

The Hour of the Dragon Short Guide

The Hour of the Dragon by Robert E. Howard

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Hour of the Dragon Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Characters.....	6
Setting.....	9
Social Concerns.....	10
Social Sensitivity.....	11
Techniques.....	12
Themes.....	14
Adaptations.....	15
Topics for Discussion.....	16
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	17
Literary Precedents.....	19
For Further Reference.....	20
Related Titles.....	21
Copyright Information.....	23



Overview

The Hour of the Dragon is escapist entertainment, intended to transport the reader into a world of magic and wonder. Its hero, Conan, loses and regains a kingdom as he fights an evil wizard from the mythical past. The novel is admirably written, featuring vivid descriptions, well-paced action, and many plot-twists and surprises.

When The Hour of the Dragon opens, Conan has become king of Aquilonia and, in spite of a history of wanderlust, proves to be a steady, compassionate, and just king. When the evil power of the ancient wizard Xaltotun is unleashed upon his kingdom, Conan is forced into hiding, then into pursuit of the magical gem called the Heart of Ahriman. This gem is responsible for reviving the longdead Xaltotun, and its powers are needed to defeat the vile wizard.

Conan journeys through lands of mystery and enchantment where friendship can be sold for a coin, and where strangers face thousands of dangers. Conan's quest for the magical gem takes him to castles, a forest filled with man-eating apes, exotic seacoast cities, a ship of galley slaves, and into an ancient pyramid.



About the Author

Robert Ervin Howard was born in Peaster, Texas, on January 24, 1906 (not January 22, as some references have it). His father was a physician who moved the family often during Howard's childhood, finally settling in Cross Plains, Texas, when Robert was thirteen years old. By this time, young Robert had already declared that he wanted to become a professional writer.

In 1924 Howard sold his first story, "Spear and Fang," a tale about cave men. This story was published by *Weird Tales* magazine, which became his most important market. Howard patterned many of his settings and characters on his Texas surroundings, populated in his day by a rugged crew of Native Americans, cowboys, miners, and oil workers. The hot, dusty climate and gritty occupations seemed to stimulate tales of heroes who were slow of speech and quick with their fists. An angry young man, Howard wrote many stories that were hard, harsh, and cynical.

Although he is now best remembered for his Conan stories, Howard wrote many others, including sword and sorcery tales that featured King Kull, and historical tales, such as those about the English Puritan defender of justice, Solomon Kane. In addition to these series, he wrote tales of cowboys, piracy, and even some dynamic and magical poetry.

During his short career, Howard established himself as one of the most successful writers for "pulp magazines" (cheaply produced publications that touted sensationalized fiction). Howard's vigorous adventure stories appealed to young audiences in particular and influenced not only many writers of his own day, but later fantasy and science fiction writers, such as L. Sprague de Camp, Lin Carter, and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Howard was emotionally unstable as a result of his tense family life. His father was a boisterous, sometimes violent eccentric who adopted the odd habit of knocking on neighbors' doors at dinner time and declaring that his wife had thrown him out of the house. Having previously eaten with his family, he thus got himself invited to a second dinner of the evening. Howard's sickly mother was a bitter woman who tried to protect her son from her husband's excesses, and he became devoted to her.

On June 11, 1936, despondent upon learning that his mother was close to death, Howard took his own life. After his death, most of his writings fell into obscurity, although his Conan stories continued to retain a devoted readership. L. Sprague de Camp made a special effort to preserve Howard's Conan stories, collecting and publishing the works, beginning in the 1960s. These efforts stimulated new interest in Howard's fiction and poetry, and his stories and novels have since steadily widened their audience.

The Hour of the Dragon is Howard's only full-length Conan novel, originally written in anticipation of breaking into the British literary market. Unluckily, his British publisher went out of business, and Howard serialized the novel in five issues of *Weird Tales* (December 1935 to April 1936). When printed as a book in 1950, its title was changed to *Conan the Conqueror*—the name by which it was commonly known until the

authoritative version edited by Karl Edward Wagner appeared in 1977, restoring Howard's original title.



Characters

In spite of his history of wanderlust and adventuring, Conan has proven himself to be a steady, compassionate, and fair king. When the great evil of the incredibly ancient wizard Xaltotun is unleashed on him and his kingdom, Conan is forced into hiding, then into a pursuit of the magical gem called the Heart of Ahriman. Its powers helped revive the long-dead Xaltotun, and its powers are required to defeat the vile wizard.

Conan is tall, dark haired, muscular but lean-waisted, and courageous.

