog-Sothoth, reasoning that, for the human anatomy, the correct pronunciation of these names was impossible.

Lovecraft clearly understood Howard's intention of trying to wake associations with lost mythologies with the familiar sounding names he chose for the people and nations of his Hyborian Age. Nonetheless, as Lovecraft's own position on writing fantastic fiction demanded utter strangeness and unfamiliarity as essential to fantastic fiction, Lovecraft could not help but disapprove of Howard's technique. What Lovecraft apparently had not fully realized was that Howard did not have another way to name the nations, races, and people of his Hyborian Age. The Hyborian Age was not an age and a place in another mystic, cosmic dimension. It was set in the vast antediluvian past of this Earth. Had Howard followed Lovecraft's line of thinking and used Lovecraftian, alien names such as Cthulhu, then he would not have been able to successfully associate his Hyborian Age with the past mythology of the world.

In *Imaginary Worlds*, Lin Carter picks up Lovecraft's criticism and uses it to attack Howard as being not competent enough to invent his own names—a claim that I regard as utterly wrong. Howard was very much capable to create names for the characters and locations of his fantastic stories. The names of some of the kingdoms of the time before the sinking of Atlantis, such as Valusia perfectly prove this. However, in order to describe in the most efficient way an age in which the legends and myths of modern man had indeed existed, Howard needed vaguely familiar sounding names.

#### (b) Anthropology and Multi-Ethnicity in Howard's "The Hyborian Age"

A central point of Howard's "The Hyborian Age" is the evolution of races and people, and Jeffrey Shanks argues in his essay "Hyborian Age Archaeology:

Unearthing Historical and Anthropological Foundations” that Howard’s secondary world-building is based on anthropology. I regard Shanks’ claim as valid, especially as Howard’s depiction of the races of this age and the dynamism of their evolution is one of the strong points of “The Hyborian Age.” Howard clearly understood the fact that mankind was steadily evolving over the centuries and millennia, and in Draft B of “The Hyborian Age” he described such changes.

Look a moment at the peoples of that age; the dominant Hyborians are no longer a pure race, tawny-haired and grey eyed. They have mixed with the conquered peoples and to a certain extent with other races.

There is a strong Shemitish, even a Stygian strain, among the people of Koth. The eastern Brythunians have intermarried with the dark skinned Zamorians, and the people of southern Aquilonia have mixed with the brown Zingarans until black hair and brown eyes are the dominant type in Poitain. The ancient kingdom of Hyperborea is more aloof than any of the others, yet there is alien blood in its veins, from the capture of alien women. . . . (“The Hyborian Age: Draft B” 11)

The section above clearly expresses the dynamism of evolution and the development of the people of Howard’s Hyborian Age. Evolution never stops in Howard’s secondary world. I would like to point out that this is a sharp contrast to many fantastic worlds depicted in modern popular fantasy series. In George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Fire and Ice* series, for example, the medieval society does not even slightly evolve over the passing of hundreds, if not thousands of years. The knights in Martin’s secondary world of Westeros are virtually stuck in an eternal, static medieval age.

I am arguing that evolution and the mixing of the people and races of the Hyborian Age make Howard’s secondary world not just dynamic in comparison with the static world of Martin’s Westeros. In fact, I am claiming that evolution turns Howard’s secondary world of the Hyborian Age into a multicultural and multi-ethnic one, which makes Howard’s secondary world building very unique. The world of the

Hyborian Age is not populated exclusively by Caucasians. Besides Caucasians of different complexion, the Hyborian Age also featured Asians in the form of the Hyrkanians. The country of Shem was populated by Semitic people, and Howard mentions that “to the south of Stygia are the vast black kingdoms” (“The Hyborian Age: Draft B” 12).

I am regarding this mentioning of black kingdoms as quite remarkable in several ways. A look at the secondary worlds featured in fantastic literature of the 20th century, from J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth to bestselling series like Robert Jordan’s *Wheel of Time*, shows that many fantasy worlds are void of people from other ethnicities than Caucasians.

I would like to point out Howard’s mentioning of dark-skinned people (and in this context his depiction of the multi-ethnicity of his Hyborian Age) as especially interesting, as Howard has faced criticism of being a racist. This criticism is not unjustified when it comes to controversial Howard stories such as “Black Canaan,” in which Howard plays with the pre-Civil War fears of a slave owning society whose slaves may rebel. I also agree that Howard’s depiction of African Americans in many of his stories, especially some of the Conan stories, as lesser developed beings that appear to be more like apes than human beings is indeed a very problematic aspect of his work. The racism found in Howard’s stories, though, was in the U.S.A. of the early 20th century socially accepted. Howard’s native state of Texas, especially rural Texas, was no exception to this. On this background, especially by 21st century standards, Howard certainly qualifies as a racist: his letters to friends and the openly xenophobic Lovecraft contain passages in which Howard used racial slurs when referring to Mexicans or African Americans. The fact that Howard was also writing for the pulp fiction market, where authors used racist stereotypes in their stories to depict non-Caucasians, did not help either. Traces of such racist descriptions based on popular prejudices can also be found in Draft B of “The Hyborian Age” when the people of Shem, a proto-Jewish race, are depicted as having “hook noses” (“The Hyborian Age: Draft B” 14).

Contrary to this evidence of racism in Howard's work, I am arguing that "The Hyborian Age" drafts also allow the observation that Howard's kind of racism was not on the level displayed by Lovecraft in his letters or his story "The Horror at Red Hook." Howard's kind of racism was also not of the violence promoting nature of white supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan. Proof of this can again be found in "The Hyborian Age." I am arguing that had Howard indeed fostered a deep, racist aversion towards African Americans, then he could have simply ignored their existence in his pseudo-history and kept his Hyborian Age strictly Caucasian. Or, just for the sake of pointing out another extreme option, Howard could have added racist descriptions of ape-like black tribes in his essay.

He did not take this option, but in fact included black kingdoms in the world of his fictive age. Here Howard displayed a more profound view of people with a dark complexion. In 1936, he discussed in a letter to two fans the people of the proto-Africa of the Hyborian Age. A map that Howard had drawn in 1932, depicts the Hyborian kingdoms overlaid on a map of Europe with the map's most southern part covering the coasts of North Africa where he had jotted down a short note "to Kush" (Map of the Hyborian Age 364-65). Howard wrote to P. Schuyler Miller about this black kingdom:

Concerning Kush, however, it is one of the black kingdoms south of Stygia, the northern-most, in fact, and has given its name to the whole southern coast. Thus, when an Hyborian speaks of Kush, he is generally speaking of not the kingdom itself, one of many such kingdoms, but of the Black Coast in general. And he is likely to speak of any black man as Kushite, whether it happens to be a Keshani, Darfari, Puntan, or Kushite proper. This is natural, since the Kushites were the first black men with whom the Hyborians came into contact—Barachan pirates trafficking with and raiding them. (*The Conquering Sword of Conan* 359)

The tribes mentioned in this letter do not appear in any of the draft versions of "The Hyborian Age," which I would argue allows the conclusion that Howard had

added them at a later point in time after he had finished working on the essay's final form. This passage demonstrates that Howard had a more differentiated view of African people that has not been noticed by now: when he writes about the variety of these black kingdoms south of Stygia, he not only displays his own differentiated view on people of darker complexion. I am claiming that in this passage Howard actually reveals a Hyborian Age racism as the Hyborians refer to any black man, whatever his origins are, as Kushite.

Returning again to Jeffrey Shanks' claim that Howard's secondary world-building was based on anthropology. Although I agree that "The Hyborian Age" shows indeed a strong focus on the evolution of races and people, I consider basing Howard's secondary world-building process exclusively on anthropology as to be too limited to correctly describe Howard's vision and creative process.

In my argument, from a terminological point, anthropology comprises the evolution of races that exist or had existed. Here I would like to stress that Howard's world of the Hyborian Age is also populated by fictive races that never existed. I think that anthropology does not cover the study of such fictive races, which, in my view, makes using the term anthropological secondary world-building not practical.

Furthermore, even in the case that if one were to accept that anthropology could very well include the study of fictive races and people, I am arguing that anthropology covers only one aspect of Howard's pseudo-history and secondary world-building. To illustrate my point, I would like to point out that Howard's "The Hyborian Age" also chronicles the rise and fall of kingdoms. Moreover, the essay also includes criticism of the damaging influence of civilization by depicting a cycle according to which savages develop to barbarians who become civilized. Civilization weakens formerly strong people, turns them decadent, and leads to their fall by being defeated by young barbarian races.

All of these aspects, anthropology, the rise and fall of empires, the cycle from savagery to civilization and back, are, in my eyes, better described under the term of history, which encompasses all of them. As Howard's Hyborian Age is a fictive

history, consequently the better term to describe Howard's secondary world-building process appears to be world-building based on pseudo-history. What makes, in my view, Howard's secondary world-building especially important is the fact that it was done for the first time in the field of fantastic literature, a point that I will be discussing in the following chapter.

## 5. Conclusion

I have demonstrated that the origin of Howard's "The Hyborian Age" lay in his intention to create a setting in form of a fictive age for a series featuring Howard's Conan of Cimmeria. This fictive age was based on mythology, as Howard intended it to be a time in which modern man's myths were alive. I have shown that in the process of creating this age, Howard distanced himself from this approach and focused more on the aspects such as anthropology, the rise and fall of empires, the cycle from savagery to civilization and back. Moreover, I pointed out that Howard also included into this mix his alternative history of the Picts, which pushed the aspect of mythology even further into the background. The result was the creation of a fully fictive history. With this Howard had become the creator of what I have called a pseudo-history.

Considering the complexity of the content of "The Hyborian Age," I regard it as astonishing to see that this essay was never fully published during Howard's lifetime. At this point it is not clear whether Howard ever had the intention to publish this essay as he never submitted it to *Weird Tales* or other professional magazines. The essay was first published in the 1936 February edition of the fanzine *The Phantagraph*, nearly four years after Howard had written it in March, 1932. *The Phantagraph* split up the essay in four parts but suspended its publication before the issue that featured the final segment of "The Hyborian Age." It was only two years after Howard's death, in 1938, that the full essay was first published, once again in another fan produced publication (LANY Cooperative Publications).



## Chapter V: Howard's Pseudo-History in the Context of Secondary World-Building in Fantastic Literature

### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapters I have described and analyzed how Robert E. Howard created his own depictions of history: as a first step he developed an alternative history for the Picts, for whom Howard felt a fascination. He then went through a period in which he wrote historical short stories, most of which were set in medieval times, during the Crusades. Following this working phase Howard then developed this own fictive age, the pre-prehistoric Hyborian Age, which he intended to be the setting of his Conan of Cimmeria series. What started out as a mapping of the geography for the world of Howard's barbarian adventurer Conan, turned into the creation of a pseudo-history, a fully fictive version of history.

I have also verified in this previous chapter my claim that the pseudo-history which Howard had created, was not a case of Howard letting his imagination run loose by randomly combining various cultures and different historical periods to one wild mix. I have shown that, Howard's approach was a decisive, controlled, creative process based on facts and data he had collected before he began the writing process.

Having thus demonstrated Howard's achievement as a creator of a secondary world based on history, I will now focus in this chapter on Howard's general pioneering role in the field of fantastic fiction. My claim is that such a pseudo-history of a fantastic age as Howard had composed it with "The Hyborian Age" had never been done before. I would like to substantiate my statement of the uniqueness of Howard's creation of a pseudo-history by putting "The Hyborian Age" essay into the context of the work of contemporary and previous writers whose secondary world-building also contains aspects of time and history.

## 2. William Morris' Fictive Medieval Setting

Richard Mathews in his study *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* regards 19th century author William Morris as one of the “the pioneers of fantasy as a modern literary genre” (16). In works such as *The Wood Beyond the World* and *The Well at the World's End*, Morris established the basic elements that became an integral part of the fantasy genre; these elements have since been extensively copied by other fantasy writers. He introduced an archaic, artificial diction and syntax that evoked an atmosphere of a long-gone era. Moreover, he also established the motif of the quest as the central plot point in his novels, which was also taken up by other fantasy writers and so became a standard component of the fantasy genre.

One more element that Morris introduced is the one I would like to focus on in this chapter. This element is the setting of an unspecified pseudo-medieval epoch without modern technology, in a fictive environment reminiscent of the lands found in fairy tales. In *The Well at the World's End* such a medieval fantasyland is introduced as:

Long ago there was a little land over which ruled a regulus or kinglet, who was called King Peter, although his kingdom was but little. . . .

[There] was no great merchant city; nor no mighty castle, or noble abbey of monks: naught but fair little halls of yeomen, with here and there a franklin's court or a shield-knight's manor house; with many goodly church, and whiles a house of good canons, who knew not the way to Rome, nor how to find the Chancellor's house. (64)

Like in a fairytale, Morris is very vague about the exact location of this kingdom. The mentioning of “the way to Rome” (64) is the only hint that the kingdom described might have been real, existing in the past history of the reader's world. It becomes soon obvious, though, that Morris' fantastic kingdom is more than just a vague geographic location.

Morris' biography reveals that besides being a writer, designer, and translator, he was also a social activist. Indeed, Morris' medieval secondary world can also be

understood as a platform for his social criticism that according to Mathews expressed “radical, secular, idealist values (Marxist values)” (16). In my opinion, the correctness of Mathews’ assessment becomes evident in passages such as the following one taken from *The Well Beyond the Woods*. Morris writes that beyond the northern border of King Peter’s little kingdom “the lord on the other side thereof was a mightier man than King Peter, albeit he was a bishop, and a baron of Holy Church. To say sooth, he was a close-fist and a manslayer; though he did his manslaying through his vicars, the knights and men-at-arms who held their manors of him . . .” (65). Even in Morris’ fantastic, fairytale-like medieval lands, organized religion is corrupt and its high-ranking representatives betray the Church’s principles for the sake of secular wealth and personal profit.

Furthermore, in Chapter 27 “Clement Tells of Goldberg” Morris describes the population of a castle in a way that leaves no doubt that he had the plight of British factory workers during the Industrial Revolution in the back of his mind when writing:

. . . but there were many poor folk there, and few wealthy.

Again said Clement that though the tillers and toilers of Goldberg were not for the most part mere thralls and chattels, . . . yet were they little more thriving for that cause; whereas they belonged to no master, who must at worst feed them, and to no manor, whose acres they might till for their livelihood, and on whose pastures they might feed their cattle; . . . so that they toiled and swinked and died with no one heeding them, save that they had the work of their hands good cheap; . . . whereas these poor wretches were slaves without a price, and if one died another took his place on the chance that thereby he might escape present death by hunger, for there was a great many of them. (Morris 164)

This explicit criticism of organized religion and capitalism illustrates Morris’ by-the-book Marxist views. One accusation leveled at fantasy is that it is escapist literature. Such literature takes the reader out of his own problematic and unpleasant

world and transports him into an alternative world where life is easier and uncomplicated. The passages I have given above clearly show that the accusation of escapism is not valid, considering the medieval setting in Morris' work.

These passages reveal a strong parallel between Morris, who uses his secondary medieval world to express his political views, and Robert E. Howard, who had a similar approach of criticizing civilization in the setting of his Hyborian Age. I would like to clearly point out that Howard was neither a Marxist nor supporter of Marxist views. Nonetheless his work contains a strong and highly critical stance of civilization that can indeed be misunderstood as Marxist. In Howard's case, the barbarian adventurer Conan was the mouthpiece for his criticism of the faults, flaws, and hypocrisy of civilization. I find this to be especially obvious in the story "Queen of the Black Coast" when Conan, whose simplistic worldview is based on the moral codex of his barbarism and not the mechanisms of civilized law, criticizes the corrupt laws of civilized society:

"By Crom, though I've spent considerable time among you civilized peoples, your ways are still beyond my comprehension.

Well, last night in a tavern, a captain in the king's guard offered violence to the sweetheart of a young soldier, who naturally ran him through. But it seems there is some cursed law against killing guardsmen, and the boy and his girl fled away. It was bruited about that I was seen with them, and so today I was haled into court, and the judge asked me where the lad had gone. I replied that since he was a friend of mine, I could not betray him. Then the court waxed wroth, and the judge talked a great deal about my duty to the state, and society, and other things I did not understand, and bade me tell where my friend had flown. By this time I was becoming wrathful myself, for I had explained my position.

'But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all

mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge's skull.' (123)

Conan, in a childlike, nearly innocent, way cannot understand that the law of civilization is not equal to justice in the way he, the barbarian, perceives it. That he consequently kills the judge in a courthouse, the epicenter of the corrupt laws of civilization, adds to the scene's irony. Howard's criticism leveled at the problems civilization and Morris' addressing of topical social issues illustrates in my eyes, an interesting similarity between both writers' secondary world building.

A significant difference between Howard and Morris becomes obvious when looking closely at how history is depicted in their works. Morris' fictive medieval kingdom lacks the extensive historical background that Howard provides for Conan's world with the pseudo-history he wrote in his "The Hyborian Age" essay. My argumentation clearly shows the varying degrees of plausibility of Howard's and Morris' secondary world locations. Morris sets up King Peter's kingdom in *The Well Beyond the World's End* in a matter-of-fact way that is reminiscent of how fairytales establish their locations; there is no explicit mentioning of a date, a year, or an important event that hints to which epoch the story takes place. A reference to the city of Rome insinuates that King Peter's kingdom may be set in the past. With this reference Morris establishes with his audience a rudimentary credibility for his story, as a real existing location has a stronger ring of truth than an obviously purely fictive one. Besides the mention of Rome, Morris does not reveal any further locations the reader may recognize; Morris stays intentionally vague when further describing his world and the time period it is set in.

Howard's approach to secondary world building makes his secondary world more credible; I have previously demonstrated that all of Howard's fantasy locations of his Hyborian Age, such as the obviously fictive kingdoms Valusia and Aquilonia, have been plausibly established via the pseudo-history of "The Hyborian Age" and the alternative history of the Picts. Both Howard's alternative history of the Picts and his pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age have been meticulously created and connected with the reader's history so that they appear accurate. Morris' world was

built on the assumption that the audience would believe in his secondary world. Howard on the other hand had created the illusion of a pseudo-history for his secondary world, which provides the reader with historical data and facts that establish a plausibility in the existence of Howard's secondary world. In my opinion, Howard's approach makes it hereby easier for readers to suspend their disbelief and accept not only the possible existence of fantastical locations such as the aforementioned kingdoms of Valusia and Aquilonia but also the existence of the fictive Hyborian Age itself.

My argument that Howard's world building via the creation of his pseudo-history makes his secondary world more believable for readers than Morris' setting of an artificial medieval age also supports my claim that Howard was the pioneer of such a pseudo-history. I do not intend to belittle Morris' achievement and his impact on the fantasy genre. As Mathews writes, Morris himself was a pioneer who significantly contributed to the creation of this genre, and his impact can be clearly seen in how much fantasy has embraced the ideas and concepts he has introduced. Furthermore, later writers whose own work further formed and defined the genre admitted to Morris' influence. J. R. R. Tolkien, for example, wrote that some of the landscapes of *The Lord of the Rings* "owe more to William Morris and his Huns and Romans, as in *House of the Wolfing* or *The Roots of the Mountains*" (*The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 303), or that "I [Tolkien] am trying to turn one of the stories . . . into a short story somewhat on the lines of Morris' romances . . ." (*The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 7). While Morris pioneered the creation of a secondary world in a fictive medieval age, Howard, with his fascination for time abysses and history, took the next step and created a fictive age set in a much deeper past.

### 3. "Static Time"

#### (a) Lost Worlds

Another popular approach that writers of fantasy use when depicting time or

history is what I would like to call static time. With this term I am referring to those stories in which time in a restricted geographical space has come to a standstill. Life and life forms inhabiting such a space fall under the influence of immovable time. Evolution in this space has either fully stopped or moves at a much slower pace than it moves in the outside world. The novels or stories, which fall into this static time category, feature supposedly lost civilizations or extinct animal species, unbeknownst to the outside world.

I have mentioned in the chapter about Howard's Atlantis that the world of the late 19th century was still uncharted. The inner regions of Africa remained even by the late 1870s unexplored as the European powers had established their influence only in the coastal regions of the continent. 19th century archaeology did not even remotely compare to the technological possibilities of today's archaeologists. Even the wildest theories, when presented with sufficient conviction, found support. Gary Lachman gives an example for this in connection with the Atlantis myth, writing "in 1882 an American congressman named Ignatius Donnelly had a bestseller with a book entitled *Atlantis, the Antediluvian World*. So convincing was Donnelly's account that Gladstone, the prime minister of England, sought funds from Parliament for an expedition to discover its remains" (*Turn Off Your Mind* 362).

Much earlier, by the end of the eighteenth century, the world had begun to become aware of the fact that there were hidden remnants of an ancient and forgotten past waiting to be uncovered. In 1748 the Spanish engineer Rocque Joaquin de Alcubierre excavated the city of Pompeii. Then, in the late nineteenth century there followed many more discoveries that drew the world's attention and proved the existence of ancient civilizations. Champollion deciphered the Rosetta Stone, Botta excavated the city Nineveh in what is now Iraq, and Heinrich Schliemann found the city of Troy. These developments eventually found their way into fantasy in form of H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), the adventure novel that became the origin of the lost world genre.

The lost world genre is a subgenre of fantastic fiction in which age-old

civilizations that should be non-existent have continued to live unnoticed by the outside world as if time stood still. An example of such a lost civilization is the Roman legionnaires of the ancient Roman Empire who are discovered in the heart of Africa by E. R. Burroughs' jungle hero Tarzan in *Tarzan and the Lost Empire* (1928).

In *Imaginary Worlds-The Art of Fantasy*, Lin Carter formulates the relation between archaeological discoveries and Haggard's bestseller *King Solomon's Mines* by claiming that "Haggard cleverly realized that the only thing more sensational than the discovery of a dead, ruined city of the ancient past would be the discovery of a *living city*, still inhabited by the descendants of the lost civilization that had established it before" (51). Carter's explanation of Haggard's inspiration amounts, in my eyes, to pure speculating, as Carter does not offer any sources that support his explanation behind the origin of *King Solomon's Mines*, neither by Haggard or reliable sources. It is a fact that Haggard was very familiar with Africa, as he was living in South Africa from 1875 to 1882, where he even became a part of the history of this nation: Haggard was the person who in Pretoria on April 12, 1877, read the official proclamation of the British occupation of the Boer republic of Transvaal and then raised the Union flag to confirm Britain's takeover. It is equally possible to assume, just like Lin Carter did on his side, that Haggard during his time spent in Africa had heard stories and rumors about lost civilizations living in yet unexplored corners of the African continent and that such information became the base for *King Solomon's Mines*.

Haggard's debut novel *King Solomon's Mines* became a highly influential work that inspired other writers to produce stories in the same vein. In 1912 Arthur Conan Doyle wrote *The Lost World*, adding a new spin on the genre by substituting lost civilizations with extinct species. In Doyle's novel a group of adventurers discovers a plateau in South America where they encounter dinosaurs.

The American pulp fiction market of the early 20th century also picked up this bestselling formula of lost civilizations and extinct species. From 1912 onwards,



Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950) let his most famous literary creation, the Lord Greystoke, better known as Tarzan, discover in the African jungles lost civilizations, ranging from Atlantean and Roman colonies to cities inhabited by Amazons and Crusaders. Moreover, in 1918, Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote the *Caspak* trilogy consisting of the novels *The Land That Time Forgot*, *The People That Time Forgot*, and *Out of Time's Abyss*.<sup>1</sup> Burroughs took Doyle's concept for this series and transferred it to the hidden island of Caspak, which is surrounded by seemingly impenetrable cliffs and is the home to dinosaurs, Stone Age people and humanoid winged creatures.

Robert E. Howard was familiar with the works of E. R. Burroughs, H. R. Haggard, and A. C. Doyle. He mentioned H. R. Haggard as one of his "favorite writers" (*A Means to Freedom* 510) in a letter to H. P. Lovecraft in December, 1932. Moreover, a list of books in Howard's collection shows that Howard owned at least twelve books written by Burroughs (*The Robert E. Howard Bookshelf* 17). Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* was also part of Howard's collection. As Howard was not shy to use plots and tropes of writers he admired, it comes as no surprise that among the body of his works there are stories which qualify as lost world or static time stories in the tradition of Burroughs, Haggard, and Doyle. These are "The Moon of Skulls" (1929), "Swords of the Hills" (submitted to Howard's agent Otis Adelbert Kline in 1933), and "The Valley of the Lost" (1933).