Although endowed with great physical strength, he is not a superhero; he is sometimes very afraid, and his battles for survival are often nearly lost. He is but a mere mortal in a contest for power against a wizard who can control even the elemental forces of nature. When angered, Conan sometimes loses control of himself, being overcome by primitive blood lust; he is vulnerable at such times to more thoughtful enemies, so he tries to use his mind and wits and to suppress his blind anger.

As unlikely as it might seem for such a barbaric warrior, Conan is actually a soulful character. He cares about the welfare of the people who depend on him. He has ruled Aquilonia with a live-and-let-live attitude that rejects the persecution of a religious minority, the Asura. With diplomacy, rather than force of arms, he has forged bonds of peace with his neighboring kingdoms.

When urged to use his great military skills for conquest, he rejects the notion, asserting that ruling one land well will suit him. Under his rule, Aquilonia has fair taxes, offers security to its people, and is a center for commerce from many lands both near and far.

This caring, compassionate side to Conan makes him unpredictable — a character given to savage violence, uncommon good sense, and a dangerous willingness to give people the benefit of the doubt.

No one else in *The Hour of the Dragon* is as well drawn as is Conan. In his mad race to escape his enemies and later to recover the magical gem the Heart of Ahriman, Conan meets many characters only briefly. They include Zenobia, a member of the seraglio of Conan's treacherous enemy, Tarascus, king of Nemedica, east of Aquilonia.

She has the distinction of being a female character who saves Conan's life without needing to be saved by him.

Small, slim, with dark hair, she has loved Conan from afar. Her courage in the face of the menace of Xaltotun and the cruelty of Tarascus impresses Conan, and at the novel's end he vows to marry her and make her queen of Aquilonia.

Other characters pass by rapidly.

Some are faithful retainers who would die for Conan, who has won their hearts with his courage and justice.



Others are brigands who torture and kill to satisfy their greed. Old "friend" Public, a merchant who grew rich with Conan's help when Conan was a pirate, betrays him. On the other hand, on the slave galley he discovers men who followed him in his pirating days, and they gladly help him. Always, there is the presence of magic, myth, and superstition. Conan's strong sense of justice earns him the aid of the followers of the religion of Asura, such as the priest Hadrathus, who tells Conan how he might win back his kingdom and who proves a valuable ally in thwarting Xaltotun. These and other colorful characters enliven the narrative; their own exotic personalities and practices contribute to The Hour of the Dragon's atmosphere of mystery and suspense.

The villains are a motley crew. Orastes, Valerius, Tarascus, and Amalric conspire to steal the Heart of Ahriman from its hiding place, and they use it to bring to life the decayed mummy of one of the fiercest wizards of the ancient land of Acheron; so far from the past is Xaltotun that his land of Acheron is regarded as a mere myth by those who have ever even heard of it. Orastes is an apostate priest of the Hyborian Age's chief religious faith, the worship of Mitra. This faith emphasizes kindness and peace, but Orastes has given himself over to the dark arts of necromancy. He learns much from Xaltotun until even he can no longer tolerate the ancient wizard's vile practices. He dies while trying to warn his fellow conspirators of Xaltotun's plans to betray them all.

Valerius is an adventurer who is the closest heir to the Aquilonian king that Conan had deposed. Courageous in a fight, he is unsuited to conspiracies, and he degenerates into a hate-filled man. He believes that the throne of Aquilonia has been won for him only for the purpose of fulfilling the ambitions of Amalric. Therefore, he brutally abuses his subjects, to make them unrulable by any of his fellow conspirators. He debauches their women, burns their homes, and taxes them into poverty, all to make his subjects as hate filled as he is. Only the prospect of battle against the returning Conan revives in him any of the noble character that had won him faithful followers.

Tarascus asks Xaltotun to kill by a mysterious disease the king of Nemedias and the king's family. When they are dead, he as the next in line will become king. Xaltotun creates a plague that kills not only the king and the king's family, but other Nemedians, making the disease seem more of a general infection among the citizenry and thus deflecting suspicion that it was a curse aimed specifically at the royal family.

Gifted with a good mind and stout of heart, Tarascus is a cruel man. His prowess as a warrior makes him a formidable enemy, but only Conan's generous spirit saves him in the end.

Conan captures the Nemedian king and ransoms him for Zenobia.

Amalric is a shadowy figure who prefers to work behind the scenes. He does not receive as much attention from Conan as his fellow conspirators, but when he is on the scene he is shown to be strong-minded. A man of immense wealth, he uses his money to buy his way to power, and he helps to finance the conspirators' conquest of Aquilonia. He is motivated by his ambition, which is to rule both Nemedias and Aquilonia.