I have explained Robert E. Howard's fascination for ancient times and illustrated how evolution was a crucial aspect of his alternative history of the Picts as well as the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age. In this context the concept of lost worlds obviously appealed to Howard, which is why such stories can so also be found in his work; although, static time is in fact the opposite of the steady evolution, which Howard used to depict in his works. In "The Moon of Skulls" the story's protagonist, 17th century adventurer Solomon Kane finds in the heart of Africa a colony of Atlantis. The aspect of the lost world or static time is only vaguely hinted at in "The Moon of Skulls" as the story's focus lies on the conflict between Solomon

Kane and the witch Nakari.

“Swords of the Hills” (1933) on the other hand is a full-fledged lost world story. The story is part of the El Borak series, which is set in early 20th century Afghanistan and features the Texas adventurer Francis Xavier Gordon, who among the hill tribes is known as El Borak. In “Swords of the Hills,” El Borak discovers in a shut off valley the descendants of the army of Alexander the Great. The problem with “Swords of the Hills” is that Howard neither added new aspects to the lost world genre when he wrote it nor wrote remarkable, never before seen twists. Thus, it is not surprising that “Swords of the Hills” earned only rejections despite having been submitted to several magazines; it remained unpublished during Howard’s lifetime.

“The Valley of the Lost” (1933) is another lost world story, this time set in late 19th century Texas. It starts out as a conventional western story about a feud between two clans, but it then changes into a lost world story, in which a forgotten race is being discovered. I am arguing here that Howard added in “Valley of the Lost” several new aspects to the lost world genre. For one, Howard mixed the lost world genre with the western genre, which at this point had never been done before.<sup>2</sup> Also, Howard includes a twist concerning the inhabitants of the newly discovered lost world; these inhabitants were an unknown race from an uncharted time of American history. Considering that the lost world genre was featuring standard genre tropes such as Atlanteans, Roman legionnaires, Crusaders, Aztecs or Vikings, Howard’s race featured in “Valley of the Lost” was drastically different and added a novelty aspect to a genre that, by this time, had more or less explored all its possibilities of available lost worlds.

“Valley of the Lost” suffered the same fate as “Swords of the Hills” and never saw publication during Howard’s lifetime. In case of “Swords of the Hills,” magazines’ rejections are not surprising as the story’s plot was just too genre typical and had been done by other authors many times, long before Howard. On the other hand, I regard the fact that “Valley of the Lost” was also not accepted for publication

as unexpected. I have demonstrated above that “Valley of the Lost” brought enough new aspects to the lost world genre. In addition, the story featured Texas as its stage, adding an extra familiar flair for the American readers to relate to. Most important though, the lost world, or in this case the lost race, that Howard featured in this story was radically different from the familiar genre tropes. An explanation why Howard did not manage to sell the story may have been this drastic difference to the regular tropes of the genre. Obviously, the magazine editors never realized what Howard had achieved in this story and only saw an unfamiliar mix of western and horror elements.

(b) History Repeating Itself: E. R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros*

E. R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros*, published in 1922, is another example of what I have called static time. The book stands in the tradition of Morris’ work; its secondary world has the medieval setting of Morris’ novels. Although, in the case of *The Worm Ouroboros* this secondary world is not Earth but the planet Mercury. Moreover, the *The Worm Ouroboros* also features the archaic, artificial English Morris established in his work, but Eddison significantly enhances it. The novel begins with the visit of a delegation from Witchland to Demonland and results in a war between the forces of Demonland and Witchland that lasts for four years. In the course of this conflict, genre typical events such as dangerous quests and heroic fights between individual heroes, as well as armies, occur. In the end, Demonland defeats Witchland, and all the Witches are killed. This supposedly glorious victory of the Demons, though, turns out to be an unsatisfying experience. The victorious Demons realize that with the Witches they did not just defeat a strong and worthy enemy; they actually lost their only worthy opponents. Without such admirable opponents, Mercury has become a lonely world, and the heroic Demons’ lives have lost their meaning. The Demons’ dilemma is solved, though; a god hears the Demons’ prayers and causes the story to repeat itself from the moment the Witches’ delegation arrives at the court of the Demons. With this ending an ever-repeating cycle has been

established that will always involve the same conflicts and the same outcome before starting all over again. Although there is a continuing, even repetitive chain of events, time on Mercury has come to a standstill, as there is no exit out of this cycle of ever-repeating events.

E. R. Eddison and *The Worm Ouroboros* are never mentioned in any of the extant letters written between Howard and his friends, fellow writers, and fans, which allows the assumption that Howard had never read nor heard of it. Nonetheless, I do find that there is a similarity between a unique aspect of Howard's work and Eddison's novel. This aspect is Howard's view of history as an ever-repeating cycle of evolution, which is reminiscent of the scenario found in *The Worm Ouroboros*.

In Eddison's novel, history repeats itself over and over again in form of the never-ending clash between the Demons and Witches. In Howard's view, evolution is also such a repeating cycle, which is a point that I have already addressed in the chapter about the writing process for "The Hyborian Age." In this cycle, a race of people evolve from savages to barbarians and into civilizations, which eventually become decadent and weak, and which consequently are destroyed by new, upcoming barbarian races. This results in these former civilizations either being utterly destroyed or being thrown back down the evolutionary ladder, where they enter back into another evolutionary cycle of from savage to barbarian to civilization. The obvious difference between Eddison's cycle and Howard's concept is that in *The Worm Ouroboros* the parties involved in this ever-repeating cycle are always the same ones. Even those heroes who happened to be killed in the story's course will consequently return to life in order to repeat and fulfill their roles in the never-ending conflict between the Demons and Witches. In Howard's cycle of evolution though, the involved parties are never the same. Decadent civilizations are fully destroyed and never return. Civilizations that survived but have been thrown back on their evolutionary level may once again climb up the ladder. During this process, though, they change by mixing with other races, thereby becoming a different race. This is, in

my eyes, a strong proof that although Howard had written lost world/static time stories, for Howard the concept of static time is not applicable. I would like to demonstrate the validity of my claim with the following example.

In several of Howard's stories, each set in different time periods in Howard's literary universe, winged, alien creatures are featured. Superficially regarded, these creatures appear to be of the same mold. There are no distinct differences discernible. Although one could accuse Howard of being too lazy to invent a new kind of supernatural creatures, instead of the same winged monsters, I would like to argue differently. In my opinion, these creatures are more than just a convenient way for Howard to recycle a monstrous creature in his stories. Howard actually uses these creatures to highlight the deteriorating effect of evolution on their species after they became stranded on earth. In this light, these creatures can be understood as personifications of the effect of evolution.

The name of one of these creatures, Yag-kosha, who is featured in the Conan story "The Tower of the Elephant," appears to support the assumption that Howard had found inspiration for these creatures in Lovecraft's Great Old Ones, who have similarly sounding names such as Yog-sothoth or Shub-Niggurath. In my opinion, this is not the case, as Lovecraft's deities are immortal creatures from another cosmic dimension. In Howard's case, these creatures are very much mortal and hail, in at least one case, from a planet that is explicitly mentioned as "the green planet of Yag, which circles for ever in the outer fringe of this universe" ("The Tower of the Elephant" 78).

This concept of alien life existing on earth adds the element of science fiction to Howard's work. This is noteworthy, as science fiction is a genre in which Howard—with the exception of the planetary romance "Almuric"—did not write anything substantial that qualifies as being more than a better draft of a story. I am arguing here that for Howard this establishing of aliens in his work is not an attempt to enter into the science fiction market. Rather, it was necessary to make his concept that the Hyborian Age was a time where the legends of modern world were alive

work.

Howard praised in his letters Lovecraft's concept of indescribable terror entering the world from another dimension, and he could have used this concept as a means to introduce his winged aliens in his work. Lovecraft would doubtlessly not have minded if Howard had used his concept. In fact, it was Lovecraft who had initiated a cooperation between Clark Ashton Smith, another *Weird Tales* writer, and Howard, in which the three authors planted references into each other's works and so established a shared universe.<sup>3</sup> Howard, though, did not use Lovecraft's concept of terror from another dimension. Instead, he had these creatures come from other planets. I am arguing that Howard wished to stay as realistic as possible in his secondary world building and regarded the origin of alien life hailing from another planet as better fitting to his concept.<sup>4</sup>

Coming now to my original claim that Howard uses these aliens as a means to show the influence of evolution: a remarkable appearance of such aliens is in the Conan story "The Tower of the Elephant" (1932), in which Conan is breaking into the tower of a sorcerer in search of a legendary jewel only to find himself helping an imprisoned alien take revenge on his captor. This alien is Yag-kosha, who Howard describes as having a winged humanoid body with the head of an elephant. Yag-kosha is an outcast from his own planet after having been defeated in a war. Together with other survivors of this conflict Yag-kosha arrived on earth. Due to different conditions the aliens lost their wings and became stranded. When Conan meets Yag-kosha, the alien is the only one of its kind left on earth and has undergone another, even more horrible transformation; he is blind and crippled as the result of torture inflicted by the sorcerer Yara, who has kept the alien prisoner for centuries.

In addition to the loss of his wings and his body being broken by torture, Yag-kosha has undergone one more transformation, although it is more of a spiritual kind than a physical one, which Howard hints at in the story. When Yag-kosha tells Conan about his life before Yara the sorcerer imprisoned him, he mentions that he had lived with people who worshipped him as a god; "At last I alone was left,

dreaming of old times among the ruined temples of jungle-lost Khitai [a prototype China of the Hyborian Age], worshipped as a god by an ancient yellow-skinned race” (78).

Earth’s mythology has indeed such a deity with a human body and the head of an elephant: the deity Ganesha. I regard this passage as important as it is here that Howard fulfills his intention to make the Hyborian Age a time in which legends are alive. Ganesha the deity did indeed exist in the Hyborian Age, but he was of alien origin. With the transformation of a lonely, mutilated alien into a god of earth’s mythology Howard has established such a connection.<sup>5</sup>

But not all of the aliens in Howard’s work become elevated to a deity. The story “The Garden of Fear” (1933) is set in the aftermath of the Hyborian Age, when due to cataclysms and advancing glaciers, the nature and geography of the earth starts to change into the form of the world as we know it. In this story Howard features another such a winged creature. This time the creature is not a hybrid of man and animal such as Yag-kosha. It is a winged man who the story’s first-person narrator describes—in spite of his terrifying and dangerous appearance—in sympathetic terms as a sad, brooding lonely creature:

A figure emerged from the tower, and coming to the parapet, leaned upon it and looked upon the valley. It was a man, but such a man as I had never dreamed of, even in nightmares.

He was tall, powerful, black with the hue of polished ebony; but the feature which made a human nightmare of him was the bat-like wings which folded on his shoulders.

. . . Was that winged man merely a freak, an isolated example of disorientated nature, dwelling in solitude and immemorial desolation? Or was he a survival of a forgotten race, which had risen, reigned and vanished before the coming of man as we know him? (45)

This passage features, with the line “forgotten race, which had risen, reigned and vanished” (45) again the evolutionary cycle of the rise and fall of races, which I

have addressed earlier. In addition, though, when the twentieth century narrator of “The Garden of Fear” theorizes that “winged men are not uncommon in mythology; they are met with in the folk lore of many nations and races. As far back as man may go in myth, chronicle and legend, he finds tales of harpies and winged gods, angels and demons. Legends are distorted shadows of pre-existent realities” (45), Howard establishes a connection between the legends, myths, and religions of modern man and his Hyborian Age. In fact, I am arguing that “The Garden of Fear” is actually a prequel to a story that also features such winged creatures and which Howard had written three years earlier in 1930, “Wings in the Night.” In my opinion, Howard explained in “The Garden of Fear” the origin of the winged creatures appearing in “Wings in the Night.”

“Wings of the Night” is the final story of a series featuring the Puritan swordsman Solomon Kane. A trademark of this series is that Howard mixed elements of the historical short story genre with elements of the horror genre. Furthermore, Howard used Africa as the setting for several of the stories. In “Wings of the Night,” set in the 17th century, Solomon Kane battles in the heart of Africa winged, humanoid creatures that terrorize native tribes. After his first fight with one of these creatures, Kane draws the same conclusion as the protagonist of “The Garden of Fear” does—that these creatures might be related to the harpies of Greek mythology and that were defeated by “the hero Jason, who . . . drove them . . . into Africa as well” (“Wings in the Night” 304). Considering that the protagonist of “The Garden of Fear” comes to the same assumption about the relationship between the winged creature and mythology, I am suggesting that it is possible to regard the creatures of “Wings in the Night” as descendants of the winged man in “The Garden of Fear.”

With this connection established, the effect of Howard’s view that evolution is a dynamic cycle becomes obvious; over the millennia on earth, the race of the dark winged man that was featured in “The Garden of Fear” has transformed—or rather mutated—into the creatures that Solomon Kane encounters in “Wings in the Night.”



After his first fight with the winged monsters, Kane gets a clear look at one of his dead opponents:

Kane leaned forward, pistol smoking in his hand, and gazed wide-eyed. Surely this thing was a demon out of the black pits of hell, said the somber mind of the Puritan; yet a leaden ball had slain it. Kane shrugged his shoulders, baffled; he had never seen aught to approach this, though all his life had fallen in strange ways. The thing was like a man, inhumanly tall and inhumanly thin; the head was long, narrow and hairless—the head of a predatory creature. The ears were small, close-set and queerly pointed. The eyes, set in death, were narrow, oblique and of a strange yellowish color. The nose was thin and hooked, like the beak of a bird of prey, the mouth a wide cruel gash, whose thin lips, writhed in a death snarl and flecked with foam, disclosed wolfish fangs.

The creature, which was naked and hairless, was not unlike a human being in other ways. The shoulders were broad and powerful, the neck long and lean. The arms were long and muscular, the thumb being set beside the fingers after the manner of the great apes. Fingers and thumbs were armed with heavy hooked talons. The chest was curiously misshapen, the breastbone jutting out like the keel of a ship, the ribs curving back from it. The legs were long and wiry with huge, hand-like, prehensile feet, the great toe set opposite the rest like a man's thumb. The claws on the toes were merely long nails.

But the most curious feature of this curious creature was on its back. A pair of great wings, shaped much like the wings of a moth but with a bony frame and of leathery substance, grew from its shoulders, beginning at a point just back and above where the arms joined the shoulders, and extending half-way to the narrow hips. These wings, Kane reckoned, would measure some eighteen feet from tip to tip.

(“Wings in the Night” 287-88)

These creatures have nothing left of the demonic beauty of the black winged man of “The Garden of Fear.” In “The Tower of the Elephant” time on earth has cost Yag-kosha’s race the loss of their wings, but their intellectual capabilities, or their wisdom and knowledge, were not affected. In “Wings of the Night” the transformation of the winged creatures has gone much further. They have lost their uncanny beauty and their dignity. The sole purpose of their existence consists in slaughtering and torturing the native tribes of the region, which seems to give these creatures a perverse sense of joy. In fact, the creatures in “Wings in the Night” have been thrown by evolution down on its lowest level. When at the end of the story Solomon Kane kills all the remaining creatures, this genocide is also the executing arm of evolution, ultimately terminating a race that has lost its purpose.

Such an ultimate extermination does not occur in *The Worm Ouroboros*. In E. R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros*, the prayer to a god made it possible that an obviously irreversible act such as killing off all enemies could be nullified and an ever-repeating cycle is established. I am arguing that this new cycle, in spite of its many events, is still static as these events are always the same and will continue to be so. Howard’s view of history did not allow for something like this. People, races, and civilizations developed, then reached a peak that could only lead to their downfall. Their extinction was a final one that could not be unmade. In Howard’s case, though, evolution took care that utterly new people and races came up and made their way through this cycle, which clearly proves the dynamic of Howard’s view of a history that never allowed a standstill.

#### 4. Planetary Romances: The Martian Stories of E. R. Burroughs

One of the most successful and influential writers of fantastic fiction for the pulp market was Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950). Burroughs’ fame is mostly based on two achievements: first, he was the literary father of the pop culture icon

Tarzan, the son of British nobility who had grown up in the jungle raised by apes. Burroughs' other claim to fame was his successful debut story "Under the Moons of Mars" (1912), which he wrote under the pen name Norman Bean and which was later retitled into "A Princess of Mars."

"Under the Moons of Mars" follows the adventures of the cavalry soldier John Carter, who, after having fallen into a cave in the desert of Arizona, finds himself to have been transported on the planet Mars, where he fights various enemies before marrying the princess Dejah Thoris. Due to the novel's success Burroughs wrote nine more novels that became a series, which is usually referred to as *The Martian Tales*. The series also influenced significantly the popular image and perception of a subgenre of fantastic fiction that is known as "planetary romance."

Burroughs' *Martian Tales* has features that allows it to be categorized as static time. In fact, I am arguing that the series' protagonist John Carter himself perfectly represents the aspect of static time because he does not seem to age at all. The first-person narrator of *A Princess of Mars* writes about John Carter: "when the war broke out he left us, nor did I see him again for some fifteen or sixteen years. When he returned it was without a warning, and I was much surprised to note that he had not aged apparently a moment, nor had he changed in any outward way" (*Under the Moons of Mars* 3-4). Junot Diaz points out in his introduction to the 2012 Library of America edition of *A Princess of Mars* that "there are even signs that John Carter might not be a human being at all, having never aged nor possessed memory of any childhood" (Diaz xi). John Carter's attribute of not aging finds a pendant in the red men of Mars, who although they are mortal, have a life expectancy of a thousand years. Although this long life expectancy is not strictly what qualifies as static time, I regard it as a significant slowing down of time passing: the red men's life clocks run much slower than their humanoid counterparts on earth.

In order to demonstrate the uniqueness of Howard's approach of secondary world building that is based on the pseudo-history he had created, I would like to look now at the background history of Burroughs' secondary world of Barsoom.

According to Burroughs, Barsoom is a dying world that once was a blooming civilization ruled by a blond, white skinned race. Changes in climate resulted in further alterations of the geography, with seas drying out, ultimately turning Barsoom into a huge desert. The civilizations that ruled Barsoom fell and became prey to green skinned creatures. In the aftermath of this civilization collapse, the white race was nearly wiped out. It mixed with minor races of the planet and as a result Barsoom changed into a world of black, white, yellow, and red humanoid races. The green-skinned monsters evolved into four-armed men, who grew up to fifteen feet tall green men. These green men are the barbarians of Barsoom, reminiscent of the warlike Native Americans of the Old West or the Spartans of Greek history. At the time of the events of *Under the Moons of Mars* they confront the humanoid red men who are the keepers of the remains of the old civilization.

Burroughs' world and its history show an interesting similarity to an aspect of Howard's work, the conflict between vanishing civilizations and strong barbarians who are on the rise. In Howard's case, though, civilizations and its people are corrupt and weak, which is something that cannot be said about the red men of Barsoom. They are still strong and fierce fighters. Their civilization's biggest weakness is shown in their lack of control of the old technology which they have salvaged from the time before Barsoom changed into a dying world and which they do not understand. This creates a world full of contradictions: on the one hand, the red men have fast airplanes which they frequently use for battles in the skies of Barsoom. In spite of having the technology that allows flying, there is no technology available for the ground transportation of people and goods. The people of Barsoom either walk or ride eight-legged creatures that are being steered telepathically. This lack of having technology under control shows its effect also in the warfare of the people of Barsoom. Guns and pistols that can cause death and massive destruction over a far distance are readily available to combatants. Due to the fact that the technology of these guns and pistols is not reliable, the fighting on Barsoom is done in a rather archaic way, by using lances, swords, and daggers.

Richard A. Lupoff claims that “Barsoom was fully equipped . . . with geography, history, mythology, flora and fauna, human and inhuman inhabitants, science and politics, religion and architecture, law, and every other institution to be expected in a fully developed world” (11). This verdict of Burroughs’ world is certainly correct when it comes to assessing Burroughs’ work by the time *Under the Moons of Mars* and its sequels were published for the first time, beginning in 1912. It is an undisputable fact that Burroughs was the pioneer who established the above given setting of Barsoom as the image of the planetary romance genre that in later years would be copied by other authors such as Otis Adelbert Kline or Michael Moorcock.

If compared with Howard’s Hyborian Age, though, I regard Lupoff’s statement that Barsoom was fully equipped with a history as not correct. I doubt that Burroughs actually ever had such a fully fleshed out background history ready at all. In my analysis of “The Hyborian Age” I have demonstrated that Howard had written a detailed pseudo-history before he wrote most of his Conan of Cimmeria series. Moreover, Howard even connected his pseudo-history with the history of the real world. With this, Howard had all the necessary facts and data ready when he continued work on his Conan tales. On the other hand, Burroughs’ history of Barsoom consists of nothing more than snippets that Burroughs spread out over his first three Barsoom stories *Under the Moons of Mars*, *Gods of Mars* and *Warlord of Mars*. If one collects all the information Burroughs has given this way, the above given background history of Barsoom unfolds indeed. In my opinion, though, this history of Barsoom is nothing more than a simple lining up of the historic events that Burroughs needed for the plot of the individual novels in which these events are mentioned. Burroughs did not give any further, deeper background information to add extra material about these events, which on the other hand is what Howard managed in “The Hyborian Age.” This is also the reason why I regard Howard’s pseudo-history as much more detailed and superior to Burroughs’ secondary world-building. In my eyes, this also strongly indicates that Burroughs made up the

history of Barsoom while writing the series. He adapted the facts of his history of Barsoom to the needs of the plots of the story he was working on at the time. The result of Burroughs making up his data on the go is an obvious lack of depth and complexity of the history of his secondary world of Barsoom.

Burroughs' history of Barsoom and Howard's pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age are of utterly different complexity, with Howard offering the more multifaceted portrayal. Both authors use time abysses of millions and hundred thousands of years for their descriptions of the evolution of the people and races of their respective worlds. I have shown in the chapter about "The Hyborian Age" that Howard had meticulously researched and tracked the evolution of each of the fictive races and people of the pseudo-history he had created. This made Howard's mentioning of the thousands of years between the various stages of his pseudo-history more plausible. In comparison to Howard's approach, Burroughs' account of the evolution of the races of Barsoom falls flat as it clearly lacks the depth and scope of Howard's vision. In fact, I would go so far to claim that his mentioning of the time abysses of Barsoom's history amounts to nothing more than name-dropping.

I would like to point out that in spite of my critical observation, which proves that Howard's pseudo-history has more intricacy than Burroughs' history of Barsoom, a decisive reason for this difference is in the biographical background of both writers. Biographers like Irvin Porges or Richard A. Lupoff have shown that Burroughs had a rather diverse professional background before he became a writer. *Under the Moons of Mars* was Burroughs' debut, which he wrote in his office during his stint as a salesman. Burroughs' debut focused on action and a fast-paced plot. It was inspired by the stories Burroughs read in the pulp fiction magazines in which his company had put advertisements. The plot of *Under the Moons of Mars* clearly shows that Burroughs did not have any kind of background history of Barsoom prepared. In fact, deeper information on Barsoom's history appears from the second novel in the series, *Gods of Mars*, in which Burroughs gives information about one of the religions of Barsoom.

Porges and Lupoff agree that Burroughs was not only a prolific writer, but also a highly profit-oriented businessman. The moment his career as a writer had started off, Burroughs focused all of his energy and time on writing with the intention to produce and sell as much of his output to the best conditions possible. On this background, he simply did not have the time to fully plan out a background history of Barsoom. Indeed, based on this biographical information I find it hard to imagine that Burroughs would at all take the time to write an essay about Barsoom's history such as Howard did with "The Hyborian Age." Burroughs was too much of a businessman not to realize that it was impossible for him to sell such an essay, as it would only have the status of being more extensive notes.

This was exactly what Robert E. Howard had done with "The Hyborian Age." I have shown that Howard had already written several Conan stories when he decided to take a break in order to develop a database that became the pseudo-history of Conan's the world. Only after he had achieved this and established a database of this age did he continue to work on further Conan stories. Having thus created a strong and plausible pseudo-history, Howard could use all the data and facts he had established. The use of these facts and data was not restricted exclusively to the Conan series. Howard also put references to "The Hyborian Age" in his other stories that were not related with the Conan series and with this, he created his own literary universe.

##### 5. Tolkien's Middle-earth and Howard's World of the Hyborian Age

Up to now I have been focusing on secondary world-building in fantasy literature before Howard had written "The Hyborian Age" essay. I have taken this step in order to show how new and unique his creating of a pseudo-history for secondary world building was. I would like to finish this chapter with a look at the work of a writer whose career began after Howard's death in 1936. When it comes to debating secondary world building in fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien's work cannot be left

out. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a seminal work that continues to be at the center of the literary genre of fantasy as it contains all the attributes of the genre. Tolkien's Middle-earth is of a perfection and detail in secondary world building that no other writer of fantasy has so far managed to surpass.

Superficially seen, there is nothing that Tolkien's Middle-earth has in common with Howard's world of the Hyborian Age. Tolkien's world is filled with Elves, Dwarves, Wizards, Trolls, and Orcs, which makes Middle-earth reminiscent of classic fairytales. Moreover, the humans in Tolkien's world are clear-cut characters who are either good or bad. Aragorn, who is introduced as a mysterious ranger, is a fighter in the cause of the good forces with the predestined fate to become a benign king who re-establishes an old order that had been upset. None of Aragorn's acts in *The Lord of the Rings* leave any doubts that he exists purely for no other purpose than to serve in the fight against the forces of evil. The very few morally ambiguous human characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, who then fall under the influence of evil inevitably get a chance to redeem themselves and receive forgiveness, even from the ones they wronged.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring* Boromir, in spite of having sworn to protect the ring bearer Frodo, tries to take away the one ring. Boromir acts not out of selfish reasons such as greed for power or treasure. His act is based on a mix of momentary moral weakness and out of the misguided duty he feels that he owes his land of Gondor. This leads to Boromir's decision to put Gondor's interests over the goals of the group that wants to see the ring being taken to Mordor and destroyed for a greater good—the saving of all of Middle-earth. Boromir fails in his attempt to take the ring, which leads to the breaking of the fellowship. For his weakness and betrayal Boromir pays, with his life, the ultimate price for his deed. In spite of this, he ends not up as a villain, but redeems himself. He dies a heroic death and gives Frodo sufficient time to escape from pursuing Orcs and continue his mission.

In Howard's world of the Hyborian Age the situation is different. Howard's protagonist Conan of Cimmeria is far from being a good or even nice person such as



Tolkien's Aragorn. Conan is a thief, a mercenary, and a pirate. He fights and steals for his own profit. Although he is not a murderer, Conan does not hesitate to kill without mercy. Mostly his motives are based on egoistic reasons such as gaining a treasure or the simple wish to survive a dangerous situation. The positive side effects of Conan's deeds are more a coincidence than caused by his intention.<sup>6</sup> Charles Hoffmann regards Conan in the essay "Conan the Existential" as an existentialist in the meaning of a person whose existence is without a higher cause or a predestined fate such as Tolkien's Aragorn. Life in the world of Howard's Hyborian Age appears to be indeed much simpler than in Tolkien's Middle-earth: Howard's Conan fights his way from one day to another and enjoys the moments of tranquility to the fullest. In "Queen of the Black Coast" Conan summarizes his existence in the memorable but dubious one-liner: "I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content" (133).

Tolkien's characters are far away from leading such a free existence as the one Conan is leading. They are deeply entangled in a web of obligations and feelings of having to fulfill a duty that often goes deeply against their wishes. An especially good example for this feature is Frodo the Hobbit. Although he regards himself as weak and far from being a hero, he volunteers against his better judgment to take the one Ring to Mordor to destroy it.

Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At least with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice.

'I will take the Ring,' he said, 'though I don't know the way.' (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 270)

Frodo does not take this burden with the wish to become a hero or to earn

respect. He simply realizes that he is the one who has been fated to go on a mission that is bound to possibly end in his doom.

Indeed, if one simply reads Howard's original Conan stories without any previous knowledge of the "The Hyborian Age" essay, the world of Howard's Hyborian Age seems to be of a much simpler design than Tolkien's Middle-earth. In Tolkien's world nature plays an important and symbolic role, resulting in long and lavish descriptions of mountains, rivers, and forests, something which is missing in Howard's stories. In each chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* there are at times extensive references to Middle-earth's old history, its people, and their languages and cultures. This information is passed on not only in epic monologues or dialogues of the various protagonists of Tolkien's story, but also via poems and even the lyrics of songs.

I would like to point out that Howard's stories also contain sections with information and references to the history of the Hyborian Age. In spite of the fact that Howard had a detailed history of Conan's world prepared in form of the unpublished "The Hyborian Age" essay, these references are much shorter than the ones found in Tolkien's work. The simple reason that Howard did not use his pseudo-history more extensively in his stories lies, in my opinion, in the fact that he wrote for pulp fiction magazines. Editors such as *Weird Tales'* Farnsworth Wright took utmost care that the writers, who were paid by the number of words they delivered, kept the word count of their stories as low as possible as this would make for the magazine the costs to acquire stories more affordable. Furthermore, the readers of these magazines demanded action-driven plots, which made any extra information that slowed down the story's pacing an unwanted one.

In spite of these differences between Tolkien and Howard, I am arguing that there is one point which Howard's world of the Hyborian Age and Tolkien's Middle-earth have in common and which has not been noted enough: both Howard's and Tolkien's secondary worlds are according to their authors depictions of our earth in the past. In the introducing paragraph to the first Conan story "The Phoenix on the

Sword” Howard set his Hyborian Age in the time between the sinking of Atlantis and the coming of man, about 10,000 to 15,000 years before mankind’s official time reckoning.

Tolkien on the other hand made it clear that although the time in which the events of *The Lord of the Rings* take place is an unspecified imaginary period, that the world in which the novel plays is our world. In a comment to a review of *The Return of the King*, written by W. H. Auden in 1956, Tolkien stated:

I am historically minded. Middle-earth is not an imaginary world. The name is the modern form (appearing in the 13th century and still in use) of *midden-erd* > *middle-erd*, an ancient name for the *oikoumenē*, the abiding place of Men, the objectively real world, in use specifically opposed to imaginary worlds (as Fairyland) or unseen worlds (as Heaven or Hell). The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary. (*The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 239)

Like Howard, Tolkien had created an extensive historical background for his Middle-earth. Only a small fraction of this material made it into the appendix section of *The Lord of the Rings*. The rest of this material, consisting mostly of drafts, comments by Tolkien, as well as unfinished stories were collected by Tolkien’s son Christopher and published posthumously in a twelve-volume set titled *The History of Middle-earth*.

On this background it can be argued that Tolkien had also created a pseudo-history for his secondary world Middle-earth. In my opinion, though, this is not correct, and Tolkien never wrote something that qualifies as a pseudo-history: I have demonstrated in the previous chapters how Howard, when he wrote “The Hyborian Age,” tried to stay in the realm of the possible. Howard used scientific theories, although some of them were outdated by the time he was writing his pseudo-history. Moreover, in “The Hyborian Age” Howard established a link to the world of the reader by depicting which races of modern man had evolved out of the

racess of his imaginary Hyborian Age. The effect of this effort is that although Howard explicitly stated that “The Hyborian Age” was never meant as a scientific essay it still has sufficient plausibility to it. Howard had created a fictive history that certainly never happened but theoretically could have.

Tolkien on the other hand used elements of fairytales and mythology for the historical background of Middle-earth, which was necessary as Middle-earth was populated by Elves and Dwarves that are fairytale tropes. While Howard used scientific theories from the fields of archaeology and anthropology, and mixed them with ideas taken from occultism, Tolkien did not use any of such material for the background history of Middle-earth but relied on sources such as Northern mythology. In contrast to Howard, who used all the results of his research for his pseudo-history and prepared it into one essay, Tolkien never wrote an essay or book that detailed the background history of Middle-earth. Tolkien put longer parts of his extensive background notes and integrated them into the texts that became *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Silmarillion*, with the latter one qualifying not so much as a history but rather as a compendium of the mythology and religion of Middle-earth. The amount of material and especially Tolkien’s skillful use of this material resulted in a detailed and complex background history.

The reason why I am arguing that Tolkien’s is not a pseudo-history as the one Howard had created lies in the fact that Tolkien relied too heavily on elements that are fairytale tropes. Both Howard’s and Tolkien’s work live from the already mentioned suspension of disbelief, the cooperation of the reader to accept in fantastic story elements that do not exist in the reader’s world. In Tolkien’s case the fairytale elements of his background history are too strongly manifested as fairytale tropes in the reader’s mind. I am claiming that although readers of *The Lord of the Rings* are willing to accept the existence of Middle-earth and all its fantastic inhabitants, it is not possible for the readers to accept the history of Middle-earth as the possible history of the earth. I am basing this non-acceptance on the fact that elves, dwarves, wizards, and other creatures appearing in *The Lord of the Rings* are too firmly rooted

in the realm of the fairytale to be considered having ever really existed and having been part of a possible history of the earth.

In contrast to Tolkien, Howard made his pseudo-history plausible by using pseudo-scientific theories and ideas. In addition, Howard established connections to the existing world of the reader by going even so far to fit his fictive Hyborian Age in the run of the world history. Tolkien, as can be seen from his comments on W. H. Auden's review, did not specify the era in which his history of Middle-earth took place. This deliberately staying not specific about the historical period gives Tolkien's background history of Middle-earth a further fairytale aspect that is reminiscent of the "once upon a time" beginnings of fairytales.

Having just demonstrated the similarities but also the main differences that took in the creation of the historical backgrounds of Howard's and Tolkien's secondary worlds, I now would like to focus again on Howard's pioneering role in this field. This step amounts to pointing out the obvious, but is of utmost importance: it is due to Tolkien's towering influence on fantasy literature that Howard's achievement has not been sufficiently noticed so far. Even if one were to classify Tolkien's historical background for Middle-earth as a pseudo-history, it is nonetheless Robert E. Howard who was the first writer in fantastic fiction who ever created such a pseudo-history: Howard wrote "The Hyborian Age" in 1932, years before the publication of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* in 1937 and the publication of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 1954.

Moreover, if one compares the different backgrounds of Howard and Tolkien, Howard's effort becomes even more impressive: Tolkien was a university professor of English Language and Literature at the university of Oxford, while Howard never had a higher education other than taking stenographic classes at Brownwood College. Furthermore, at his workplace Tolkien had the libraries that supplied him with all the books and literature that he needed for the work on his literary endeavors. Howard, on the other hand, lived in a small town in rural Texas, far away from any libraries. For his research Howard only had books available from his father's and his own

collection, with many of them offering only outdated information. In spite of all of these unfavorable conditions, Howard managed to write the first pseudo-history in the field of fantastic fiction.

## 6. Conclusion

When Robert E. Howard wrote in 1932 the essay “The Hyborian Age,” he became the first author in the field of fantasy who developed a fleshed out pseudo-history as the background of his stories. Up to then something like this had never been done before in the field of weird fiction. I have demonstrated this by discussing two influential works, whose success has led to them having become often-copied templates of genre fantasy: the first one was the work of William Morris, who introduced a fictive medieval setting for his novels, and the other work I discussed were E. R. Burroughs’ *Martian Tales* that he wrote for the American pulp fiction market of the very early 20th century.

Both writers’ novels and their secondary worlds are built on having been set in a distant past, or in Burroughs’ case on a planet with a long history, and both their secondary worlds lack the detailed pseudo-history which Howard had created for his Hyborian Age. The result of this lack of background information is that Morris’ and Burroughs’ secondary worlds display a decisive lack of complexity if one analyses their work beyond the aspects of plot and characterization of their protagonists.

This complexity of Howard’s work is unfortunately not noticed out of two reasons: “The Hyborian Age” essay in which Howard had constructed his pseudo-history has, up to now, never received the attention it deserved. “The Hyborian Age” is a playful, pseudo-scientific essay and not an action story that is part of the Conan of Cimmeria series and could not find any interest among fans and professional publishers. Due to this, the essay was never fully published during Howard’s lifetime.

The other reason that Howard’s achievement has not been noticed so far is the

impact of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* on the fantasy genre that has overshadowed Howard's work. Indeed, Tolkien's secondary world of Middle-earth is of exquisite detail and complexity. It also features an equally detailed background history. I have pointed out in this chapter that Tolkien did not actually write a pseudo-history such as Howard did. Tolkien's secondary world-building is more based on mythology and folk tales than on history. I have also pointed out that Tolkien began the work on the background history of Middle-earth years after Howard had already written "The Hyborian Age." All of this supports my claim that Howard had a pioneering role in fantastic literature by introducing the concept of devising a plausible pseudo-history as the base for secondary world building.

**Part II:**  
**Robert E. Howard and the History of Texas**

Introduction

In the first part of this thesis I have shown how Robert E. Howard created the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age. Howard's successful creation of an utterly fictive age does not mean that Howard was an escapist who had lost touch with the real world. In this second part of my thesis I will demonstrate that Howard was in fact firmly rooted in the reality of his environment.

I am claiming that the history of Howard's native state of Texas was a big influence on his literary work: Howard openly admitted that he would have rather lived in the time of the Old West or the era of the Texas frontier. In the following I will analyze Howard's views concerning the Old West and the era of the Texas frontier and research their impact on his work. I will also look at how realistic Howard's views concerning these epochs were or whether Howard had a romanticized image of the Old West and the era of the Texas frontier.

Furthermore, I will address the questions whether Howard integrated Texas history or aspects of the history of Texas in his stories. Finally, closing a circle, I will finish this section with a look at whether Howard connected the history of Texas with the pseudo-history of his Hyborian Age.



## Chapter I: Robert E. Howard and His Relation to the Old West and Modern Texas

### 1. Introduction

The first part of this thesis dealt with fictive history in Howard's work in form of the Hyborian Age. In this second part I will focus on real history, in this case the history of Texas. Howard's letters as well as comments by friends and fellow writers about Howard clearly prove that he had a strong knowledge of the history of Texas. Furthermore, Howard had gone on record stating his love and admiration for the time of the Old West and the era of the Texas frontier.

In the context of history, a theme that appears throughout Howard's work is his critical stance towards civilization. Howard regarded civilization as an unnatural state of mankind, which he deemed inferior to the more natural state of barbarism. Howard expressed this view in his essay about the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age. I am claiming here that this view was not restricted to Howard's fictive Hyborian Age. In fact, I will show that he displayed a similar opinion when it comes to the history of Texas, namely by contrasting the era of the Old West and Texas frontier to the modern times he was living in, especially the early 20th century when the Texas oil boom had heavy impact on the culture and traditions of Texas, its people and their lives.

I would also like to demonstrate in this chapter that Howard's upbringing in rural Texas, his knowledge and fascination for the history of Texas do indeed reflect in his literary work. Furthermore, I am arguing that Howard's critical stance towards civilization is a result of his background as a Texan and his admiration of the era of the Old West and Texas frontier.

Moreover, I am claiming in this chapter that Howard's expressed fascination and admiration for the Old West and Texas frontier is an important aspect of his literary work that up to now has not been given sufficient attention. If my claim proves to be correct, I will be able to show that Howard's use of Texas history in the

frame of his Western stories and in his fantastic stories was more than just local color ornament.

## 2. Howard's Image of the Old West and View of Modern Texas

In order to approach Howard's stance, I regard it as necessary to look at first at the terms Old West and frontier, which Howard frequently used in his correspondence. In fact, both terms are closely linked and are sometimes even regarded as referring to the same matter.

According to John Seelye in his introduction to *Stories of the Old West-Tales of the Mining Camp, Cavalry Troop, & Cattle Ranch*, the term Old West refers to the era of the movement from the civilized East of the North American continent towards the hardly settled West coast before and after the American Civil War. Hand in hand with the term Old West goes the term frontier. This term comprises the meanings of being the flexible line that marked the advance of the westward movement, the advance of civilization, and the retreat of wilderness.

Both terms, Old West and frontier, have taken on meanings that go beyond these original definitions. For example, Seelye points out that the direction of West took on the connotation of hope, expressing the yearnings and wishes for a better life of those making the trek westward.<sup>1</sup> As to the frontier, Seelye establishes an important connection to popular culture and the field in which Robert E. Howard was working in when he states that "the frontier was a militant ideal kept alive by pulp fiction and motion pictures" and that "in North America the idea of frontier is almost always etymologically intimate not only with movement . . . but with the idea of battlefield, conceived as the line between the forces of civilization and the ever retreating wilderness" (Seelye xiii).

Moreover, this flexible frontier was not just a place where wilderness and civilization clashed. In fact, at this frontier the line between civilization and wilderness (or: barbarism) became diffuse. Seelye gives an example of this effect by

referring to the 18th century writer Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. In this book Crevecoeur describes the rise of new farms in former wilderness areas. According to Seelye, Crevecoeur "regarded with distaste the kind of persons who formed the vanguard of civilization, the frontiersmen who made the first rude settlements in the wilderness. He defined the white hunter as a semi-savage, a once civilized man reduced by life in the woods . . . to barbarism" (Seelye xiv). I am arguing that this depiction of the frontier corresponds well to Howard's view of the frontier: for example in the story "Black Canaan" which is set in the swamps of Louisiana, Howard depicts the white population living there as also having lost its civilized aspect, displaying tribal behavior that puts them on the level of barbarism or even savagery.

The end of the era of the Old West and the frontier was declared in 1893 by Jackson Turner, who according to Seelye had stated "with the disappearance of free land, the frontier, which for so long had shaped the American character, had closed and gone out of business" (Seelye xx). Turner's historic statement is doubtlessly true in the sense that by 1893 the westward movement had stopped and that North America was settled. When it came to Texas, though, where Robert E. Howard spent his life, even in the early 20th century the spirit of the frontier was still very much alive. In fact, I am claiming that this frontier spirit was alive to the point that Texas could in many ways still be called a frontier, which is an image that I am arguing was also strongly set in Howard's line of thinking. Texas historian T. R. Fehrenbach supports my claim by writing as follows:

Texas entered the 20th century with its basic society a full two generations, or about sixty years, behind the development of the American mainstream. Industry was in its infancy; among the people themselves the norms and patterns of the industrial society had no root. . . . The early 19th-century American values were in no way eroded in Texas. There was no reason why they should have been. During a century of explosive conquest and settlement, the land changed very

little, and the people not at all. (633)

Robert E. Howard was born and raised in Texas and spent most of his life in the small rural community of Cross Plains in Callahan County in West Texas, off the track from the more urban cities of Dallas, San Antonio, and Houston. In fact, Howard was a product of this rural Texas environment and his views concerning the old and modern Texas are, in my opinion, a result of his upbringing in this environment. Fehrenbach's above depiction of the condition of early 20th century Texas contains statements that are, in my eyes, the key to explaining Howard's views of the era of the Old West, the frontier, and his stance to the times he lived in.

First, even at the beginning of the 20th century, Texas was about 60 years behind the rest of the nation resulting in the fact that "early 19th-century American values were in no way eroded in Texas" (633). I will soon demonstrate how important this aspect was when it comes to Howard's great affinity for the era of the Old West and Texas frontier. Second, according to Fehrenbach, Texas and its people had not changed at all with the coming of the 20th century, which is a point that I will connect with Howard's stance concerning the impact of outside forces on Texas such as the oil boom and arrival of newcomers to Texas.

Howard left no opportunity to express his love for the era of the Old West and Texas frontier. A look at his extant letters to friends and fellow writers supports this claim. Between 1930 and 1936 Howard was in regular contact with fellow *Weird Tales* writer H. P. Lovecraft. Many letters of this correspondence were dedicated to the comparison between the conditions at the civilized East coast where Lovecraft had his home and the conditions in rural Texas where Howard resided. In the frame of this communication Howard clearly voiced his favorable view of the era of the Old West: Howard went on record saying that he would have rather been born in the time of the Old West than in the time he lived in and went through lengths to explain to the Easterner Lovecraft why he felt so.

One of Howard's main reasons for his preference of the past era of the frontier was "freedom from crushing taxes, crowds, the hustle and rush of urban life, the

monotony of the sweat-shop or the office, the same routine, snobbery and being merely a cog in the machine” (*Means to Freedom* 699). In my opinion, the reason Howard is giving here, while praising the era of the Texas frontier, is also the expression of a universal, timeless yearning of anybody who is caught in an unhappy environment and is wondering whether there is more out there beyond the confinement of unfulfilling daily work and freedom infringing duties.

Howard’s yearning for the freedom of the frontier, not being bound to one space but the steadily being on the move through a seemingly endless country, and new adventures and discoveries steadily luring behind the flexible frontier is also an essential aspect of his literary work. I would like to point out that, interestingly, Howard depicted this ultimate freedom of the era of the Old West and Texas frontier not so much in the frame of the genre that seems to be most suited to do so, which would be Western tales. In fact, in my opinion most of Howard’s traditional Western stories are uninspired and of a mediocre quality that puts them on the lower quality spectrum of the genre and his literary work. Instead, Howard took the freedom of the frontier of the Old West into the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age: just like the pioneers of the Old West who moved westward or the cowboys who roamed the wide ranges of frontier Texas before the land was fenced, Howard let his barbarian adventurer Conan of Cimmeria freely wander through the world of his fictive pre-prehistoric Hyborian Age. This makes Conan an alternative version of the American frontier hero in a fantastic setting. Moreover, the moment Conan becomes a king and by necessity has to stop his free roaming of the world, he becomes the alter ego of Howard, who felt miserable being caught in his real-life environment in jobs he did not enjoy.

This becomes evident in the draft version of the first Conan story “The Phoenix on the Sword,” in which Howard introduces Conan as a king who mourns his lost freedom and for a short moment even appears to consider suicide, which is an uncanny parallel to Howard, who committed suicide by the age of 30.

Howard biographies ranging from L. Sprague DeCamp’s *Dark Valley Destiny*

to Mark Finn's *Blood & Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard* agree that Howard in his attempts to make his living as a writer had problems keeping a regular profession as he had strong feelings against being ordered around. This aversion to regular office work finds its ultimate expression in a scene in Howard's self-authored pseudo-biography *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*. In this scene Howard's literary alter ego, Steve Costigan, knocks out his boss on the very first day of his new job after he humiliates Costigan in front of the office staff for being late and makes fun of Costigan's background as an aspiring writer. There are no extant documents or statements by Howard's friends and witnesses that confirm that such an incident really occurred. In fact, I do regard this scene as nothing more than an expression of Howard's wishful thinking.

In a previous chapter, I have addressed how Howard kept the use of the violence he secretly wished to inflict on the people who he felt disrespected and insulted him in real life strictly within the boundaries of his imagination and literary work, such as the fantasy stories featuring Kull of Atlantis. This means in my eyes, that the incident depicted in *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* is also nothing more than a case of pure fiction and another case of Howard's wishful thinking.

I would like to point out that this scene of violence in *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* leads to another, rather controversial, aspect in connection with Howard's appreciation for the time of the Texas frontier and Old West. Howard's feelings of having to restrain him in his real-life environment stand in contrast to the freedom which the era of the frontier offered in his view. This counts especially when it comes to the use of violence. Richard Slotkin observed in *Violence Through Regeneration: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* that "the most striking quality of life in the New World was the relative absence of restraints on human behavior" (34). This is an observation that especially counts for the conditions on the Texas frontier and in the Old West. In fact, under given circumstances Howard regarded the use of violence not only as justified, but as legitimate. I will soon go into detail concerning this point. On the other hand, in

order to change Lovecraft's perception of the Old West and the Texas frontier as having been a space without order that was ruled only by violence, Howard also pointed out that "the freedom of the West meant more than lack of restraint by law" (*Means to Freedom* 699).

Violence and its depiction are an essential aspect of Howard's literary work and critics such as Alpers have suggested that Howard's fantasy stories glorified violence to the extent that they qualify as fascist literature. I regard this accusation as utterly wrong, as Alpers makes the preposterous claim that the simple consumption of such literature turns the reader into a violent fascist. Moreover, Alpers and other critics following his argument lack a basic understanding of Howard's personal background, namely Howard being a proud Texan.

In my opinion, in spite of acts of violence being a part of nearly every story Howard wrote and the lengthy and detailed depiction of violence in his literary work, Howard neither glorified violence nor displayed an unhealthy fascination for violence. In fact, he was simply mirroring this aspect of the history of Texas, the Old West, and the Texas frontier in his work.

The history of Texas is full of violence: from its very beginning when the future Texans fought the Spanish to gaining their independence from Mexico. Even after Texas had its independence, daily life was still full of violence: the warlike Native American tribes roaming the plains of Texas such as the Comanche made life at the frontier a daily fight for survival.<sup>2</sup> The Reconstruction period following the Civil War saw Texas turn into a lawless place in which gunslingers and outlaws such as John Wesley Hardin (1857-1889) caused terror and fear. Then there was also the period of the infamous violent Texas feuds that became part of Texas history. Even during Howard's lifetime, the oil boom of the early 20th century brought along violence and crime to the small rural communities on whose territory oil was found and whose population number rose overnight from the influx of oilfield workers, businessmen, prostitutes, and criminals.

I am arguing that a person growing up and living in an environment in which

violence was an integral part of its history and culture cannot help having an utterly different position concerning violence than someone growing up and living in a more sheltered environment. This counts especially for Robert E. Howard and becomes clear in the communication between Howard and Lovecraft. Howard was eager to give the Easterner Lovecraft a vivid and realistic image of the history and traditions of life in the era of the Texas frontier, which resulted in him focusing heavily on violence filled stories about outlaws and warlike Amerindians. The effect of Howard's letters to Lovecraft was that Lovecraft could not help but to develop an image of the Old West, the Texas frontier, and even the Texas of Howard times as being ruled not by civilized law but by brutish strongmen. Texas historian T. R. Fehrenbach's assessment that "the long barbarism of the frontier created something akin to a barbarian ethos in parts of Texas. The strong were respected, even if they might be hated; the weak, or late-comers clamoring for 'their share' tended to be despised" (612) shows that Howard's depiction of the conditions in the Old West and the Texas frontier was not as wrong or exaggerated as it may appear.

On this background Howard regarded the use of violence given certain circumstances indeed as legitimate if not natural, although, I am arguing that this does not allow the claim that he condoned the use of violence. This legitimate use of force was based on the ethos of the life in the Old West and the Texas frontier. Disrespecting the rules and social manners that formed the etiquette of the society of the frontier was sufficient reason for being at the receiving end of violence. Howard gave such an example of the legitimate use of violence in a letter to Lovecraft. According to Howard, hospitality "was the custom in those days; hospitality was almost a sacred obligation; if a man stopped at your ranch, you made a place at your table without asking him who he was or where he was from" (*Means to Freedom* 702). In the episode Howard mentioned, a group of travelers asked for hospitality at the house of a rich Easterner who was not familiar with these rules. The man ordered his cook to deny the travel-stained group any service. What the farm owner did not realize was that one member of the group was the outlaw Billy the Kid. This resulted



nearly in him being shot by the famous gunman, an act that Howard viewed as perfectly appropriate with regard to the breaking of the frontier etiquette.

In spite of this, the era of the Old West and Texas frontier was for Howard not only a time full of daily violence and peoples' struggles to survive among such conditions. Howard's letters to Lovecraft show that his real appreciation of this era was based on an utterly different aspect: the moral superiority of the men and women living in this time, "the loyalty of men, their readiness to shoulder each other's burdens, their honesty, and their kindness" (*A Means to Freedom* 639). Hand in hand with this opinion came a further reason for Howard's admiration of the era of the Old West and Texas frontier: "That's why I love the memory of the frontier; there a man was not judged by what he had or what he knew, but by what he was" (*A Means to Freedom* 639).

Once again, like Howard's previous claim that era of the Texas frontier offered a freedom modern times did not have, this statement above goes beyond expressing admiration for the open-mindedness of the people of the frontier era; I am arguing that Howard's statement refers very much to his own person and situation in his real-life environment and expresses wishful thinking in which Howard projected that he would have fared better under the conditions in the era of the Texas frontier. In the first part of this thesis I have shown that Howard felt misunderstood and disrespected by the citizens of Cross Plains. In Howard's view his fellow citizens regarded him as strange because he did not work in a regular job and instead wrote stories for magazines of dubious reputation. He believed that nobody of his community realized his success as one of most popular writers of *Weird Tales*, the magazine that published most of his work. Howard's fellow citizens also did not see the work and discipline that it took to write stories that would sell. On this background I am arguing that Howard's line of thinking led him to assume that he would have gotten the respect that was denied to him in his life time in the era of the Texas frontier where, according to him, people were more open minded than in the time he lived in.

I am arguing that this lends Howard's image of the Texas frontier and the era of the Old West a romanticizing if not outright idealizing aspect. The reality at the frontier was doubtlessly different from Howard's image: although I agree with Howard's assessment that the frontier offered a man the opportunity to prove himself and establish himself by his deeds, I regard it as very doubtful that Howard would have received the respect he was craving for in this era. Life at the Texas frontier required other skills than being a pulp writer in order to survive.

Another point for Howard's love for the era of the Texas frontier shows also strong parallels to his own real-life situation. To Lovecraft, Howard wrote that in the Old West "poverty was not degrading" (*A Means to Freedom* 638). I think that in this passage Howard revealed—possibly without his intention—more of his real feelings and the situation of his family. Although Howard was a successful writer who sold a lot of his stories, Howard's main customer *Weird Tales* only paid on publication. After the acceptance of a story it often took several months or even longer until the story was finally published. Even then, *Weird Tales* did not pay Howard as the magazine was constantly under financial pressure and on the verge of running out of business as pulp fiction researchers as Robert Weinstein and John Locke agree. With Howard's mother having severe health issues that required expensive treatment, this lack of income drove the Howard family close to poverty, which was a condition that Howard obviously felt as degrading.

In this context I find it interesting to note that Howard used the fate of another impoverished writer as an example to support another point that he admired about the people from the era of the Texas frontier: this was "the loyalty of men, their readiness to shoulder each other's burdens, their honesty, and their kindness" (*A Means to Freedom* 639). To prove this statement Howard claimed that Edgar Allan Poe would not have suffered poverty by the end of his life, because his neighbors would have supported him and helped him to take care of his own life. I regard this as a very daring assumption—especially when considering Poe's irascible and unstable personality, as well as his tendency of not paying back debts. Both of these

character features were not compatible to the customs and etiquette of the frontier and I regard it as much more of a possibility that Poe would have rather found a violent premature end than receiving the help Howard assumed he would have gotten. This passage again strongly supports my opinion that Howard's image of the Old West and the Texas frontier was indeed an idealizing of the conditions of this era.

I regard Howard's positive image of the era of the Old West and the Texas frontier as more based on his assumption that the people of this period had superior positive character features than the actual freedom Howard thought to have had in this time. In Howard's eyes these positive character features of the people of the frontier era were also mirrored in their customs and other areas of their daily lives. In one account Howard described how his grandfather handled his business as a moneylender. Howard claimed that his grandfather lent money to strangers who appeared at his house without having them sign any documents or demanding witnesses, fully trusting in the honesty of the people borrowing from him. In spite of handling such transactions this way, the money, including interest, was returned by the agreed date. According to Howard, his grandfather began to lose money when Texas "began to fill up with smart gentlemen from the civilized sections who knew all about business methods" (*A Means to Freedom* 639).

Howard's depiction of the way his grandfather conducted business is not a romanticized version of the Old West. Business in this era was indeed handled based on oral agreements, which happened out of the necessity that there were no lawyers that could be asked to write legally binding contracts for the business parties. Lawyers were among the group of later arrivals to the west, after the first rough settlements had been established in the wilderness and had then turned into towns and cities. In the era of the Old West, a man who did not keep his word was regarded as a liar. A man marked as a liar would not be able to make any business as nobody would trust him or deal with him. Calling someone a liar in these times was herewith the worst possible insult. Being called a liar or having the reputation of being a liar could destroy a man's existence at the frontier. Calling someone a liar were so called

fighting words that led inevitably to a violent altercation as the necessary response of the insulted party to save his reputation. In fact, many Hollywood Western movies made before the 1970s reflect this aspect of the Old West in scenes in which the seemingly harmless insult “liar” is the trigger that starts a gunfight.

Another one of Howard’s statements I have mentioned above, in which he complained about the influx of people from “the civilized sections,” (639) from outside of Texas and the negative impact of these new arrivals leads to my next point: his critical stance towards civilization and the time he was living in.

In the chapter about Howard’s creation of his pseudo-history I have drawn attention to the fact that Howard expressed a highly critical stance towards civilization. In fact, the closing lines of the Conan story “Beyond the Black River” perfectly summarize Howard’s standpoint towards civilization: “Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. . . . Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph” (100). In my opinion, Howard’s definition of barbarism corresponds to his view of the life conditions of the era of the frontier: people led a more natural life not ruled by artificial, freedom infringing laws, and monotonous, unfulfilling work. In Howard’s view civilization was responsible for the corruption of this natural state of mankind. Howard made it very clear in the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age that in his eyes, civilization was nothing more than an intermediary state of mankind. Civilizations were end stadiums in the evolution of people and races. Civilizations could not develop any further. They became decadent and were consequently destroyed by uprising barbarians who themselves turned into a decadent civilization.

In respect to the history of Texas, Howard regarded early 20th century Texas and the time he was living in as the antithesis to the time of the Old West and the Texas frontier. The event that catapulted Texas into the 20th century and changed the state was the oil boom that began in 1901 at the Gulf Coast. The oil boom had a similar effect on Texas as the 19th century California Gold Rush. It drew companies and technology from outside of Texas into the state as well as the masses of people

hoping to make a fortune. Wherever oil was found in rural Texas a similar scenario occurred. Over night the population of the communities where oil was found swelled several times their original number. Together with the masses of oil field workers, mostly unskilled migrant workers, came the camp followers consisting of businessmen, legitimate ones as well as disreputable ones, and vice in form of prostitution and crime. Ann L. Beeler writes about the outbreak of the oil boom in Cross Plains in February 1920, where Howard and his family lived:

Within two months of the discovery of the well, it became obvious that Cross Plains was a boom town. Houses were built, under construction or plans were being made to build. Even then, there was never enough housing to go around.

The city fathers were warned that the danger to both life and property that had been the experience of all other oil towns should lead to immediate steps being taken to provide at least a night watchman. A month later Higginbotham Brothers & Co.'s store was burglarized. (113)

Robert E. Howard had spent his early childhood in several oil boom towns before the Howard family settled down in Cross Plains. Howard's letters contain many references to the negative experiences he had gathered during his life in such oil boom towns. In a letter to *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright he wrote, "I'll say one thing about an oil boom—it will teach a kid that life's a pretty rotten thing, about as quick as anything I can think of" (*Collected Letters 2*: 199), clearly expressing that in his opinion the oil boom did not bring positive changes that improved the lives of people but rather the opposite.

Howard's openly expressed disgust about the vice, the violence and general loss of human decency that he professed to have had witnessed in these places is, in my opinion, reminiscent to the decadence he ascribed in his pseudo-history of civilizations. This allows, in my eyes, the conclusion that Howard's negative view of modern times originates in his experiences during the Texas oil boom of the early 20th century. Howard lamented the oil boom's negative, deteriorating effect on the

moral and physical well-being of the young Texans in another letter to H. P. Lovecraft, writing that “I’ve seen whole towns debauched by an oil boom and boys and girls go to the devil whole-sale. I’ve seen promising youths turn from respectable citizens to dope-fiends, drunkards, gamblers and gangsters in a matter of months” (*A Means to Freedom* 91). In my opinion, Howard’s statement can indeed be seen as a dire prediction that due to the oil boom the state of Texas was about to change for the worse: the oil boom corrupted the new generation of young Texans. This generation’s loss of the positive moral characteristic features of their ancestors would lead to the end of the traditions and the lifestyle that had made Texas the last state in which the traditions and values of the pioneers of the frontier were still alive.

In spite of his rejection of the social and technological changes that occurred in the time he was living in, I would like to argue that Howard also realized that it was impossible to stop this development. This realization of the ultimate end of Howard’s beloved era of the Old West and the Texas frontier is also reflected in his literary work.

### 3. The End of the Texas Frontier in Howard’s Work

Howard conveyed his infatuation with the Old West throughout his correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft and I would argue that with Lovecraft he could not have had a person more unsuited to understand his arguments. In fact, Lovecraft was utterly unfamiliar with the history, mentality, and culture of Texas. In my opinion, he presented Howard’s antithesis, the Easterner who lived safely and comfortably in cities full of historic architecture and culture, protected by laws and enjoying the fruits of civilization and modern technology.

I would like to stress that it was indeed Howard himself who contributed significantly to the fact that Lovecraft received a distorted image of the era of the Old West and Texas frontier as being a time and place that was ruled by violence and murder: although Howard was full of praise for the better morals of people living in

this era, he focused more on the depiction of the violent aspects of the Old West and the Texas frontier. Howard's letters resulted in Lovecraft gaining a one-sided image of the Texas frontier and the Old West as being nothing more than a period of daily gunfights and acts of random violence. Furthermore, I would like to claim that in his letters Howard argued not from a 20th century perspective but from the point of view of a person living in this past era. Lovecraft did not realize this idiosyncrasy. From Lovecraft's standpoint Howard hereby appeared not only to express understanding for the violence of the Old West and Texas frontier, but he also seemed to outright justify it and Lovecraft could not and would not condone such a stance.

Moreover, Howard also argued aggressively that barbarism in general was clearly superior to the civilization of modern times. Whenever Lovecraft presented arguments for the positive sides of civilization, Howard rejected Lovecraft's opinion. This led to the point that Lovecraft stated in a letter, written in July, 1934, that people denying the advantages of modern times and civilization and not endorsing them were "enemies of mankind" (*A Means to Freedom* 799). Howard took this statement as Lovecraft accusing him personally as such an enemy of mankind. In the course of the following, very heated, debate which then shifted to the topic of the era of the Old West and Texas frontier having been the better time to have lived in, Howard wrote, "I realize the frontier epoch is over. I merely say that I wish I had lived then, instead of now. That wish is not nearly so outrageously uncommon as you believe, nor is it any evidence of a twisted viewpoint or a repudiation of human standards" (*A Means To Freedom* 941).

I regard Howard's above cited claim that he very well realized that the epoch of the Old West and Texas frontier as very important. This statement clearly disbands any accusations and speculations that Howard was a person who was stuck in a past he glorified to the point of romanticizing it without acknowledging the harsh realities of this time and era. I would also like to point out that there is even more proof of the truth of Howard's statement. Howard's literary work contains stories, written as early as 1933 in which Howard's realization of the end of the era

of the Old West is clearly expressed: Both, “Old Garfield’s Heart,” published in the December 1933 edition of *Weird Tales* and the unpublished “Wild Water” are what I regard as Howard’s literary farewells to the Old West and the Texas frontier era.

“Old Garfield’s Heart” focuses on local color elements and deals with the end of the era of the Old West and Texas frontier in a melancholic and personal way. “Wild Water” is an angry depiction how the influx of Eastern technology and corruption of Texas mentality causes the end of old traditions and the destruction of nature.

(a) “Old Garfield’s Heart”

In 1933 Robert E. Howard wrote August Derleth:

How did you like “Old Garfield’s Heart” in the latest *Weird Tales*? There wasn’t much to the plot, but the background and environment were realistically drawn. I guess I ought to sit down and write a lot of yarns laid in this country, but I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to sell them. To the best of my knowledge nobody has ever truthfully depicted the cross-timbers belt, and so I doubt if I would find a market. (*Collected Letters* 3: 154)

“Old Garfield’s Heart” belongs to the group of Howard’s weird western stories, in which he mixed the western and horror genre.<sup>3</sup> The story is told in a first person voice from the perspective of a nameless young narrator and is about Jim Garfield, an early settler, or old timer, of the Texas frontier. When Garfield is mortally wounded in a fight with Comanche, an Amerindian medicine man appears and saves Garfield’s life by putting the heart of an Indian god into his chest. As a result, Garfield does not age and turns into a semi-immortal. Being not immune to a violent death, an injury damaging Garfield’s brain will turn him into a full-fledged zombie as the magic heart will continue to keep his dead body alive.

In my opinion, Howard used the frame of this supernatural western story to present his readers a glimpse of the past era of the Old West and Texas frontier. He



achieved this feat via including in “Old Garfield’s Heart” aspects of regional Texas, ranging from culture, tradition, life, and mentality to the history of the Lone Star State. In my view, this effort resulted in the realistic depiction of the story’s setting in the rural Texan community of Lost Knob, a fictive version of Cross Plains, the town Howard lived in.

In fact, “Old Garfield’s Heart” is full of descriptions of the life in rural Texas in the early 20th century Texas. The very beginning of the story, a scene in which a young man is sitting on the porch of a house and listening to his grandfather’s stories about the history of Texas, portrays a view that could be seen throughout rural Texas before the invention of television or radio. Furthermore, Howard’s various biographers mention that he collected traditional songs and stories of the Old West by talking and listening to Texas old timers. The opening scene of “Old Garfield’s Heart” can, in my eyes, be read as a depiction on how Howard did his research on Texas culture and history.

The same scene features another subtle reference to an aspect of Texas culture: when the narrator’s grandfather mentions Jim Garfield, he asks his grandson, “[You] think old Jim’s the biggest liar in this count, don’t you?” (“Old Garfield’s Heart” 379) to which the narrator replies, “[He] tells some pretty tall tales” (379).

Mark Finn shows in *Blood & Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard* that Howard was in fact deeply rooted in the tradition of the Texas tall tale, which is a unique story telling mode of the American Southwest. The Texas tall tale’s goal is creatively lying but not with the intention of deceiving the audience, but rather to entertain the listeners as well as the story teller himself. I am arguing here that this fleeting mentioning of this regional story telling mode clearly demonstrates Howard’s intention to put as much local color into “Old Garfield’s Heart” in order to show a detailed picture of Texas culture and history. This attribute raises the story hereby above the level of a simple weird western tale.

Moreover, the story’s opening scene between the young narrator of the story and his grandfather talking on the porch also has a timeless atmosphere as at first it is

not clear whether the story's setting is in the late 19th century or the early 20th century. The arrival of Doc Blaine, the town physician in his car firmly takes the reader back into the modern times of the early 20th century. Considering the local color elements I have pointed out so far, I would like to argue that on this background Doc Blaine can also be understood as the literary alter ego of Howard's father Dr. Isaac Howard, who was Cross Plains' town physician and who also visited his patients on their farms outside of town by car.

It is Doc Blaine who takes the reader back into the 19th century when he and the story's narrator visit the property of Jim Garfield, which Howard describes as a space that still has not made the step into the 20th century: "Old Garfield's dwelling-place was reminiscent of the past. The boards of the low squat house had never known paint. Orchard fence and corrals were built of rails" (381).

Garfield's house is later described in further detail:

Old Jim had not gone to bed when we got there. He was sitting in the room opening on his sagging porch, the room which was at once living-room and bedroom, smoking his old cob pipe and trying to read a newspaper by the light of his coal-oil lamp. All the windows were wide open for the coolness, and the insects which swarmed in and fluttered around the lamp didn't seem to bother him. (385)

Considering that stories produced for the pulp fiction were based on action, this lengthy inclusion of the description of Garfield's home is, in my view, surprising as it does not provide any information necessary to drive on the story's plot. I am claiming that Howard included this depiction in the story as he felt that this kind of housing had become rare by the time he wrote the story. With this passage Howard presented the readers another memory of the Old West and Texas frontier era.

In the previous section about Howard's view of the Old West, I have addressed the point that Howard regarded the people of the era of the frontier as better than their descendants living in modern times. I have also shown that Howard especially mentioned their willingness to support each other. In "Old Garfield's Heart" Howard

presents how this feature of the frontier era has been preserved in Lost Knob in the early 20th century. When the storyteller's grandfather learns in the beginning of the story that Jim Garfield's health is in bad condition, he asks, "[Who]'s takin' care of him?" (379) to which the story's narrator replies, "Joe Braxton—against Garfield's wishes. But somebody had to stay with him" (379). It turns out that Joe Braxton is a helper who was hired and paid by Doc Blaine. I am arguing that this passage hereby allows the conclusion that Howard regarded this fictive region of Texas still as a frontier, at least in terms of keeping frontier traditions still alive.

But "Old Garfield's Heart" also shows that the values and morals of the frontier are losing their validity in modern Texas. In the second part of the story Howard describes an incident in which these values and moral standards are betrayed by the town bully Jim Kirby, who, I would like to argue, represents the new Texas generation that has been corrupted by the modern era Howard was so critical of. According to the story's narrator, "[Kirby] had bought a steer from my father, and when my father went to collect for it, Kirby claimed that he had paid the money to me—which was a lie" (383).

With this incident, Howard shows in a twofold way how much the modern era has deteriorated the traditional values of the frontier. First, the bully Kirby abuses the tradition of trust and honesty. Like Howard's money lending grandfather who trusted the men he made business with, the storyteller's father dealt with Kirby under the assumption that Kirby would stick to the old ways in which a man's word was worth as much as a written contract. Kirby betrays this trust with his false claim of having given the money to the story's narrator. More disturbing than the betrayal of these moral standards is the second point Howard is insinuating. Kirby is not a stranger to the narrator's father. In fact, he is a member of the community of Lost Knob and hereby should be among the group of people who support each other in times of need. Instead he openly cheats a member of his own community. I would argue that with Kirby and his behavior, Howard indeed predicted the end of the traditional social structures in rural Texas.

The incident draws even bigger consequences: Kirby goes so far as to brag with his deed and further humiliates the narrator by threatening him with violence and insults him as a weakling. This leads to the narrator settling the conflict in the old way of the Texas frontier, using justified violence to restore his honor: he attacks Kirby with a knife and slashes his face, hereby visibly marking him in the community as a liar nobody can trust.

In the previous chapter, I have pointed out a scene in *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* in which Howard's literary alter ego inflicts a similar act of violence on someone who slighted him. In *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* there is no mentioning of any legal repercussions of this act. I regard it as interesting that Howard handles the similar scenario in "Old Garfield's Heart" in an utterly different manner when the story's narrator states that "there was a preliminary hearing, and I was indicted on a charge of assault, and the trial was set for the following term of court" (384). In this short sentence, Howard corrected Lovecraft's assumption of Texas being a lawless place ruled by the use of violence and the law of the stronger. Howard, by mentioning a working judicial system in Texas, expressed that another aspect of the era of the Old West was once and for all over: the use of violence as a means to solve problems and vigilantism. This passage is another proof that supports my claim that Howard, in spite of his love for the past era of the Old West and Texas frontier, was indeed not stuck in the past.

This past, the history of Texas, is very much alive and present in "Old Garfield's Heart" in form of the story's semi-immortal protagonist Jim Garfield. Howard leads the reader in "Old Garfield's Heart" to realize Garfield's unnaturally old age by connecting Garfield's life with crucial events in the history of Texas: according to the storyteller's grandfather, Garfield was at the battle of San Jacinto (1836) as a result of which Texas separated its ties with Mexico and became an independent republic. The grandfather also mentions that Garfield was serving under the famous Texas Rangers Jack Hayes and Ewen Cameron in the Mier expedition in 1842. I am regarding Howard's linking of Jim Garfield with these historical episodes,

as well as others found in “Old Garfield’s Heart,” as an act of making Garfield a symbolic personification of the era of the Old West and Texas frontier.

Moreover, Howard understood that the history of the Old West and the Texas frontier was not exclusively a history of the white man taming a wild land. Howard also added the character of the Amerindian medicine man Ghost Man, who in the story had implanted the magic heart into Jim Garfield’s chest. Ghost Man is like Jim Garfield linked with historical episodes of the land before the arrival of the Texans. According to Jim Garfield, Ghost Man knew the Spanish conquistador Coronado, whose expedition into the region that became Texas took place in 1540. With this, I regard it as possible to see Ghost Man as the personification of the history of the Amerindians who had lived in the lands that eventually became Texas.

The end of “Old Garfield’s Heart” finds Jim Garfield, the last remaining frontiersman and witness of the history of the Old West, dying. The old timer Garfield’s death is caused by Jim Kirby, the representative of the new, corrupted generation of Texans. This act supports again my claim that Howard had understood that the era of the Old West was something of the past and over. By the end of the story, Garfield’s heart, which has kept him alive for so long, is taken out of his breast and returned to Ghost Man, who has suddenly shown up at Garfield’s hut. When Ghost Man leaves the hut, the young narrator of the story follows him but cannot find the old Amerindian. Ghost Man, symbol of the Amerindian tribes of the American Southwest, the Lipans, Comanche, and Kiowa has disappeared without a trace.

With the vanishing of these two elemental features of the Old West and the Texas frontier, the old timer who had explored, settled and fought in the frontier, and the Amerindians who had roamed the ranges of Texas in the times before the arrival of any settlers, Howard expresses his realization of the end of the Old West and Texas frontier. In my eyes, this turns “Old Garfield’s Heart” into a very personal story of Howard’s in which he gave a literary farewell to the era he so much appreciated.

(b) “Wild Water”

While “Old Garfield’s Heart” is, in my argument, a very personal and sad farewell to the era of the Old West and Texas frontier, I regard “Wild Water” as the opposite: the story is an angry depiction of the fruitless attempt to stop the advance of modern times into Texas.

“Wild Water” is a modern Western set in Depression era Texas and depicts the fall of Jimmy Reynolds, a man who does not understand the many changes brought by the new times and the influx of modern technology into rural Texas. When Reynolds kills a local businessman who cheats the farmers out of their land, he is hunted by the police. During this chase Reynolds experiences the transformations in his environment and finds his ultimate demise.

“Wild Water” was never published during Howard’s lifetime. This is, in my eyes, not surprising as the story’s plot appears to amount to nothing more than being a description of the pursuit of the unlikable protagonist, Jimmy Reynolds. In spite of these seeming flaws the story is of importance in Howard’s work as it proves again his understanding of the end of the era of the Old West and the impact of modern times on rural Texas.

“Wild Water” is full of descriptions of the bleak conditions of a Texas that is shaken by the Depression and has lost all its former glory of the Old West and Texas frontier era: farmers, unable to repay bank loans are evicted from their land. Furthermore, the technology brought into Texas from the East coast is used without any understanding of local conditions, ignoring the warnings of the local population about possible dangers. In the final act of the story this oversight will lead to a catastrophe that not only results in the further destruction of nature but also the ruining of the existence of many locals whose ancestors had been among the first settlers in this region. In my opinion, Howard presents here a scenario of Texas being taken over by Easterners without the understanding and respect for Texas. This is a setting that is reminiscent of the years of the Reconstruction era that followed the Civil War, when Texas was administrated by outside powers from the North. The

Reconstruction period was also marked by lawlessness and the capriciousness of the newly established authorities that were more intent on humiliating the Texans in the aftermath of the Civil War than rebuilding the state from the destruction.

The central conflict of “Wild Water” is the clash between the story’s protagonist Jimmy Reynolds and the changed, freedom infringing conditions brought by modern times into the former frontier region. Jim Reynolds is described as a man who is firmly stuck in the past, the time of the Texas frontier and who is not capable to adapt to the changes the modern times require. In fact, Reynolds is “an atavism, the personification of anachronism . . .” (“Wild Water” 136). In Reynolds “. . . always smoldered an unrest and a resentment against conditions that restricted and repressed” (136).

The established law that we find in the Texas depicted in “Old Garfield’s Heart” does not exist for Reynolds. His solution to legal trouble follows the barbarism of the frontier that has been pointed out by Texas historian Fehrenbach. Howard describes Reynolds as a man whose “mind leaped as naturally toward personal violence as that of the average modern man turns to processes of law. He was literally born out of his time. He should have lived his life a generation before, when men threw a wide loop and rode long trails” (136). I am arguing that in this passage Howard clearly presents Reynolds as a symbol of the past era of the Old West or frontier time. Accordingly, this reflects heavily in Reynolds’ behavior and his line of thinking that is displayed in the run of the story.

In the correspondence to Lovecraft in which Howard described the history, culture of Texas, and the mentality of the Texans, he did not condone violence in general. Nonetheless, he showed an understanding that Texans resorted to violence when outsiders disrespected their values and traditions. In case of Jim Reynolds, the changes forced upon his environment and upon the region’s people by businessmen, bankers, and technology from the East turns out to be too much to bear and his natural reaction is turning to violence. Reynolds fulfills his intention by killing Saul Hopkins, the man whose loans to farmers turned them into paupers and whose lands

Hopkins' company acquires.

I have mentioned that "Wild Water" was never published during Howard's lifetime and the reason for the story's rejection is an obvious one. Howard regarded himself as a proud Texan and wrote "Wild Water" from the view of a Texan. For him, Reynolds' conduct of killing the businessman who dispossessed farmers for not repaying their loans was an understandable act that on the background of the code of the Old West could even be regarded as an act of self-defense. Reynolds has been depicted as a personification of old ways of the Old West and in the story he acts accordingly. The East coast editors of the pulp magazines to which the story was submitted to were not familiar with Howard's line of thinking in the old traditional Texas way. Thus, to these editors the protagonist of "Wild Water" was nothing more than a murderer, or to use more modern diction, a terrorist. As a result, a story featuring such an unlikeable main character was not appealing.

Like "Old Garfield's Heart," "Wild Water" also features scenes that depict the end or corruption of the traditions and customs of the Old West. One of these customs was the aforementioned obligation to offer hospitality to anyone asking for it, regardless of the person's background. When Jim Reynolds runs from the police, he drives to Joel Jackson's house, where he does not ask, but demands to be given hospitality: "Joel, you've got reasons for befriending me. I can't hide out in the hills all the time, because there's nothin' to eat. You live here alone, and don't have many visitors. I'm going to stay here a few days till the search moves into another part of the country . . ." (140).

To someone not familiar with the historical and sociological background of the history of the Old West the scene above does not make any sense: Reynolds' demanding shelter seems to be preposterous and Jackson's agreement to hide the fugitive killer is not logical. I have mentioned before that according to Howard, offering and receiving hospitality was an essential part of the life and traditions of the Texas frontier. In this context, Reynolds' demand to be taken in and his expectation to be offered protection does not appear as strange at all. Rather, it is something that



is natural.

Thus, with hospitality being given, the possibility of being betrayed by his host would seem impossible for Reynolds. Nonetheless, this betrayal happens when Jackson calls the police. This betrayal—an act for which Jackson even uses modern technology in the form of a telephone—can be seen as much more than a simple act of selling someone to the authorities; it amounts to the end of a tradition without and in which the West could have never been settled. The enormity of Jackson's deed leaves Reynolds not just speechless—he seems to be incapable of processing what was done to him: “A savage resentment made thinking a confused and muddled process. Jackson. The one man south of Lost Knob he had thought he could trust, had betrayed him—not for gain, not for revenge, but simply because of cowardice. Reynolds snarled wordlessly” (145).

Just as Jack Kirby in “Old Garfield's Heart,” the traitor, Joel Jackson, is another example of Howard's view that the modern times corrupted people. For both Kirby and Jackson, the values and traditions of the frontier do not count anymore. Egoism, personal profit, and cowardice have replaced solidarity and honesty, the features that made life in the Old West possible.

I would like to point out that in “Wild Water” Howard did not only use the corruption of the customs and values of the Old West as a means to show the damaging influence of modern times. In “Wild Water” he also used an actual event in his immediate environment to point out the damaging influence of Eastern technology. In fact, “Wild Water” is based on the overflowing of Lake Brownwood that occurred on July 3, 1932, when a record rainfall surpassed the estimated amount of water the artificial lake could hold. In “Wild Water” this flooding forms the final act of the story. After Reynolds barely escapes the police at Jackson's house, a rainstorm occurs. During his escape, Reynolds passes an artificial lake that was constructed based on plans by Eastern engineers. He soon realizes that the lake's dams are about to overflow if the rain continues to be so strong when he sees a man on the dam. The stranger on the dam turns out to be Bill Emmett, another farmer

who has lost his property to the banks.

Just like Reynolds, Emmett also turns to violence when facing legal problems he is not capable of solving. Emmet's plan is to blow up the dam and cause a flood that will destroy the town where the bank that dispossessed him is located. Although Reynolds is sympathetic to Emmet's hostility towards the bank, he is taken aback by the fact that Emmet's revenge will also cause casualties. Reynolds tries to stop Emmet. He kills Emmet in the fight that follows and is mortally wounded himself.

In my view Howard presents this climax of "Wild Water" with an angry irony that I regard as mirroring Howard's own stance: Reynolds, the last representative of the code and values of the Old West fights and dies in order to protect the dam, which is a symbol of the Eastern intrusion into Texas as well as a manifestation of Eastern ignorance and arrogance towards the local population. Even worse, although Reynolds prevents his opponent, Bill Emmet, from blowing up the dam, the story's ending does not make it clear whether Reynolds' sacrifice will prevent the dam from overflowing.

Howard's underlying message of "Wild Water" is deeply pessimistic: modern technology causes more harm than positive results and stopping the progress of modernity is impossible. Those who try to stop this process will find themselves becoming social outcasts and will fail in their attempt to fight this development.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have shown that Robert E. Howard held a deep fascination for the era of the Old West and Texas frontier. He even went so far as to state that he would have rather been born in the past. Howard's main reasons for his infatuation with this era ranged from his assumption that this time offered men more freedom from the boring routine of unfulfilling work that early 20th century laborers had to endure. Howard also believed that he would have been more accepted for his different attitude to life and society in the era of the Old West and Texas frontier. Finally, he perceived the

men and women living in the times of the Old West and the Texas frontier as morally superior than their 20th century counterparts.

In my view Howard's image of this past era was a mix of wishful thinking and romanticizing, especially when it comes to Howard's assumption that he would have found more acceptance during this time. On the other hand, I am arguing that Howard had a sound knowledge of the history, culture, traditions, and folklore of his native Texas which enabled him to have a very realistic image of the conditions in the Texas frontier and the Old West.

Finally, I have demonstrated that in spite of his love for this past era Howard was not stuck in the past, refusing to ignore the great changes the 20th century brought to rural Texas in form of the oil boom and the introduction of new technologies. By analyzing his stories "Old Garfield's Heart" and "Wild Water" I have shown how Howard included in his work his understanding that the time of his beloved Old West and Texas frontier was over once and for all.

## Chapter II: Texas History in Robert E. Howard's Fantastic Stories

### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analyzed Robert E. Howard's view of the Old West and Texas frontier. I described Howard's fascination with this historical period of his native state of Texas that resulted in his critical stance to the changes Texas underwent in the early 20th century. Via the analysis of two of Howard's western stories, the weird western tale "Old Garfield's Heart" and the modern western story "Wild Water," I proved that Howard was not a person who was stuck in the past era of the Old West and Texas frontier and who did not want to accept the new life modern times brought. In fact, I showed that in "Old Garfield's Heart" and "Wild Water" Howard clearly expressed his understanding that his beloved eras of the Texas frontier and Old West were over.

In this chapter, I will examine whether Howard integrated aspects of the history of the Texas frontier and the Old West in his stories. I will not include the corpus of Howard's traditional western stories, which, naturally, contain these aspects as a firm part of the genre. The same counts for Howard's humorous western stories. I regard these as well-written slapsticks in a western environment. In my opinion though, they do not address the topic of the frontier.

Instead, my focus will be on Howard's fantastic stories. I would like to demonstrate that Howard did not only create his own pseudo-history but also integrated the history of the state of Texas in his fantastic stories. With this I hope to provide valid proof of my claim that the Lone Star state history influenced Howard's work. Furthermore, if I can prove that Howard did indeed integrate Texas history in his fantastic stories, this will also support my claim that Howard can be regarded as a writer of Texas. This again will be a new and substantial addition to Howard's list of achievements that are usually reduced to crediting him only with being the writer of fantasy who invented the Sword and Sorcery subgenre.

## 2. Aspects of the Frontier in Howard's Fantastic Fiction

### (a) Howard's Taking the Texas Frontier into the Hyborian Age

In the previous chapter, I discussed the meanings of the term 'frontier' and demonstrated that it stands for more than just being the marker of the westward moving advancement of the settling of the North American continent. The frontier was also a battlefield where the advancing civilization from the East met the resisting wilderness. Moreover, I have pointed out that in this space civilization clashed with wilderness, savagery, and barbarism. I also indicated that the lines between these forces diffused. In fact, civilized people who were the first to arrive in the wilderness lost their civilization and turned back into barbarians or even savages. I gave historical examples of such a loss of civilization by mentioning Puritans who left the safety of their civilized enclaves surrounded by wilderness in order to live with Amerindians. I also pointed out another example of this loss of civilization in the form of the white hunter, the image of the frontiersman, who ventured into the wilderness before the masses of future settlers followed and whom the 18th century writer Hector St. John de Crevecoeur saw as "a semi-savage, a once civilized man reduced by life in the woods . . . to barbarism" (Seelye xiv).

I am arguing that such loss of civilization in a frontier space can also be found prominently in the work of Robert E. Howard. In fact, this clash of civilization and wilderness, barbarism, and savagery that leads to the loss of civilization is, in my opinion, an elemental aspect of Howard's literary work. This is evident in Howard's very critical stance on civilization. According to him, civilization corrupted the morals of men and turned them weak and decadent. For Howard, civilization was a temporary state of mankind that could not persist. Howard's fictive Hyborian Age is, in my eyes, an expression of the ever-repeating historical cycle in which races and people develop from savages to barbarians to civilizations that turn decadent. They are eventually destroyed by upcoming barbarians who will next turn into a decadent civilization that is inevitably doomed to fall.

In my eyes, Howard combined his view of this cycle of history with the aspect

of the frontier. He hereby gave the frontier a new form: he took the conflict of the frontier, the clash between settlers who brought civilization into the wilderness, and the tribes of Amerindians living there offering resistance, and transferred this scenario into his Hyborian Age. Howard achieved this in the frame of the Conan of Cimmeria series, namely the story “Beyond the Black River.”

“Beyond the Black River” is a later entry in the Conan of Cimmeria series and was probably written some time in 1934 when Howard mentioned the sale of the story in a letter dated October. Interestingly, although “Beyond the Black River” is set in the Hyborian Age and is hereby a fantasy story, it has in fact an atmosphere strongly reminiscent of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Leatherstocking Tales* such as “The Deerslayer” and “The Last of the Mohicans.”

In “Beyond the Black River” Conan is a mercenary scout in the service of the kingdom of Aquilonia, which tries to extend its territory by occupying the seemingly unsettled wilderness. I regard it as noteworthy that similar to the history of the American frontier, this Hyborian Age wilderness lies also in the west. Moreover, like the settling of the American West, Aquilonia’s undertaking is not so much a military undertaking but a soft approach: the kingdom does not send soldiers but settlers into this wilderness in order to establish footholds of civilization.

This wilderness, though, is inhabited by the barbarian Picts. In “Beyond the Black River,” Conan learns that the up to now unorganized tribes of the Picts have begun to form one united force and are about to launch an offensive against the settlements. Conan and the young Aquilonian, Balthus, try to warn the settlers and authorities of the impending attack but are ignored. When the uprising finally happens, the only thing left for Conan and Balthus to do is try to bring as many surviving settlers of the initial attack out of the wilderness into the safety of the civilized territory. This undertaking is successful at the price of Balthus’ life, who sacrifices himself when holding up pursuing Picts.

In my opinion, the setting of “Beyond the Black River” features a scenario that is decisively similar to a western story as well as the history of Howard’s native

Texas: the story uses the historic episode of the settling and taming of West Texas, as well as the setbacks of this undertaking and places it into the fictive Hyborian Age. In the Pictish wilderness—the Hyborian Age frontier—the forces of Aquilonian civilization and barbarism in form of the Pictish tribes clash like the settlers of Texas, and the Amerindian tribes at the Texas frontier.

In my view the conditions at this Hyborian Age frontier are similar to the conditions of the frontier of American and Texas history where the civilized men who had come into the wilderness lost all the aspects of their civilization. In “Beyond the Black River,” a group of men is described as “a new breed growing up in the world on the raw edge of the frontier” (59) and as “sons of civilization, reverted to a semi-barbarism” (59). I would like to point out that Howard’s description of these Hyborian Age woodmen is nearly identical to Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s depiction of the American frontiersman and white hunter “as semi-savage, a once civilized man reduced by life in the woods . . . to barbarism” (Seelye xiv).

Another proof of my claim that the frontier diffuses clear differences is that the story’s protagonist, Conan, a barbarian who in fact despises civilization, is actually in the service of the civilized army against uprising barbarians. Moreover, in “Beyond the Black River,” even barbarians fight other barbarians: Conan the barbarian fights the uprising barbarian inhabitants of the wilderness.

For this conflict Howard used another race which he had previously established as his ultimate barbarians: the Picts, who were Howard’s original catalyst to write an alternative history that eventually led to his creation of the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age. This return of the Picts as opponents of Conan of Cimmeria adds significantly to the drama of “Beyond the Black River.” In the previous stories of the Conan series, Howard established Conan as the definitive personification of barbarism. In order to make this clash between barbarians as memorable and exciting as possible, Howard needed to come up with a sufficiently impressive opponent for Conan. This nemesis was the Picts: in “The Hyborian Age” essay, Howard had shown them to be the ultimate barbarians who could not be corrupted by civilization.

The Picts were also the ones that brought the Hyborian Age to an end by overpowering the civilized kingdoms of Howard's fictive age.

A closer look at "The Hyborian Age" shows that the conflict between Conan the Cimmerian and the Picts in "Beyond the Black River" was not one Howard had prepared just for the story "Beyond the Black River." This conflict had its roots much earlier in Howard's pseudo-history: I have pointed out in a previous chapter that Howard had established in the story "Men of the Shadows" and "The Hyborian Age" the fact that the Picts were the hereditary enemies of the Atlantean race. According to "The Hyborian Age" the surviving Atlanteans evolved into the Cimmerians following the cataclysm that destroyed Atlantis, which hereby made Conan indeed an enemy of the Picts.

In spite of the parallels between the historical settling of the North American continent and the setting of "Beyond the Black River," I would also like to point out that Howard significantly deviated from American history in this story. In Howard's Hyborian Age events run differently: The American West was won and settled by the onslaught of civilization, while by the end of "Beyond the Black River," the barbarians have won and all the civilization in the Pictish wilderness has been erased. A woodsman who meets Conan summarizes the defeat of the forces of civilization with a statement that clearly expresses the essence of Howard's view of history: "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. . . . Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph" (100).

I have previously demonstrated that Howard held a critical stance towards civilization. In the Conan of Cimmeria series, Howard's criticism of civilization is expressed by the series' protagonist. Howard uses Conan and his criticism of civilization as the medium to reveal his personal view of the negative aspects of civilization in his literary work. In this context I regard it as interesting that it is not Conan but an anonymous side character who in "Beyond the Black River" proclaims that "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. . . . Civilization is unnatural" (100). This statement concerning barbarism and civilization is the most decisive expression



on this topic in the whole body of Howard's literary work. In my view, this makes "Beyond the Black River" one of the most important stories in Howard's catalogue when it comes to the topic of barbarism and civilization.

Moreover, in addition to Howard's statement above, there is a further autobiographical element in "Beyond the Black River" that makes the story stand out in the Conan series, which reveals further personal insights in Howard's stance concerning the frontier. In the story Conan has side-kicks in form of the young Aquilonian Balthus and his dog Slasher. I regard Balthus, and his dog, as literary versions of Howard and his pet dog Patches. Balthus' is described as being a youth with a "mop of tousled tawny hair" (45) and muscular, which is very similar to how Howard usually depicted himself in letters. Even his literary alter ego, Steve Costigan in *Post Oaks & Sand Roughs* is portrayed in this way.

Balthus is introduced as a youngster who is lacking the necessary skills to survive in the dangerous environment of the Pictish wilderness. The young Aquilonian is not capable of moving silently through the forest but "tramped imperturbably" (45). Although Balthus "was not making as much noise as it seemed to him, [ . . . ] he well knew that the faint tread of his booted feet would be like a tocsin of alarm to the fierce ears that might be lurking in the treacherous green fastness" (45).

With Balthus being Howard's literary alter ego in the Hyborian Age setting, I would like to argue that the clumsiness Balthus displays in the savage environment takes on a special meaning: I regard it as Howard admitting his own possible clumsiness if he were transported from his safe and civilized environment into a frontier-like environment. Howard knew that he was a 20th century man who had grown up in an environment of civilization and that he would be woefully unprepared if he suddenly had to live in a frontier-like environment. With this, Howard also realized and admitted that he would not have a chance to survive among the conditions of his Hyborian Age. And indeed, the rulers of the frontier, the barbarian Picts, kill Howard's literary alter ego as well as his dog in "Beyond the

Black River”. This is, in my eyes, Howard’s sincerest and most open admission to the fact that he did not have the skills to live in a period he loved so much—the era of the frontier.

I have already pointed out that Howard used the fantastic environment of his stories to address personal issues of his real-life environment. Howard’s imagining himself into his Hyborian Age, into conditions that were similar to his beloved era of the frontier, is another such an example. “Beyond the Black River” is hereby not only a story in which Howard takes the frontier of the Old West or Texas into his fictive Hyborian Age. The story is also Howard’s personal reflection on whether he would be able to survive among such frontier conditions—be these in his fictive Hyborian Age, or the frontier of the real world: the Texas frontier.

#### (b) The Frontier and Barbarism in Howard’s Southern Gothic Horror Tales

I pointed out that the frontier was a place where the lines between civilization and barbarism blurred. Whenever civilization urged westward on the North American continent, the frontier was the place where the laws, rules and morals of civilization stopped to exist and had to be established again. Until this was achieved, any restraints on human behavior were lifted.

I have shown that Howard depicted in “Beyond the Black River” the Hyborian Age frontier as a space where civilized man lost his civilization. Howard also presented this view in fantastic stories that were not set in the fictive Hyborian Age but in modern times in places such as the Piney Woods region of East Texas or the swamps of Louisiana. In these stories Howard described this loss of civilization in more detail and took this theme to an extreme level that I will be demonstrating in this section.

Howard used the setting of swamps or dense forests as space that represents the frontier where civilization and wilderness clash in stories such as “Black Canaan,” “The Shadow of the Beast,” or “Moon of Zambabwe.” These stories belong to genres with which Howard is usually not immediately associated, the southern gothic

horror and detective genres.

All these stories depict the swamps as a space where civilization is not advancing but retreating. In the horror story “The Shadow of the Beast,” the protagonist clearly feels the wilderness of the swamps, their resistance which defies the intrusion of civilization and states “the stillness bore heavily upon me. I seemed to sense, in the blackness about me, the spirit of the unconquerable swamplands, the primitive foe of man whose abysmal savagery still defies his vaunted civilization” (97).

In fact, the swamps are not simply stopping the intrusion of civilization. Wilderness is actually taking back the space that civilization had, for a short moment, carved into it. A passage from the story “Moon of Zambabwe” depicts this act of repossession by wilderness:

The young pines had invaded the once generous lawn. The whole place wore an aspect of decay. Behind the Manor, the barns and outhouses which once housed slave families, were crumbling in ruin. The mansion itself seemed to totter above the litter, creaky giant, rat-gnawed and rotting, ready to collapse at any untoward event. (240)

The only thing that remains of this civilization are memories that glorify and distort the past. In “The Shadow of the Beast,” the view of a deteriorating colonial house leads to the protagonist’s yearning musings that:

. . . the house had once been a mansion of the old colonial type. Sitting in my saddle for an instant before I dismounted, a vision of lost glory passed before my mind—a vision of broad plantations, singing negroes, aristocratic Southern colonels, balls, dances—gallantry. All gone now. (98)

Civilization, in this case pre-Civil War civilization, is symbolized by a culture that consists of aristocracy, social events, and a code of conduct marked by gallantry. All of this does not fit at all into the surrounding primeval wilderness. It is more its ultimate antithesis. However, the dark side of this kind of civilization, slavery, is

romanticized to “singing negroes” (98) in the fields of the plantation.

In many of Howard’s stories set in swamps, the inhabitants of these swamps are the descendants of slaves. They are in fact another example of the loss of civilization, although in an unpleasant context that reflects, in my eyes, the socially accepted racism of the United States of the early 20th century: in these stories the swamp dwelling African American descendants are portrayed as being on a lower level than those African Americans who are living outside of the swamps or in cities. This ranking conveys a strongly racist stance: it was in fact slavery which gave in the racist line of thinking the African American slaves their designated place in the pre-Civil War American society; slavery lend them the questionable and illusionary status of being part of this civilization. The moment these slaves were freed and settled in the swamps, they shed the civilization that was forced upon them and returned to their original mode of existence, which was savagery.

The story “Black Canaan,” probably written sometime in 1933,<sup>1</sup> is based on such a setting. There are two versions of this story extant. One version was published in the June 1936 edition of *Weird Tales* and has since then been used for compilations and anthologies of Howard’s work, which makes it hereby the official version. This version appears to have undergone editorial changes that Howard was not happy about. In a letter to August Derleth, he complained that he had to “cut so much of the guts out of it, in response to editorial requirements, that in its published form it won’t much resemble the original theme” (*Collected Letters* 3: 439). In 2011 Glenn Lord issued another version in the privately published journal *The Howard Collector* that indeed shows significant differences with the story’s official version. In this chapter, I will be using both these versions of “Black Canaan,” referring to the version published in *The Howard Collector* as original draft version.

“Black Canaan” is based on an oral telling about “Kelly the Conjure-Man” that Howard had mentioned in letters to H. P. Lovecraft in December, 1930, and January, 1931. Kelly was an African American who lived in the late 19th century in the wilderness of Arkansas. According to Howard, Kelly was “a professed dealer in

charms, and a dispeller of “conjers.” The black folk came to him to have spells lifted from their souls where enemies had placed them by curses and incantations. Moreover, he was a healer . . .” (228). Kelly then abused the power he had over the African American population of this region with some of them turning violent and mad. Howard mentioned that Kelly suddenly vanished from the region without a trace but insinuated that he was probably murdered either by the African Americans or the white population who both had come to fear him.

For “Black Canaan” Howard took the basic elements and the plot of “Kelly the Conjure-Man” and extended it to the length of a short story. In “Black Canaan,” the story’s protagonist and first-person narrator, Kirby Buckner, learns that in his hometown region Canaan, which is located in a swamp region, a racial riot is about to start. Buckner immediately returns home, where he hears that a mysterious African American voodoo priest by the name of Saul Stark is using his power over the region’s African American population to instigate this uprising. On his way through the swamps, Buckner encounters a follower of Saul Stark, an enigmatic girl who has also supernatural powers. Buckner falls under her spell that forces him to attend a ritual in the swamps in which Buckner will be the sacrifice. He nonetheless ventures into the swamps in order to challenge Stark. There Buckner witnesses a ritual; at its peak, the mysterious sorceress is performing a dance. When the girl dies during the dance, Stark loses control over the gathered African Americans. In the following fight, Buckner kills Stark.

The swamps in “Black Canaan” are again a frontier space where civilization and wilderness clash. In “Black Canaan,” this confrontation takes place in form of racial tensions between African American descendants of slaves who are living in the swamp wilderness and the white population living on the outer parts of the swamps. This setting, in which the white population seemingly represents the forces of civilization while the African American swamp population takes the role of the savages or barbarians representing wilderness, is a very problematic one as it features racist stereotypes of the worst kind: the seemingly supreme white population fighting

savage African American swamp dwellers who are out to kill, rape, and loot.

I would like to argue here that in spite of these seemingly racist stereotypes, “Black Canaan” is actually not a racist story. In fact, Howard addressed another aspect of Texas history in this story, namely the historic fear of the white Texas population of the pre-Civil War era of racial uprisings. Historian T. R. Fehrenbach estimates that in pre-Civil War Texas, 182,000 African-American slaves were in bondage, which was roughly one-third of the population. According to Fehrenbach, “The fear of a slave rebellion lay endemic over the black areas of Texas. . . . This incipient hysteria was strengthened, if not entirely caused, by abolitionist agitation in the North, which at this time with almost lip-smacking satisfaction, was prophesying chaos and murder in the South” (316).

The protagonist of “Black Canaan,” Kirby Buckner, clearly expresses this fear when he learns of the possibility of an uprising:

The word was enough to strike chill fear into the heart of any Canaan-dweller. The blacks had risen in 1845, and the red terror of that revolt was not forgotten, nor the three lesser rebellions before it, when the slaves rose and spread fire and slaughter from Tullaroosa to the shores of the Black River. The fear of a black uprising lurked forever in the depths of that forgotten back-country; the very children absorbed it in their cradles. (236)<sup>2</sup>

I would like to argue that considering the historically proven background of slave revolts and the also documented fear of the white population of such uprisings, that “Black Canaan” is in fact not a story which promotes racism or white supremacist ideology. “Black Canaan” is in fact a story of local color. Howard made this historic fear of racial uprisings one topic of the story. He approached this topic by describing it from the point of view of the mentality and mindset of the white population. Hereby Howard had to resort to stereotyping and racist language such as the excessive use of the slur “nigger,” as without it the realistic depiction of the racist mentality of the white population would not have been possible.

In my paper “Local Color and Its Underlying Meaning in Robert E. Howard’s Weird Western, Southern Gothic Horror and Detective Stories,” I have argued that “Black Canaan” is what I have called local color overkill: during the writing process Howard had immersed himself too much into the racist mindset of the white people he wanted to depict as authentically as possible. The result was a story, which contains language and racial stereotypes that a reader of the 21st century would regard as highly offensive, inappropriate and racist.

The swamps as the setting of “Black Canaan” are a place at whose center savagery rules. The African American swamp dwellers in these swamps are described in the draft version of “Black Canaan” as savages who are “primitive and lawless. . . . Untouched by civilization, they remain as primitive as their African ancestors” (*The Howard Collector* 13). But, according to Howard, the white population living on the outer rims of the swamps is also far from being civilized. In the same letter to Lovecraft, in which Howard told him of “Kelly the Conjure Man,” Howard referred to the white population of the Arkansas swamp area as “desperate characters . . . , white folks little above the negro in civilization, and much more aggressive and dangerous” (*A Means to Freedom* 110). The draft version of “Black Canaan” describes the white settlers in a similar way:

In Canaan lived white people . . . , sons and daughters of frontiersmen who first settled the country. . . . Isolated by rivers and swamps, they lived their own lives with little interference from the outside world.

Joe Lafely was right; we were a shut-mouthed breed, self-sufficient, mixing little in the affair outside our borders, and dangerously jealous of our own seclusion and independence. We were clannish, taciturn towards strangers, tied together by bonds of our environment and circumstances. These bonds held me no less strongly than the others, though my travels had carried me far beyond the range of most of them—as far east as Nashville and as far west as San Antonio. (*The Howard Collector* 8)

Both passages indicate the swamps' weakening effect on civilization. The white settlers on the outskirts of the swamps have taken on a tribe-like mentality and existence that puts them down to the level of barbarism.<sup>3</sup> This barbarism of the white settlers is further demonstrated in a passage of the draft version: the creek marking the border of the region of Canaan is called "Nigger Head Creek". In the version that was published in *Weird Tales* there is no further information available concerning the origin of this name. The story's draft version reveals the gruesome details behind this name, mentioning that "once, long ago, the creek had another name; but it had been called Nigger Head, since the black uprising in 1845, when the severed head of the negro leader had been nailed to a tree at that crossing" (*The Howard Collector* 6).

I am arguing that in this passage, Howard revealed not only the violent racism of the region's white population. The severed head's nailing to the tree is more than a warning to the defeated slaves or a deterrent to refrain from further uprisings. It is an act that equals the marking of territory by a group that has lost its claim of being civilized people. Civilizations mark their territory via the establishing of imaginary lines that are understood as borders by other civilized nations. The white settlers in "Black Canaan," whom the swamps have turned into barbarians, have no use for such imaginary borders. Like head-hunting tribes, they keep the severed head of their defeated enemy as a trophy of their victory. They then use it not only as a means of humiliating this enemy even in his death, but also as a fear inducing marker to demonstrate what may happen to anyone who enters their territory with hostile intentions.

In my opinion, with the depiction of the barbarism and savagery that affects the people who live on the outer fringes of such a frontier space, Howard had successfully illustrated the diminishing effect of the swamp space on civilization. In "Black Canaan" this is only a first step, though.

In the story this deteriorating effect of the swamps on the forces entering from the surrounding civilization is much further exemplified. I have previously pointed



out Howard's critical stance on civilization and his conviction that civilization was weak and decadent. According to this line of Howard's thinking, a civilized person who enters a frontier space such as the swamps from the outside cannot survive. In order to survive, the civilized intruder has to lose his civilized layer and return to his savage or barbarian self. In my opinion, this descent into savagery is an essential aspect of Howard's story "Black Canaan."

In my argument, this loss of civilization occurs in various steps. One such step is revealed in the story "People of the Serpent," where the protagonist, a private detective, also finds himself in a swamp location and realizes that ". . . in primitive solitude a man's instincts are whetted" (41). Instinct is a feature lost to the civilized man. A civilization is marked by rules and laws intended to protect man. In addition to these rules, in bastions of civilization such as cities, there are many warning signs, for example traffic signals, that make civilized man's reliance on instinct redundant. In Howard's stories, though, the civilized protagonists who enter the swamps find their lost instincts reawaken. This not only lets them experience more clearly the hostility and the intensity of this swamp environment, but it even saves their lives. In my eyes, "Black Canaan" demonstrates this in the scene in which Kirby Buckner approaches Saul Stark's cabin:

The faint breeze dropped suddenly. The stillness became so intense, it was like a physical impact. I paused, startled; it was as if some inner instinct had shouted warning.

As I stood there every fiber of me quivered in response to that subconscious warning;—some obscure instinct deep in my consciousness sensed peril, as the man subconsciously senses the presence of the rattlesnake in the darkness, or the swamp panther crouching in the bushes. I drew a pistol, sweeping the trees and bushes, but saw no shadows or movement to betray the ambush I feared. But my instinct was unerring; what I sensed was not lurking in the woods about me; it was inside the cabin—waiting. (242-43)

In this scene it is not Buckner's background of having grown up in the wilderness that saves him. It is not the skill of the frontiersman who has learnt to observe and read nature that protects him from the trap set inside the cabin. It is solely Buckner's reawakened instinct and his trust in it that makes him hesitate to enter the cabin.

I would like to point out that this reawakening of instinct and trusting it goes hand in hand with the return of another feature lost to men living in civilization where rational thinking rules: the civilized protagonist again begins to fear and believe in the supernatural. Kirby Buckner's awakened instinct warns him not only of the trap set for him in Saul Stark's cabin. It also tells him what is hiding within the cabin:

[A] horror against which every primitive instinct that was my heritage cried out in panic.

And that instant half-memory woke suddenly. It was the memory of a story of how voodoo men leave their huts guarded in their absence by a powerful ju-ju spirit to deal madness and death to the intruder. White men ascribed such deaths to superstitious fright and hypnotic suggestion. But in that instant I understood my sense of lurking peril; I comprehended the horror that breathed like an invisible mist from that accursed hut. I sensed the reality of the ju-ju, of which the grotesque wooden images which voodoo men place in their huts are only a symbol.

Saul Stark was gone; but he had left a Presence to guard his hut.

I backed away, sweat beading the backs of my hands. Not for a bag of gold would I have peered into the shuttered windows or touched that unbolted door. (243)

Buckner never doubts that the danger awaiting him is a supernatural one. In fact, he even presents rational explanations such as "superstitious fright and hypnotic suggestion," (243) but instantly rejects them, rather trusting his instinct and accepting the supernatural. I am arguing that with this step Buckner has given up the role of the

civilized man who has been saved by Enlightenment from the yoke of superstition and has returned to the level of a barbarian who accepts and fears unexplainable phenomena.

Besides this return to superstition and the reawakening of lost instincts, Howard presents another step in “Black Canaan” that marks how the civilized protagonist turns back to his primeval barbaric self: the sexual temptation, or sexual attraction which the civilized protagonist feels toward a savage female swamp dweller. Shortly after Kirby Bucker enters the swamps, he meets a mysterious woman, the bride of Damballah:

. . . a strange turmoil of conflicting emotions stirred in me.

I had never before paid any attention to a black or brown woman.

But this quadroon girl was different from any I had ever seen. Her features were regular as a white woman’s, and her speech was not that of a common wench. Yet she was barbaric, in the open lure of her smile, in the gleam of her eyes, in the shameless posturing of her voluptuous body. Every gesture, every motion she made set her apart from the ordinary run of women; her beauty was untamed and lawless, meant to madden rather than to soothe, to make a man blind and dizzy, to rouse in him all the unreined passions that are his heritage from his ape ancestors.

. . . My blood bounded suffocatingly through the veins in my temples as I scowled down at her, suspicious yet fascinated. (233)

T. R. Fehrenbach has pointed out in *Comanches: The History of a People* that the first wave of white settlers arriving on the new continent did not consist exclusively of males. In fact, the Puritans had brought along their families and a high birthrate raised the number of the newly-arrived white population within short time. This made the settling of the eastern parts of the North American continent by white Anglo-Saxons a process that had happened mostly without interracial mixing as the newcomers did not turn to native females for their sexual needs.

Interracial mixing occurred only later, after the first Puritan communities were

established and members of these communities began to leave these safe havens. In the wilderness, some of these men came to live with the Amerindian tribes of the region and turned native by taking American Indian women as wives. In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin calls attention to how strongly the Puritans disapproved of this: the Puritans, seeing how these men lived out their sexuality, something that Puritan morals suppressed and condemned, regarded these men and their loss of civilization as souls lost to the devil.

This damning attitude concerning interracial mixing continued to be strictly implanted in the consciousness of the white American society, especially when it came to relations between whites and African-Americans.<sup>4</sup> The forbidden aspect of such a relationship turned it into something akin to the tasting of a forbidden fruit: in the pre-Civil War south, the sexual exploitation of slaves by their white owners was an open secret, with many white slave owners taking African American concubines. Brothels offered African American prostitutes with the prices for their services differing depending on the lightness or darkness of the prostitute's skin color.

During Howard's lifetime, and especially in rural Texas, racial segregation was still the norm. This included also the views on interracial mixing. Howard too expressed clearly racist opinions concerning such interracial mixing. In a letter to H. P. Lovecraft written in December, 1930, he described his childhood encounter with a man of Asian-African background in New Orleans: "The most inhuman hybrid I ever saw was standing in the door of a laundry shop not far off Canal Street, in New Orleans. He—or it!—was as black as any negro I ever saw, but had the slant eyes and broad features of a Chinaman" (*A Means To Freedom* 100).

On the other hand, Howard also voiced fascination with interracial sexual encounters. Howard's piece "Etched in Ebony," which was published 1929 in the *The Junto*, a private mailing list of juvenile writings which was circulated among Howard's friends with literary ambitions, describes such a sexual act. The story, or rather fragment, details the sexual encounter between the first-person narrator and an unknown black woman. It is full of disturbing sadomasochistic violence: the woman

scratches the narrator's face while the narrator punches the woman with his fist in the mouth. I would like to argue that this image of a sexual act between a white man and a black woman, filled with violence and the mutual inflicting of pain, may have very well expressed the early 20th century racist, stereotypical image of supposedly unrelenting unleashed savagery. "Etched in Ebony" is in fact not just a violent erotic fantasy restricted solely to Robert E. Howard. I would regard it actually as the portrayal of an innermost secret, erotic wishful thinking of many young white men of the racist, early 20th century rural Bible belt America.

In "Black Canaan" the temptation of the girl whom Kirby Buckner meets in the swamps wakes primeval yearnings in the civilized protagonist for such forbidden sex that defies the morals and disregards the ethic codes of the protagonist's civilized society. In fact, in the frontier environment of the swamps where civilization has come to an end Kirby Buckner, who claims to have always ignored African American women, immediately feels attracted to the girl. She awakens in Kirby the dormant, supposedly lost lust and the passions of his own savage ancestors. With this, another step is taken in which the intruder from the civilization into the wilderness of the frontier sheds his civilized background. Kirby forgets all his previous dismissing of African American women and falls, in the truest meaning of the word, under the girl's spell.

In spite of Howard's addressing and playing with a major social and moral taboo of his time, the fulfilling sexual act never happens in "Black Canaan." Although Kirby Buckner is forced to follow his temptress into the deepest swamps, the girl dies before the consumption of interracial sex. In the edited version of "Black Canaan" the reason why the girl dies is never clear. In the story's draft version, the girl is in fact killed by Buckner, who hereby violently dissolves the magic spell the girl had put him under. Buckner also frees himself from the girl's improper temptation.

The final and ultimate transformation of the civilized intruder into the frontier space is completed by his return to savagery and barbarism, which occurs during the

final confrontation with his swamp-dwelling nemesis. Here the civilized protagonist sheds his very last remaining layer of civilization: he lets go of all those artificial restraints imposed on him by civilization and turns into a savage, barbaric, primeval being. In “Black Canaan,” this return to savagery is graphically depicted in the fight between Buckner and the voodoo priest Saul Stark.

I ground my heel down his bare foot, crushing his instep. He howled and lost balance, and I tore my knife free and stabbed him in the belly. Blood spurted and he dragged me down with him. I jerked loose and rose, just as he pulled himself up on his elbow and hurled his knife. It sang past my ear, and I stamped on his breast. His ribs caved under my heel. In a red killing-haze I knelt, jerked back his head and cut his throat from ear to ear. (262)

The above-cited fight scene between Kirby Buckner and Saul Stark is next to the depiction of a massacre in the Conan story “Red Nails,” the most graphic depiction of violence in Howard’s literary work. My reason for this claim lies not only in the graphic details which Howard put into the fight scene. The scene’s disturbing, uncomfortable impact lies in the fact that the parties involved in this altercation are ordinary men, not clichéd, cardboard-style heroes. Howard does not show the reader two noble knights following the rules of chivalry. Indeed, there is nothing glorious, heroic or noble in this fight scene; both opponents are desperately trying to survive a confrontation that can only end with the death of one of them, and it is clear from the beginning that no quarter will be given nor is it expected.

For Kirby Buckner, whose transformation is expressed with him being “in a red killing haze” (262), the only way to win is by losing all the restraints of civilization: sticking to rules and codes of conduct imposed on by civilization. This includes fairness, showing compassion, even the hesitating to exploit an opponent’s weakness. Sticking to the conventions of what civilization regards as a fair fight will mean Kirby’s own instant demise as his opponent will ruthlessly use this weakness for his own advantage. As ugly as this transformation is, at the frontier where

civilization and wilderness clash, this shedding of civilization is the civilized protagonist's only chance to win and survive.

I am arguing that this is not simply a point that Howard had made up in order to express his criticism that civilization turns man weak and decadent. Howard's view that barbarism is the natural state of mankind mirrors the historic conditions of the American frontier. In my opinion, though, Howard depicts in this view also the conditions of his native state of Texas which was indeed the final frontier within the United States of America. In this context, it is noteworthy how often historians such as T. R. Fehrenbach use the term barbarism in their publications when referring to the life conditions and the people, whites and American Indians, of the Texas frontier. Indeed, barbarism was the natural state of mankind: at the real-life frontier of Texas history as well as in Howard's swamp landscapes of the Hyborian Age.

### 3. Historic Texas Violence in Howard's Work

#### (a) Violence in Howard's Work and Its Relation with Texas History

To state that violence is an essential aspect of Howard's work means pointing out the obvious. Howard has been sufficiently criticized for the seemingly excessive depiction and use of violence in his stories. In *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, John Clute refers to the violence in Howard's work as "nearly insane violence" (483), and Joachim Alpers has even gone so far to regard Howard as promoting violence and hereby fascism too. I strongly disagree especially with Alpers' claim that Howard promotes fascism and the insinuation that Howard's kind of fantasy literature is fascist literature.

First and foremost, Howard had no regard for fascism. In a debate with Lovecraft, Howard rejected fascism as follows:

. . . nothing but a new fad-name for industrial tyranny. It's the final step of entrenched special privilege-holders, which would peon the people beneath them beyond all hope. The Fascist movement in America is

nothing but a move on the part of the money-barons to establish themselves more firmly than ever, to stamp out the last vestige of freedom in the people beneath them. (*A Means to Freedom* 809)

Furthermore, Howard's kind of individuality, which he expressed in his letters and literary work, was not compatible with a movement that demands from its supporters an ultimate willingness to obey and follow orders. Howard's stories feature admittedly a seemingly fascist trope in form of protagonists who are usually portrayed as a perfectly shaped, strong white super-human who solves his problems using violence. This alone, though, is far from being a sufficient reason to regard Howard's work as promoting fascist ideology. I consider Howard's heroic characters like Conan of Cimmeria more as a representation of the perfect alpha male archetype than an *übermensch*—a super-human—found in fascist ideology. In reply to Alpers' accusation that Howard glorified violence and fascism, I would like to argue that this claim is without any foundation. It is indeed true that Howard's stories feature extensive descriptions of violence. It is also true that his protagonists resort to using violence as a means to get out of dangerous situations. This in itself is neither a glorification of violence nor a support of fascist ideology.

Fascism uses violence as a means to suppress political opposition and to exterminate ethnicities, minorities, faiths, and lifestyles that fascism regards as inferior and not fitting into its ideology. I would like to strongly stress that in Howard's work there is not one single story in which violence is used for such goals.

It is a fact that Howard depicted violent acts as heroic acts: the violent conflict of warriors of equal strength whom fate has taken to a place where both men cannot avoid each other and simply have to fight. Classic literature such as the *Iliad* or the German *Nibelungenlied* is full of such conflicts which critics have labeled as epic or heroic, but not as glorifying violence. Furthermore, even although Howard's heroic characters such as Solomon Kane or Conan of Cimmeria are morally ambiguous and clearly not white knights in shining armor—their motivations are many times based on egoistic reasons—the violence they inflict is in the end always directed against



what can clearly identified as the forces of evil. When Conan in “The Man-Eaters of Zamboula” finally has his opponent, the henchman Baal-pteor, in a grip where he is helpless and breaks his back, then Conan kills a sadist in a fair fight who has admitted to having enjoyed murdering helpless children, women, and people too weak to defend themselves. Conan is indeed cruel and without mercy to his enemies, but Howard is not glorifying the violence Conan uses. When Conan kills an enemy in a fight, the rules are clear: no mercy is being given, nor is mercy expected.

Conan uses violence out of the obvious necessity to survive fights and battles, and Howard does describe these acts with the fervor of a professional story teller. Moreover, Howard was a writer of entertainment literature and needed to deliver sufficient thrills and excitement in order to sell his work. A detailed fighting scene was one such sales point. In my eyes, leveling the accusation of glorifying violence at Howard would be equal to making all literature that features epic, heroic characters, and their achievements in battles guilty of glorifying violence. Such a list would then also have to include classic works such as Homer’s *Iliad* or the *Nibelungenlied*.

In fact, I would like to point out that Howard displayed at times a surprisingly differentiated view concerning violence, which again supports my claim that Howard is not glorifying violence. In the story “Red Shadows” the 17th century protagonist Solomon Kane encounters a young woman. The girl has not only been raped but was also stabbed and left to die. Kane does not know the girl but decides to avenge her. Finding the girl’s murderer lasts years and takes Kane from France into the deepest jungle of Africa, where the inevitable showdown occurs. The paragraph following Kane’s vengeance for the girl, in which he executes her killer reads:

Kane mechanically cleansed his sword on his tattered garments. The trail ended here, and Kane was conscious of a strange feeling of futility. He always felt that, after he killed a foe. Somehow it always seemed that no real good had been wrought; as if the foe had, after all, escaped his just vengeance. (66)

The above passage unmistakably depicts Kane's realization that his violent meting out of justice has not achieved anything at all. Kane does not experience an elevating feeling that tells him that he had acted gloriously. On the opposite, Kane experiences something that I would like to call the bitterness of disillusion: the supposed satisfaction of having avenged the girl and restored justice does not set in. On the contrary, Kane has reached the bitter realization that the man he had just killed has in fact "escaped his just vengeance" (66).

Many of Howard's stories end on a similarly bitter note with the victorious protagonist realizing that his seeming victory is nothing more than a simple, fleeting experience without any further merit. This passage is hereby a clear proof that Howard did not glorify violence. Howard's approach of depicting violence had more to it than just delivering gory details for the joy of pulp magazines' readers and was not a cheap, sensationalist means for Howard to raise the chances to sell his stories.

In fact, the scene of the final confrontation in "Black Canaan," which I have debated above, shows violence in such a realistic way that it actually strips this act of any heroism or glory. Instead the scene transmits, in my view, an uncomfortable feeling on the verge of disgust as it shows men who have shed all their humanity, leaving only their basic instinct of wishing to survive. Howard achieved an unpleasant realism with this passage that raises him above the level of a violence-glorifying, sensationalist writer.

The reason for the wrong assumption that Howard had held an unhealthy fascination for violence that he brought into his literary work can be traced back to the year 1983, in which the first biography about Robert E. Howard was published. In *Dark Valley Destiny: The Life of Robert E. Howard*, the authors L. Sprague De Camp, Catherine Crook de Camp, and Jane Whittington Griffin falsely portrayed Howard as a person who was highly mentally unstable and outright psychotic.<sup>5</sup> Later publications, such as *One Who Walked Alone* (1986), written by Howard's former girlfriend Novalyne Price Ellis and based on her diaries, portray Howard in a different light: he was indeed eccentric and faced inner demons, possibly depression,

but according to Price Ellis he was not the mentally unstable psychotic that De Camp and his collaborators presented him as. Unfortunately, *Dark Valley Destiny* managed to successfully establish this incorrect and negative image of Howard, which even nowadays is falsely regarded as true.

Although the claim that Howard was obsessed with violent fantasies is not correct, the depiction of violence is, as I have already stated, a central aspect of the literature Howard wrote. In my eyes, the origin of this aspect lies not in the supposed mental issues, which De Camp falsely attributed to Howard's behavior, but somewhere else. In 2010, Mark Finn published a significantly revised second edition of his Howard biography *Blood & Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard*, where Finn makes an important observation that until then has not been noticed: Finn presents Howard as a writer of Texas, who in his work incorporated the culture, mentality, and history of Texas. I would like to pick up Finn's claim in order to explain the connection to the violence in Howard's work and his stance on it.

Howard's letters, especially the ones sent to Lovecraft, reveal that he had a deep knowledge of the history Texas, his native state. The history of the Lone Star State is an especially violent one: it includes wars with Spain and Mexico as well as the American Civil War. Texas history also featured bloody conflicts between warlike Amerindian tribes, especially the Comanche and the white settlers. During the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, Texas became a place where outlaws such as the infamous John Wesley Hardin (1853-1895), a gunslinger who according to Leon C. Metz had "killed most likely several dozen (men)" (xi), roamed freely. Furthermore, in addition to all of these conflicts there were also the Texas feuds, violent clashes that began as trouble between individuals and then resulted in a vicious circle of murders that affected whole communities and counties.

For Howard, who was familiar with Texas history, violence was hereby a natural part of this history. In fact, violence was an aspect that in Howard's view continued to be a part of life in Texas even during Howard's lifetime. Furthermore, for Howard violence was an essential part of human existence. The Texas frontier

was a place that was settled by the use of violence. A man who lacked the necessary aggression potential could not have survived in the barbarian environment of the Texas frontier: it was not elaborate words and correct arguments that decided a conflict in such an environment but deeds. T. R. Fehrenbach described the conditions in Texas with the words that the “long barbarism of the frontier created something akin to a barbarian ethos in parts of Texas. The strong were respected, even if they might be hated” (612).

I would like to argue that it is hereby not surprising that Howard had a more understanding stance towards violence if one considers his knowledge of the violent history of Texas as well as his upbringing in rural Texas where the mentality of many people was still closer to the morals and ethics of the 19th century frontier than to the modern 20th century. This does not mean that Howard condoned violence. In his letters as well as his stories, Howard expressively rejected the violence used by stronger bullies against weaker people.

On this background I would like to claim that the depiction of violence that is found in Howard’s work, and the underlying stance according to which violence is an essential part of human existence, does not allow accusations such as Howard having been a fascist or having an unhealthy fixation on violence. The violence the reader finds in Howard’s work is an authentic one that has its roots in the violent history of the Lone Star State and Howard’s understanding of this history.

#### (b) Historic Texas Violence and Howard’s Hyborian Age

The correspondence between Howard and Lovecraft, which began in 1930 and lasted to Howard’s death in 1936 is often reduced by critics and researchers to a supposed debate about barbarism versus civilization which has been summarized by S. T. Joshi in his paper “Barbarism vs. Civilization.”<sup>6</sup> Although the topic of barbarism and civilization frequently appeared in this correspondence, I would like to argue that the overall theme of the exchange between Howard and Lovecraft can also be described as life in Texas versus life on the east coast of the United States.

Howard's letters to Lovecraft are full of depictions of Texas culture, mentality, and history. In the frame of this communication, Howard wrote often about the violent episodes of Texas history. A recurrent topic in this connection was Howard's mentioning of the Texas feuds. These feuds, a word that insinuates the meaning of a minor conflict between individuals, were in fact more than just a grudge or personal disagreement. Paul H. Carlson writes in C. L. Douglas' *Famous Texas Feuds*: "In most cases what started as a minor disagreement between two families escalated into community-wide, mob-driven hostilities" (Foreword n. pag.). Carlson continues:

General outlawry and thievery started the first and bloodiest feud in Texas, the Regulator-Moderator (Shelby County) War in the 1840s. In a general sense it pitted the Republic of Texas era established Texans against newly arrived residents. Some feuds, such as the Mason County War (1875) and the Salt War (1877), were ethnic/racial clashes: the former pitted German-Texans against other American-Texans, and the latter saw Mexicans and Mexican-Americans fighting Anglo-Americans. (Carlson n. pag.)

I regard Carlson's choice of calling these feuds wars as very revealing: these conflicts were not simple violent altercations between families but, as Carlson puts it, acts such as "murder, arson, threat and intimidation, and destruction in shocking proportions" (Carlson n. pag.). According to Carlson, one reason for the scope of these de facto wars was that the inhabitants of the regions in which these wars took place did not have the option to stay out of them but were forced to take the side of one of the opposing factions. Social pressure and structures made it impossible to stay neutral with the result that "law abiding farmers got involved, as did preachers, teachers, and women; plus doctors, dentists, shopkeeper, and lawyers" (Carlson n. pag.).

These clashes took place in the frontier-like environment of Texas at the time, where the law of the eastern states was not yet fully established. Again, there was no restraint on human behavior and all parties involved turned into semi-barbarians who

acted accordingly: a violent act was retaliated with more violence which caused a vicious cycle that in most cases ended with the utter destruction of one of the parties involved.

Howard's correspondence with Lovecraft reveals his knowledge of this violent aspect of Texas history. Although Lovecraft was taken aback with the violence filled image of Texas that Howard regularly described in his letters, he was at the same time impressed with Howard's knowledge. Lovecraft mentioned this feature in Howard's letters to August Derleth, a regional writer of novels, short stories, and poems about Sac Prairie, a fictive version of Sauk City. To Derleth, Lovecraft praised Howard's "tremendous brilliancy, & if his attainments could be disciplined he'd do for West Texas what you're doing for Sac Prairie" (*Essential Solitude* 524). How much trust Lovecraft had in Howard's skills shows in the follow-up letter he sent to Derleth one week later (November 19, 1932), in which he went so far to suggest that Derleth directed Howard into writing regional literature:

There is certainly a vast lot of latent genius in Two-Gun Bob [Robert E. Howard]; & if anyone is adapted to chronicle the saga of the southwest, he's the boy. I wish you could help to bring out the poetry-suffused regional epics which I feel he has locked within him. (*Essential Solitude* 525)

Lovecraft also urged Howard directly to use his knowledge of the history and culture of his hometown region and write a book about it. In fact, Howard himself was well aware of his potential but at the same time also realized the limitations. In December, 1933, Howard wrote to August Derleth, in which he mentioned his story "Old Garfield's Heart":

There wasn't much to the plot, but the background and environment were realistically drawn. I guess I ought to sit down and write a lot of yarns laid in this country, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to sell them. To the best of my knowledge nobody has ever truthfully depicted the cross-timbers belt, and so I doubt if I would find a market. It couldn't be

conventional wild west stuff, because this isn't wild west atmosphere. A few hundred miles to the west lies the country that is ordinarily featured and fictionalized in rustler-cowboy-gunman dramas, but this stretch is unique. And being outside the conception of the average reader or critique, being, so to speak, neither east nor west, in the conventional sense, realistic portrayal would probably be rejected—not falling into some conventional classification. (*Collected Letters* 3: 154)

The passage above proves that Howard realized his pioneer role of being a writer of stories that had his hometown region as their setting. On the other hand, Howard's letter clearly expresses his lack of confidence to sell realistic stories. Howard believed the ambiance of his hometown region to be different from the regular wild west stage featured in other writers' works. In Howard's eyes this difference would make it impossible for him to sell stories that realistically depicted these conditions that were so unlike from the best-selling regular western stories that romanticized the conditions of Texas.

Nevertheless, Howard wrote such regular western stories too. In my opinion, though, despite Howard's familiarity with the history and conditions of the Old West, the frontier, and Texas he did not manage to transfer this knowledge into his regular western stories. I regard most of these stories as of only mediocre quality: with the exception of the story "The Vultures of Wahpeton,"<sup>7</sup> Howard's western stories are formalistic and filled with clichéd cardboard characters. Their depiction of the Old West or the frontier is a romanticized and artificial version that precedes the image later Hollywood western movies would spread worldwide.

I regard it indeed as astonishing that despite of his background Howard did not manage to write a western story which realistically depicted the conditions of the Old West and the frontier. Before addressing the reasons for this idiosyncrasy, I would like to stress, though, that Howard was nonetheless successful in portraying the atmosphere of the Old West and the frontier: he achieved this by transferring these conditions out of their Texas history environment into his fictive Hyborian Age.

I have already shown in an earlier chapter one example of this feature of Howard's. This was the Conan story "Beyond the Black River" to which Howard actually referred to as a "frontier story" (*A Means to Freedom* 817). In fact, if one were to edit the barbarian Picts of "Beyond the Black River" into Comanche, substituted the location of the Pictish wilderness with the West Texas frontier set in the years during the American Civil war and also turned the story's barbarian protagonist Conan the Cimmerian into a Texas Ranger, "Beyond the Black River" would be a western story. Moreover, this story also portrays a chapter of Texas history: the episode of the Texas frontier during the Civil War years when the Comanche tribes realized that the frontier region was not sufficiently protected and began to raid the settlements of the frontier region. The result of these raids was that most of the white settlers left for the safety of East Texas and the frontier was pushed back by nearly two hundred miles.

Howard used this same approach of taking another chapter of Texas history and relocating it into his Hyborian Age when he wrote the final story of the Conan of Cimmeria series. "Red Nails" was written in 1935 and published in *Weird Tales* as a three parts serial between July, and October, 1936. Howard mentioned the story in a letter to fellow *Weird Tales* author Clark Ashton Smith describing it:

A Conan yarn, and the grimmest, bloodiest and most merciless story of the series so far. Too much raw meat, maybe, but I merely portrayed what I honestly believe would be the reaction of certain types of people in the situations on which the plot of the story hung. (*Collected Letters* 3: 367)

Howard did not exaggerate when he referred to "Red Nails" as the "grimmest, bloodiest and most merciless story" (367) of the Conan series as "Red Nails" features indeed a lot of very graphic violence. In "Red Nails," Conan and his female sidekick Valeria find themselves caught in a dome-like city with no possibility to leave. The city turns out to be inhabited by two factions who bitterly fight each other to the death, with one faction marking the demise of each enemy with a red nail



hammered into a pillar. Conan and Valeria find themselves drawn into this conflict. After the group that they joined manages to defeat the opposing faction, Conan and Valeria are betrayed by the female leader of their group. During a ritual in which Valeria is supposed to be sacrificed, an old man appears. Wielding a wand that turns out to be a weapon, the old man causes further massacre. By the end of the story the only survivors left in the city are Conan and Valeria.

Superficially seen “Red Nails” does not seem to be an especially noteworthy entry in the Conan of Cimmeria series as the story recycles a formula that Howard regularly used with other stories of the Conan series: Conan finds himself at an isolated location and the only way to get out of there is by fighting. The only points that make it noteworthy are its higher level of graphic violence that Howard had mentioned in his letter to Smith and the fact that “Red Nails” was Howard’s last Conan story.

There is more to “Red Nails”, though. It is no coincidence that the scenario of “Red Nails,” two groups fighting each other to the death, is reminiscent of the Texas feuds mentioned above. In fact, “Red Nails” is based on Howard’s 1935 visit to the town of Lincoln, which in 1878 was the stage of a historic gunfight that lasted for five days (July 15-19). This gunfight was also a chapter in one of the most famous feuds in the history of the Old West, the Lincoln County War (1878-1881), in which even historical personalities such as the outlaw Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett were involved.

How much of an inspiration the stay in Lincoln was for Howard is demonstrated in my opinion, in a letter to Lovecraft. It contains a lengthy description of the famous gun battle that took place in the town. Howard’s depiction of this gunfight in Lincoln is indeed so intense and full of details that I would argue that Howard reaches a nearly cinematic effect. In the same letter Howard made two interesting observations about the origin of this violent episode:

Burns, in his splendid book that narrates the feud, missed one dominant element entirely; and this is the geographical, or perhaps I should say

topographical effect on the inhabitants. I think geography is the reason for the unusually savage and bloodthirsty manner in which the feud was fought out, a savagery that has impressed everyone who has ever made an intelligent study of the feud and the psychology behind it. The valley in which Lincoln lies is isolated from the rest of the world.

Vast expanses of desert and mountains separate it from the rest of humanity—deserts too barren to support human life. The people in Lincoln lost touch with the world. Isolated as they were, their own affairs, their relationship with one another, took on an importance and significance out of proportion to their actual meaning. Thrown together too much, jealousies and resentments rankled and grew, feeding upon themselves, until they reached monstrous proportions and culminated in those bloody atrocities which startled even the tough West of that day. (*A Means to Freedom* 870-71)

I would argue that this isolation Howard noticed made Lincoln another frontier-like space in which again the values of the distant civilization did not exist or had ceased to exist. When the historical shootout occurred, there was in fact civilization present in Lincoln. The town had a sheriff, a representative of the law of civilization, but he was not able to stop the outburst of violence. Again, the outbreak of barbarism defeated the rules of civilization. Eventually it was the intervention of the army, an outside force coming to the town's help that ended the five-day battle in July 1878.

Howard added another reason to his argument about the isolated location of Lincoln town, writing:

It was with a horror I frankly confess that I visualized the reign of terror that stalked that blood-drenched valley; day and night was a tense waiting, waiting, until the thunder of the sudden guns broke the tension for a moment and men died like flies—and then silence followed, and the tension shut down again. . . . I visualized people caught together like

rats, fighting in terror and agony and bloodshed; going about their work by day with a shut mouth and an averted eye, momentarily expecting a bullet in the back; and at night lying shuddering behind locked doors, trembling in expectation of the stealthy footstep, the hand on the bolt, the sudden blast of lead through the windows. Feuds in Texas were generally fought out in the open, over wide expanses of country. But the nature of the Bonito Valley determined the nature of the feud—narrow, concentrated, horrible. I have heard of people going mad in isolated places; I believe the Lincoln County War was tinged with madness. (871)

Historian T. R. Fehrenbach regards the escalating barbarization of the people living at the frontier, white settlers and Amerindians, as the reason for their brutalization and the excessive violence of the frontier. Violent acts committed by one side were revenged with twice as much violence resulting in further and even stronger revenge. This created the already mentioned spiral of violence that none of the parties involved were willing and also capable of stopping.

In my view Howard's explanation that madness was another reason for the violence of the Lincoln Texas feud makes sense: the psychological stress on the people living at the violence laden frontier must have been immense. Settlers leaving their houses for their fields always had to be alert of possible raids by Amerindians and were never sure whether they would return safely to their homes by the end of the day, or, if they returned whether their home had not become the target of a raid. Experiences such as being involved in a fight for ones' life, even just the witnessing of violent acts or the aftermath of a violent act such as finding the mutilated body of the victim of a raid by Amerindians could also cause severe psychological trauma. What Howard referred to as madness is nowadays known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that requires long psychological and medical treatment, which is an option the men and women living in the time of the Old West and the frontier never had.

Howard infused in “Red Nails” indeed all the points that he had addressed in his letter to Lovecraft about the Lincoln County Feud: the story’s stage is an isolated location, an ancient city where people are confined without being able to leave, and the violence of the war has turned all of them into traumatized madmen. Howard’s portrayal of the city dwellers leaves no doubt of this. Shortly after Conan and Valeria enter the city, they involuntarily become involved in a fight. They end up with saving the member of one of the fighting factions. When the survivor celebrates his victory over the slain bodies of his enemies, Howard describes his expression as “his flaming eyes reflecting a ghastly exultation” (237). Furthermore, the man then “spat on the corpses and stamped on their faces, dancing in a ghoulish glee” (237) with Conan asking Valeria “who is this madman?” (237). The survivor also tells Conan and Valeria that he was born in this city and has never left it, hereby mirroring the confinement and isolation that Howard mentioned in his letter about Lincoln.

The evidence I have presented so far about the background of the creation of “Red Nails” clearly demonstrates the story’s origin in an episode of the history of Texas. This in itself does not make “Red Nails” more than Howard rewriting a historic episode as a fantasy story. What raises “Red Nails” above being more than just a simple transfer of a historic episode into Howard’s fictive Hyborian Age is that in this story Howard included personal reflections and comments about the violence he depicted.

Shortly before the final confrontation between the fractions in “Red Nails,” two soldiers talk about the outcome of the battle:

“Suppose . . . we destroy Xotalanc,” he said. “What then, Xatmec?”

“Why,” returned Xatmec, “we will drive red nails for them all. The captives we will burn, flail and quarter.”

“But afterward?” pursued the other. “After we have slain them all? Will it not seem strange, to have no foes to fight? All my life I have fought and hated the Xotalancas. With the feud ended, what is left?”

Xatmec shrugged his shoulders. His thoughts had never gone beyond

the destruction of their foes. They could not go beyond that. (256)

In this passage Howard raises the question of what will happen with a lifelong soldier, who never knew anything else than violence and fighting after he finally defeats his enemy. In my opinion, Howard could not have addressed this issue if he had depicted the Lincoln Feud in form of a realistic western story. The conditions of the frontier and the Old West did not give the people living there any opportunity to reflect on such an issue. Life at this time and in this place was lived, in my argument, in the moment. Planning a future in a country that was neither fully settled nor civilized was impossible. For the pioneers and the first settlers at the frontier life was not about planning their next steps but simply about getting a day's work done and surviving. The frontier and Old West were no places for philosophical thoughts and questions.

I have already pointed out a similarity to this approach in "Beyond the Black River," where a woodsman becomes the mouthpiece for Howard's civilization critical stance, saying "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind" (100). I regard it as highly unlikely that any real existing frontiersman who had lived in an environment of barbarism would have ever stated such an opinion. These men and women came into the wilderness as the vanguard of civilization. I would like to argue that they arrived there with the explicit idea in mind to bring civilization into the wilderness. I regard it as safe to claim that all these men and women wanted to pursue a life that would put them at one point above the conditions of cavemen and tent dwellers. None of them intended to live continually under the basic conditions and the barbarism which they encountered on their arrival in the wilderness.<sup>8</sup>

It is pointing out the obvious when stating that Howard put his own world view into his stories. This in itself posed no problem for Howard as long as the story was set in a fantastic environment, especially the environment of the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age, which he had created. Things were different for Howard when it came to the portrayal of the history of his native state of Texas in form of a realistic western story. Based on Howard's displayed knowledge, interest, and fascination in

the history of the Old West and frontier, I would argue that Howard had an undoubtedly great respect for this history of his native state. In my view, Howard could not bring himself to write realistic western stories about historic episodes of Texas in which he made the characters the mouthpiece for his personal world views as these views did not fit into the story's setting. My claim, which is based on Howard's expressed wish to have sufficient realism in his stories, even if they had a fantastic setting or contained fantastic elements, is that Howard may have regarded such an act as tampering with the Texas history he loved and respected so much. A western was hereby no means for Howard to express his views.

Lovecraft, in a letter to Bernard Austin Dwyer, reached a similar conclusion:

But for all his one-sided theories Bob is a great boy. . . . There is nothing commercial in the way he spreads whole Iliads and Odysseys of the southwest over letters of 15 to 20 closely typed pages, and with a poetic fire and unconscious art which only a finely-developed intellect and imagination could command. Whether he likes it or not, he is a genuine creative artist—and of a depth and energy which will carry him far. . . . I have repeatedly urged him to utilise his fine ability and deep erudition in writing a history of Texas—as well a vivid, coördinated account of the various frontier desperadoes. He could certainly produce something magnificent in this line if he would only buckle down to it. As to the reason he doesn't grind out cheap western stories for the pulp magazines—I've never asked him, but I fancy it is because he knows and loves the West too well to be able to work within the puerile, artificial convention of commercial "Western stuff."

For all his talk of purely monetary objects, he isn't the sort to sell his birthright for a mess of pottage—and I can imagine how he must feel about the grotesque, absurd caricatures which pass as "western fiction" among easterners. To a chap who knows the west as the everyday life around him, the concoction of stock "westerns" must be

the next best thing to an impossibility. (*The Letters to Maurice W. Moe and Others* 473-74)

I would hereby like to argue that it was Howard's Hyborian Age, where he could work with the history of Texas without a guilty feeling of tampering it: by transferring episodes of Texas history into the pseudo-history he had created, Howard could nonetheless realistically depict the conditions of the Old West and the frontier. At the same time Howard could also fully express his views that in his opinion would otherwise not have fitted into the frame of a regular, realistic western story.

#### 4. Connecting Texas History with the Hyborian Age

I have so far demonstrated how Howard had used aspects and episodes of the history of Texas in his fantastic stories. In this context I have also shown how Howard transferred chapters from Texas history, such as the Texas feuds, into the setting of the pseudo-history of his Hyborian Age. In the final section of this study I would like to address the question of whether Howard, besides the mentioned transfer of Texas history into the Hyborian Age, connected the pseudo-history of his Hyborian Age with the history of Texas.

Among Howard's work is also a body of stories in which he mixed the locality of Texas with supernatural elements. These stories are usually referred to as weird western. In the frame of these weird western stories Howard often hinted at the possibility that Texas had another history beside its official one, a history that contained fearful secrets from an older past.

One example for this hinting at such a past full of mysteries is a story which I have already discussed in this study, "Old Garfield's Heart." In this story Howard turned the semi-immortal main character Garfield and his Amerindian friend into symbols of the era of the Old West. The demise and disappearance of Garfield and his Amerindian friend equals hereby the end of this era. In my view, though, one

important aspect of this story has so far been left unnoticed: the magic which Garfield's Amerindian friend Ghost Man had used to keep Jim Garfield alive for so unnaturally long. Howard never explores this aspect, neither asking for the origin of this magic nor explaining where Ghost Man had acquired his knowledge of magic. I am regarding this magic aspect as Howard teasing the possibility that Ghost Man's magic is a remnant from an older time. World history does not have such an age but the world of Howard's pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age features indeed such lost and forgotten wonder. Howard, though, establishes no such connection in "Old Garfield's Heart."

A similar hint at forgotten secrets of the past that had been better left buried is found in the story "The Horror from the Mound." In this story a West Texan Anglo-Saxon farmer dismisses the warnings of his Mexican neighbor to stay away from mysterious "mounds that are found here and there through the Southwest—relics of a past and forgotten age" (305). When the farmer nonetheless opens such a mound, he frees a vampire from the old continent who has been kept captive within this mound. Just as in "Old Garfield's Heart" the reference to a mysterious, older age is a diffuse one. It teases at a possible connection with the magic of the Hyborian Age, but never clearly states this connection. In "The Horror from the Mound" the vampire is not killed by the Spanish conquistadores who realized his true identity. Instead, they carry the vampire, while he sleeps in a mound which they sealed. Why the vampire is not capable of getting out of this mound is a matter Howard never touches in the story. One answer to this question is that the mounds have a special magic that prevents supernatural creatures from escaping. This falls again in line with the magic mentioned in "Old Garfield's Heart," which may indeed be a remnant of an older, forgotten time, such as the Hyborian Age. However, Howard mentioned the existence of several such mounds in the Southwest and with this insinuates the possibility of even more ancient secrets being hidden in such mounds.

In my eyes, all of Howard's hints in these stories toward a possible connection between Texas history and the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age are too vague to



claim such a link. The closest Howard comes to establishing a clear connection between his fictive Hyborian Age and Texas history in the framework of his weird westerns is the story “The Valley of the Lost.” The story, which remained unpublished during Howard’s lifetime, starts out as a regular western with a Texas feud as the seeming central point of its plot but then turns into a horror story. The story’s protagonist finds himself in a valley where he explores a subterranean cave. There he experiences flashbacks that show him episodes of the region’s history. One of these flashbacks involves an ancient mysterious city, inhabited by a non-human race in an unspecified time before the arrival of the Amerindians. The city is later attacked by the Amerindians who kill most of its inhabitants with the survivors mutating into snake like creatures who continue to live in subterranean caves. At the story’s climax the late nineteenth century Texas protagonist has to fight these creatures of this older and forgotten age.

“The Valley of the Lost” with its mutated snake people is, in my opinion, reminiscent of the Bran Mak Morn story “Worms of the Earth,” which features also mutated subterranean dwellers from an ancient past. The story does not give sufficient hints, though, about the origin of these snakelike creatures which would allow conclusions to connect them either with any of the ancient, pre-human races that Howard had mentioned in his “The Hyborian Age” essay. Although “The Valley of the Lost” clearly refers to time abysses beyond the known history of mankind, the appearance of the pre-human race that inhabited the mysterious city is such an obvious hint, it is again not possible to establish a clear connection to Howard’s Hyborian Age.

Besides the above mentioned weird western stories there is another group of stories in Howard’s work that deal with passing time abysses: these are the reincarnation stories about James Allison, a Texan who has the capability to remember not only his previous incarnations but who is also aware that he will continue to be endlessly reborn in the future, which in fact turns Allison into the personification of time itself.

One James Allison story, “Marchers of Valhalla,” is set in an unspecified time after the Hyborian Age and involves a group of proto-Vikings who are wandering along the coast of a proto-Texas whose final geographical form will be shaped during the climax of the story. At the beginning of this story Howard describes in a flashback sequence how the present geography of Texas had changed since the Hyborian Age. Although this passage establishes a connection between the geography of modern Texas and the geography of the Hyborian Age, I would like to argue that this is not a connection between the history of Texas and the Hyborian Age. In my opinion, this passage amounts to nothing more than Howard’s playful explaining of how the Texas coast was shaped in an unspecified time between his Hyborian Age and known world history.

The impact of “The Hyborian Age” essay on Howard’s work is, in my opinion, immense. In fact, this essay became the base that loosely connected many of Howard’s stories to a small literary universe. The same can also be said about the impact of the history of Texas on Howard’s work. In case of Texas history, Howard transferred episodes of this history into his fictive “Hyborian Age.” In this context I regarded it as an intriguing assumption that Howard may have used aspects of his pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age and linked them with the history of Texas. At this point, though, I could not find any proof for this assumption, as there are no stories, story fragments, or letters of Howard extant, that clearly connect Howard’s fictive Hyborian Age with the real history of Texas.

## 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the influence of the history of Texas on Howard’s work. I demonstrated that Howard used episodes of Texas history, such as feuds, and transferred them into the setting of the pseudo-history of his Hyborian Age. This step was not simply a strategy of Howard’s to rewrite actual Texas history in a fantasy environment. I have proven that Howard resorted to this transfer of Texas history as

it gave him the opportunity to include his personal views such as his criticism of civilization in these stories. In my argument Howard regarded the adding of his personal views in a story set on the background of Texas history as tampering with this history, which I argued was a step that Howard could not bring himself to take.

I have also demonstrated that the influence of Texas history becomes most obvious in the aspect of the violence depicted in Howard's stories. In this context I proved that accusations leveled at Howard such as claims that he glorified violence or promoted fascism are baseless. Howard's portrayal of violent acts, even highly graphic ones, were in my argument nothing more than mirroring the violent history of Texas. I also shown that this becomes evident in Howard's more understanding position concerning the use of violence.

Finally, I have also shown that the barbarism depicted in Howard's stories has its roots in the barbarism of the Texas frontier. I have demonstrated that the frontier was not just a geographical marker of the advance of civilization on the North American continent. The frontier was in fact a space where civilization and wilderness clashed and the lines between these opposites became diffuse. I demonstrated how Howard made this a central aspect of his story "Black Canaan" in which the civilized outsider into the wilderness of the swamps had to return to barbarism in order to survive in this frontier environment.

## Conclusion

Robert E. Howard's work is usually associated with, or rather reduced to being nothing more than well-written action stories produced for the early 20th century pulp fiction market. In this thesis I have demonstrated that this image is not correct: there is in fact much more to discover in Howard's work and this raises Howard above the level of being just a simple pulp fiction writer. Furthermore, in spite of the flaws that can indeed be found in some of his stories, Howard was in many ways an influential literary pioneer.

In the first part of my thesis I have validated my claim that Howard was in fact the first author in the field of fantastic fiction who had ever created a detailed and plausible pseudo-history as the background of his fantastic stories. Furthermore, in the context of proving my claim I could also debunk criticism that has dismissed Howard's achievement as being nothing more than a simple mixing of anachronisms with different cultures of various historic stages. In fact, by analyzing his working steps and the sources he had tapped into in order to write "The Hyborian Age," I verified that Howard's creation of his pseudo-history was not a case of Howard letting his imagination running wild without any restraint. I have proven my claim that it was actually a disciplined creative process in whose run Howard combined contemporary as well as outdated scientific theories together with ideas from occultism into the pseudo-history of a fictive age that had a ring of plausibility and truthfulness. Moreover, my research has also demonstrated that the creation of "The Hyborian Age" was based on Howard's previous work in which he reimagined the history of the Picts and his experience of having written historical short stories.

I also presented evidence that Howard's pseudo-history was not just the background for his Conan of Cimmeria series. In fact, Howard's secondary world building was based on his pseudo-history, which is another novelty aspect that Howard brought to fantastic fiction. I supported my argument for Howard's pioneering role of this kind of secondary world building by comparing "The

Hyborian Age” essay with the way other influential writers of fantastic fiction, such as William Morris, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and E. R. Eddison, used history for their world building. In all cases it became obvious that none of these writers had a concept of a pseudo-history such as the one Howard had developed.

Howard’s achievement of having written the first pseudo-history in fantastic literature and having used it as the base of his secondary world building process has up to now been overlooked. The reason for this oversight is, in my eyes, the strong position Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is holding in the field of fantastic fiction. Indeed, *The Lord of the Rings* also features a secondary world that is based on an artificial history that appears to be much more complex than the one Howard had created. In this study I have compared Tolkien’s secondary world building process with Howard’s approach. In fact, both secondary worlds, Howard’s Hyborian Age as well as Tolkien’s Middle-earth, are representations of our Earth in an earlier time. As the result of this comparison I confirmed my claim of Howard’s pioneering role in writing a pseudo-history not just by basing it on the by now generally known fact that Howard had written “The Hyborian Age” years before Tolkien began to work on his history of Middle-earth. I have extended this original claim, arguing and proving that Tolkien had actually never written a pseudo-history in the vein of Howard.

By having presented and verified all of these facts, it has become evident that Howard was the first writer who created a concise and plausible pseudo-history in the field of fantastic fiction. Furthermore, he was also the pioneer who used his pseudo-history as the fundament for creating a secondary world.

In the second part of this thesis I addressed the influence of the history of Texas on Howard’s work. I proved that the violence found in Howard’s work is not a case of Howard glorifying violence. In fact, I have demonstrated that he mirrored the violence of the history of the state of Texas in his stories.

I also followed the question of why Howard never used this knowledge of the history, culture, and mentality of Texas to write authentic, convincing western stories. Here I established a connection between the pseudo-history of the Hyborian Age and

the history of his native state of Texas: I demonstrated that he took aspects of Texas history and inserted them into his fantastic stories. This strategy gave his fantastic stories not only a touch of realism. It also gave Howard the opportunity to add into these stories comments that expressed his personal views on real-life issues.

Pulp fiction writers of the early 20th century, such as H. P. Lovecraft, have over the last few years been recognized by academia for their importance and influence on fantastic fiction. In 2005, Lovecraft was even canonized into the group of important, influential American writers with the prestigious Library of America series publishing a volume with a collection of Lovecraft stories. This recognition is still denied to Robert E. Howard. It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to opening the path for the recognition and literary canonization of Howard and his work.

## Notes

### Part I

#### Chapter I: Robert E. Howard' Alternative History of the Picts

1. Having been accepted by *Weird Tales* in January, 1925, "The Lost Race" was not immediately published, but two years later in *Weird Tales*' January 1927 issue.
2. Although historians refer to the Picts as 'people' or 'tribes,' Howard regarded the Picts in his alternative history as a 'race.' The following chapter about Atlantis will detail this point.
3. At a paper session about Robert E. Howard held at the 37th International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in Orlando/Florida in March 2016, Jeffrey Shanks addressed this unevenness of "Men in the Shadows." Shanks suspects that Howard might have originally written only the lengthy account of the Pictish history, but then realized that in this form the story would be impossible to sell to any magazine. In order to make it more sellable Howard then wrote the action sequence which introduces the story. According to Shanks, *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright recognized Howard's attempted bluff and consequently called him out in his rejection letter by pointedly writing down in detail all the faults he saw in "Men of the Shadows."
4. Besides the mentioning of cataclysms that change the world and become the reason for the Picts' wandering through the ages, there is no further mentioning of dramatic events like decisive battles in the history of Picts or adventures in which heroic characters among the Picts distinguish themselves. The result of this lack of detail, or embellishment, is that the story meanders along and has a tiring effect on any reader who expects a traditional adventure tale. This lack of details in the Pictish history could have also been intended by Howard. In "Men of the Shadows" the history of the Picts is delivered in form of an oral account given by a Pictish shaman. In *Blood & Thunder—The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard*, Mark Finn has

established that Howard grew up in an environment of oral story telling and was himself well versed in the Texas tall tale, the oral story telling tradition of Texas. In the Pictish shaman's account in "Men of the Shadows" Howard might have attempted to reach an oral story telling effect by letting the shaman tell the Pictish history in the same way Howard expected any experienced story-teller at a camp fire to approach such a task: concentrate only on the most important facts and data of the Pictish history without adding any further embellishing that might distract listeners from the flow of the Pictish history.

5. Howard also wrote a poem titled "A Song of the Race" (1969) with Bran Mak Morn as the protagonist.

6. Vikings fighting together with Picts and Celts against the Roman army is one of the most obvious anachronism in Howard's work. The Vikings appear in history much later, after the fall of the Roman Empire, and history never mentions any battles between Vikings and Roman legions. It is hard to imagine Howard, who had a deep understanding of history, to make such a mistake. This makes the inclusion of the Vikings in the alliance of 'barbarians' that are fighting the forces of 'civilization' in form of the Roman legion an intentional act of Howard's with which he further stresses the 'barbarism' of the alliance fighting the civilized Romans.

7. Timothy W. Arney points out in his essay "Howard and the Picts: A Probable Genesis for 'Worms of the Earth'" that the moniker 'worms of the earth' for the deformed creatures Bran Mak Morn calls upon, might have actually been a description for the historic Picts. Arney bases his theory on the English translations of a Latin text written by Gildas (c. 494-c. 570) in which the Picts are referred to as "worms [who] emerge from the narrow crevices of their burrows" (Arney 18).

8. "The Little People" is an originally untitled fragment, which is missing at least one page.



## Chapter II: Atlantis and Its Influence on Howard's Process of Creating a Pseudo-History

1. There seems to have been another letter in which Howard might have given a more detailed explanation on his views about Atlantis. According to Howard, this letter contained “all my views on the matter I included in a long letter to the editor to whom I sold a tale entitled ‘The Shadow Kingdom,’ which I expect will be published as a foreword to the story—if ever. This tale I wove about a mythical, antediluvian empire, a contemporary of Atlantis.” (*Collected Letters* 2: 237). This letter has unfortunately been lost. The story “The Shadow Kingdom” was also published without the foreword mentioned by Howard.

2. Evidence supporting Howard's knowledge can be found in his letters to H. P. Lovecraft in which both men debated the origins of races and peoples. Howard and Lovecraft supported their arguments by citing anthropological theories that by the time were regarded as valid. The depth of these discussions allows the conclusion that Howard was more than just a layman on the field of anthropology.

3. According to Howard researcher and editor Patrice Louinet, these annotations were done by Howard and are also on the original typescripts of “Men of the Shadows” (personal communication, June 6th, 2017). A similar step is taken on the previous page of the story, where the shaman talks of “beast-men,” which are also marked as footnotes and then identified as Neandertals (“Men of the Shadows” 24).

4. The question how Howard, who was living in a small and rural Texas community, would come in contact with the teachings of an esoteric New Age group is an interesting one that offers several answers. One possibility is that it was via Howard's father that Howard learnt about the Theosophists. Dr. Isaac Howard was known to have used alternative healing methods like hypnosis and other practices not related with western medicine. There are no documents available, though, that give proof to the assumption that Dr. Howard himself was familiar with Theosophist teachings.

More convincing is Jeffrey Shanks' theory that Howard had learnt about the

Theosophists via the Little Blue Book series, which was published by E. Haldeman-Julius. Howard was a reader of this series, which was intended to educate the American working class. Volume 477 of this series was titled *Theosophy in Outline* by F. Milton Willis and could have found its way into the hands of Howard.

### Chapter III: Robert E. Howard's Historical Short Stories

1. Unpublished list compiled by William P. Lampkin, editor/site owner of The Pulp.net. E-mail message to author January 28, 2018.

2. *The All-Story* was later titled to *All-Story Weekly*, which according to Ed Hulse turned out to become “arguably the most important pulp magazine ever published” (Hulse 39).

3. *Tros of Samothrace* is still an important series in the field of pulp fiction studies: The series caused controversy among the readership due to its negative depiction of Julius Cesar as an imperialist and tyrant, which was an image that ran contrary to the by then typically positive portrayal of Cesar.

Another factor that elevates the series from being forgettable pulp fiction output is the character depth of its protagonist Tros, who is not an action hero at all but rather a clever strategist.

4. The editorial staff of *Oriental Stories*—probably editor Farnsworth Wright himself—reacted immediately to Bell's accusation. In a reply which stretched over nearly two pages and which was filled with quotations and examples from historical sources, Bell's accusation that Moslems were not allowed to drink alcohol was proven wrong. This did not keep Howard from also sending in a letter, which was published in January 1933 in “The Souk,” the readers' column of the first issue of *Oriental Stories'* follow-up magazine, *The Magic Carpet*. In this letter Howard added another example that was not mentioned in *Oriental Stories'* response to Bell:

I welcome and appreciate criticism in the spirit of Mr. Bell's, though, as you point out, he chances to be mistaken in the matter of Timour and others. . . . In regard to Moslems drinking, I understand that the

Seventeenth Century Tatars of Crimea, before imbibing spilled a drop of wine from the vessel and drank the remainder, declaring that since the Prophet forbade tasting a drop of wine, they thus obeyed the command. They spilled the drop and drank the rest. Many modern Moslems maintain that they disobey no holy law by drinking brandy and whisky, since the Prophet said nothing about these beverages—proving that Christians are not the only people on earth to wriggle out of laws by technicalities. (“The Souk,” *Oriental Stories Combined with the Magic Carpet Magazine* 126)

5. The story is actually a collaboration of Howard and his friend Tevis Clyde Smith, with Smith having done the research and Howard in charge of the writing process.
6. These Irish knights were originally featured in Lamb’s stories and became an obvious inspiration to Howard, who in his early twenties had gone through a phase in which he believed that his family was of Irish heritage. As a result of this, Howard read voraciously about Celtic/Irish history and culture, and went even so far to study the Irish language. Howard also wrote stories in other genres that featured protagonists with an Irish-Celtic background.
7. In 1973 Marvel Comics adapted the character of Red Sonya to become part of the Conan the Barbarian comic series. As a result, Red Sonya, whom Howard had originally envisioned as a realistic character with feminist features was turned into the juvenile fantasy of being a red-haired, chainmail bikini clad swordfighter. Spelt due to legal reasons “Red Sonja” this character has become another enduring pop culture icon that was also featured in a Hollywood movie and in an ongoing comic series. Red Sonja is a sad example of how wrongly popular culture depicts Robert E. Howard’s creations.

#### Chapter IV: “The Hyborian Age”: Creating a Fictive Age and Pseudo-History

1. In the essay’s publication in Donald Wollheim’s fanzine *The Phantagraph*, the sentence “this was the world of Conan’s time” can be found. Rob Roehm assumes—

again without giving any reasons for his assumption—that this sentence was added by Wollheim. Considering that Conan is not mentioned once in the essay, this sentence that suddenly states Conan’s name appears to be out of place and supports Roehm’s assumption.

2. The fact that the first Conan story is a revised Kull story has become the argument of critics, who claim that Howard’s heroic characters are nothing more than exchangeable cardboard characters and that Conan is the same character as Kull in a slightly different setting. In spite of the seeming similarities between the characters, Kull of Atlantis and Conan are both fundamentally different. To give just one example, Kull is a recluse who detests his environment and resists escaping in visions and alternative realities. Conan, on the other hand, in spite of his dark mood reminiscent of Kull’s, is firmly set in life and enjoys it to the fullest.

3. In the 21st century the character of Conan has become a popular culture icon that is known under the moniker ‘Conan the Barbarian,’ which is a name Howard had never mentioned nor given to Conan. Conan has been featured in movies, comics, and TV games. He has in all of these formats never been depicted correctly in the way as Howard had conceived him but always as a simple-minded killing machine of impressive human strength. The mass of literary inferior pastiche stories that were written by other authors than Howard and published years after Howard’s death contributed to establishing this wrong image Conan’s. One result of this is that some critics like Alpers wrongly accuse Conan as being a fascist *übermensch* and that the Conan stories glorify violence and promote fascism. On the other hand, the introduction to “The Phoenix on the Sword” hints at the complexity of Conan’s psyche when mentioning his “gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth” and clearly proves that Alpers’ image is not correct as there is more to the character of Conan.

4. In Draft C, this ancestry is explicitly stated. Once again this shows how much Howard was intent to create a coherent age/world/universe: Howard had mentioned in his alternative history of the Picts in “Men of the Shadows” the conflict between the Picts and Atlanteans, a conflict that had also been mentioned in the Kull story

“The Shadow Kingdom.” This conflict became a hereditary conflict that stretched over the millennia and continued up into Conan’s Hyborian Age: the story “Beyond the Black River” finds Conan as a mercenary and scout in the service of Aquilonia fighting the Picts.

This coherence and complexity of Howard’s interconnected pseudo-history is often overlooked: Simon Sanahuja expresses in his essay “From Bran Mak Morn to Beyond the Black River: The Evolution of the Picts in Robert E. Howard’s Fiction” (39-41) his puzzlement why Howard, who all his life had shown an affection for the Picts, had, in “Beyond the Black River,” all of a sudden turned the Picts into the ‘bad guys.’ Sanahuja offers the explanation that Howard, who in his youth and adolescence had loved the Picts, “had tried to deny himself” as an adult. As a consequence of this self-denying, Sanahuja comes up with the question, whether Howard “could have tried to fight the man he was in his younger days and, unable to face directly the ghost of his memories, attacked the Picts instead?” (41). Sanahuja goes even so far to insinuate that Howard’s scenario of Conan fighting the Picts could have been “a first onset of suicidal thoughts” (41).

In my opinion, it is obvious that Sanahuja either never read “The Hyborian Age” or did not understand the complexity of this essay. In “Beyond the Black River,” Howard does not depict the Picts as evil. The Picts are simply the hereditary enemies of the Atlanteans, the ancestors of Conan’s race, and with this depiction Howard stuck consequently to the facts he had established in “Men of the Shadows” and “The Hyborian Age” essay.

#### Chapter V: Howard’s Pseudo-History in the Context of Secondary World Building in Fantastic Literature

1. These three novels were originally serialized in the pulp fiction journal *Blue Book Magazine* in the August, October, and December 1918 issues. In 1924, they were published together in book form under the title *The Land That Time Forgot*.
2. This crossover of western and the lost world genre was repeated years later, in

1969, by the movie industry. In the movie *The Valley of Gwangi*, cowboys discover in a hidden valley a tyrannosaurus rex, which they catch using lariats.

3. One way how H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and Robert E. Howard established references to each other was via the creation of the book within a book device. Lovecraft started this by inventing the *Necronomicon*, the forbidden book written by the mad Arab Alhazred, which turned anyone reading it into a madman. Lovecraft often mentioned the *Necronomicon* in his stories, to the effect that readers began to believe in the existence of this book. Clark Ashton Smith and Robert E. Howard soon followed with their own versions of such tomes, such as Smith's *Book of Eibon* and Howard with his *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, written by the German madman von Junzt. Clark Ashton Smith unintentionally destroyed the illusion of these dangerous books when he replied to a fan letter, published in the fanzine *The Fantasy Fan*, that all three books were inventions.

4. It is also possible that the inspiration for these winged creatures and their origin from another planet came not from H. P. Lovecraft but from another influential writer Howard appreciated: Edgar Rice Burroughs. Howard had several of Edgar Rice Burroughs planetary romance novels such as the Mars series in his book collection. Moreover, Howard even wrote in the later phase of his career the planetary novel *Almuric*, which shows a very heavily influence of Burroughs' *Mars* series and which also features winged humanoid creatures. Via Burroughs' work, though, Howard was also familiar with the concept of alien life forms living on far away planets. Instead of bringing a man from earth to such a distant planet, Howard went the other way and took aliens from such a planet to the earth into his Hyborian Age.

There is one more trace leading to Burroughs as the inspiration for the winged humanoid creatures in Howard's work. And this trace leads us back to the concept of static time. In the novel *The Land That Time Forgot*, another one of Burroughs' static time novels, winged humanoid creatures are featured as well.

5. What also makes this passage interesting is the similarity to the fate of the Pictish

king Bran Mak Morn Howard described in the story "The Dark Man": like Yag-kosha in "The Tower of the Elephant," Bran becomes a god after his death.

6. An exception to this image of Conan being an egoistic character who only works for his own benefits is the novella *The Hour of the Dragon*. In this story Conan is presented as an altruistic king, who acts not out of selfish reasons, but out of responsibility towards his people. Howard describes Conan throughout the series as a character who treasures his freedom the most. Although Conan has become king, he does not enjoy this status as it robs him of his freedom. In *The Hour of the Dragon* Conan loses his throne, which would have been a perfect opportunity for him to leave everything behind and enjoy a new life full of the freedom he has been yearning for. He fights to get back his throne. His motivation, though, is not revenge or a bruised ego due to having been defeated. Conan knows that the usurpers of his kingdom cruelly abuse his former subjects. Conan's decision to fight for his people turns him into an altruistic king who is fighting for a greater good, the well-being of his people. In this process, Conan is even willing to sacrifice what he treasures most, his freedom, which he will lose the moment he regains his kingship.

## Part II

### Chapter I: Robert E. Howard and His Relation to the Old West and Modern Texas

1. Seelye also points out that this westward movement that came to coin the term West and its association with hope did not originate on the East coast of the North American continent. It actually started on the old continent of Europe where the Puritans in the hope to find safety from religious persecution and freedom made their way westward over the Atlantic towards America.

2. S. C. Gwynne writes about the frequent attacks by the Comanche that "so many raids were made by moonlight that in Texas a full, bright spring or summer moon is still known as Comanche Moon" (65).

3. This mixing of different genres in one story was Howard's strategy to improve his chances to sell a story as he could submit the one story to more magazines: while a

western story would only be sellable to a pulp magazine specialized on the western genre, a supernatural western story could also be offered to pulp magazines buying only horror stories.

## Chapter II: Texas History in Robert E. Howard's Fantastic Stories

1. There is no information available that indicates an exact date when "Black Canaan" was written. Rusty Burke mentions "Black Canan" in his *Robert E. Howard Fiction and Verse Timeline* as received in September 1933 by Howard's agent Otis Adelbert Kline. Considering Howard's profession as a pulp fiction writer who lived off a large amount of stories he could sell, I regard it as reasonable to assume that in order to increase his sales numbers, Howard sent his stories to Kline the moment he had finished them. This allows then to date "Black Canaan" as having been written in 1933.

2. The question whether Howard was a racist is a difficult one. On the one hand, regarded with 21st century standards and based on some of his statements concerning African Americans and Mexicans, Howard clearly qualifies as a racist. This becomes especially obvious in some of the opinions Howard expressed in his letters to H. P. Lovecraft in which both writers debated the topic of immigration into the U. S. A.

On the other hand, in Howard's literary work and extant letters there is no proof that Howard promoted or supported aggressive racism and violence towards other races. The view that African Americans and Mexicans were not equal to whites was one that not only Howard held. In the U. S. A. of the early 20th century racism was still socially accepted. It can so be argued that Howard was just a product of his rural Texas environment in which such racism was regarded as normal.

3. In the edited version of "Black Canaan" which was originally published in the June 1936 edition of *Weird Tales* this section reads: "In Canaan lived the sons and daughters of the white frontiersmen and their slaves. Joe Lafley was right; we were an isolated, shut-mouthed breed. Self-sufficient, jealous of our seclusion and



independence” (232). In comparison with the longer draft version this version significantly takes away the aspect of the tribalism, if not barbarism these white settlers have taken on.

4. A look at America’s entertainment industry clearly proves this stigma: the first interracial kiss in a Hollywood movie happened in the 1957 movie *Island in the Sun* (“A Brief History of Kissing in Movies,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/magazine/a-brief-history-of-kissing-in-movies.html>. Accessed 20 December 2018.).

5. The supposed facts which de Camp presented in *Dark Valley Destiny: The Life of Robert E. Howard* were the result of unprofessional and dubious research methods. Based on the fact that Howard had committed suicide when learning that his terminally ill mother was about to pass away soon, De Camp and his collaborators constructed an unhealthy relationship between Howard and his mother. With this predetermined image of Howard in mind De Camp conducted his research in Howard’s hometown Cross Plains, Texas. Interviews were conducted with leading questions intended to gain answers that supported De Camp’s theory of Howard having been a psychotic person. With close friends of Howard declining to be interviewed, De Camp turned to interviewing those citizens of Cross Plains who had no closer contact with Howard but regarded him due to his suicide and the eccentric behavior Howard had displayed as the crazy son of the town’s popular doctor.

6. In my eyes, it is not possible to label this exchange between Howard and Lovecraft a debate as this would imply a communication in which both sides present their points and address the arguments made by their partner. In case of the exchange between Howard and Lovecraft this hardly took place: It is obvious that often both men did not, or possibly could not, understand what the other wanted to say and talked past each other.

7. Howard submitted “The Vultures of Wahpeton” to *Smashing Novels Magazine* with two endings: one version of the story had a dark ending with one of the main characters being killed; the other version ended with a happy ending. The editor of *Smashing Novels Magazine* decided to take the unusual step to use both versions in

their magazine. The story appeared with the darker ending while the happy ending was added together with an explanatory note by the editor.

8. There was one group of white people of the frontier who indeed made a case that barbarism was the natural state of mankind. These were the men and women who at a young age were made captive by Amerindians and who had then been adopted into these tribes. Many of these white captives who were years later rescued—against their will—and taken back to their biological families had so much adapted to the Amerindian lifestyle that they could not cope up with life in civilization. Texas history mentions many cases in which the rescued ones returned to their Amerindian families. Cynthia Ann Parker, the most famous rescued captive, unsuccessfully tried to escape back to her tribe and eventually starved herself to death.

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