The overarching menacing figure of *The Hour of the Dragon* is Xaltotun, the revived wizard who has been drawn from the land of the dead by Orastes's use of the Heart of Ahriman. He himself matter-of-factly declares that he knows more about necromancy than all the knowledge of all the people of the world. His ancient land was Acheron, a nation that once occupied much of the region now occupied by the Hyborian peoples. Acheron was ruled by wizards whose evil deeds were many and monstrous. Xaltotun was this evil nation's greatest wizard. He lived for an immensely long time but was eventually destroyed by a folk magician who used the Heart of Ahriman. As powerful as he was, Xaltotun could not fathom all the powers of the mystical gem and could not make it serve him.

He therefore had hidden it away to prevent others from using it against him. But it was stolen and delivered into the hands of his enemies.

Now he feels himself fully revived.

He again hides away the Heart of Ahriman, but he is betrayed by Tarascus, who steals the gem and has it spirited away to the sea. Tarascus mistakenly thinks it to be the source of Xaltotun's power, and he wants to keep the wizard vulnerable because he senses that the wizard might betray the conspirators. To Xaltotun, the gem is only a threat, and he thinks he has it hidden where it cannot harm him. He gets in touch with the few living descendants of ancient Acheron and with them begins to revive the ancient rites of his people. Orastes tries to warn the others of what he has seen Xaltotun doing.

The ancient wizard, he tells them, plans to bring back Acheron out of the past, destroying the present kingdoms and peoples that reside where Acheron once was. After that, Xaltotun will conquer the world and make it all into a haven for black magic and unspeakable evil. Orastes's abrupt death at the hands of Xaltotun and the attack of the returning Conan's armies cut off the other conspirators' consideration of the warning. Xaltotun proceeds confidently, moving to aid in the destruction of Conan and the Cimmerian's allies. When Hadrathus uses the Heart of Ahriman to put an end to Xaltotun's power, the final truth of the ancient wizard is revealed: He was only an animated corpse who had mistakenly thought that the Heart of Ahriman had made him fully alive. He ends as a "brown, dry, unrecognizable carcass."

Setting

When he began writing about Conan, Howard developed an imaginary history and geography of Conan's world. This enabled him to maintain a consistency of setting and events from one story to the next. The events in *The Hour of the Dragon* are set in an imaginary Hyborian Age, which succeeded a Pre-Cataclysmic Age of the barbaric civilizations of Atlantis and Lemuria. With the coming of the Cataclysm, Atlantis and Lemuria sank into the oceans and the semi-civilized peoples of the world sank back into savagery.

Eventually the Hyborians, a northern race, became the dominant civilization of the western world. Their Hyborian Age lasted more than a thousand years, ending when the Picts and other enemies finally swept away their kingdoms.

Eventually, an ice age erases most of the remnants of their culture, leaving only their names for places and peoples, such as Picts (ancient inhabitants of what is now Scotland), Brythunians (Howard's ancestors of the Britons), and Iranistan (a place name that becomes Iran). The Conan stories are filled with the names of people and places reminiscent of ancient lands, myths, and superstitions.

During the period of *The Hour of the Dragon*, Conan's people, the Cimmerians, are a barbaric people who are loosely organized as clans and tribes.

Derived from Homer, the word Cimmerian describes a people who lived in a land of perpetual darkness. In Howard's imaginary history, the Cimmerians are descendants of the Atlanteans who escaped from the Cataclysm.

Social Concerns

Howard is a product of his times, and his views of the side of good coincide with the morals and ethics of the Judeo-Christian world. Although fierce and barbaric, Conan believes in the Golden Rule and holds mercy to be a high virtue. The evil wielders of black magic are not only nasty and unattractive people, but their own dark practices lead to their defeat and destruction. Howard makes it clear that people do not use evil magic; instead, the evil magic uses them, just as Xaltotun uses the men who had planned to use him.

Howard is also a product of America. For instance, even today, many, probably most, nations do not hold tolerance of different religions to be a virtue; yet Americans tend to hold religious tolerance to be one of their nation's highest virtues, and Howard's Conan is an American-style just ruler who eventually benefits from his ending religious intolerance in Aquilonia and adopting a live-and-let-live attitude toward religious minorities. Further, his rule has a strong American flavor to it. He assists private enterprise and uses his military to make his nation's trade secure. Merchants can come to Aquilonia in safety, and their trading spreads wealth to Conan's subjects, and the nation as a whole prospers. This represents the traditional American view that free enterprise brings the greatest prosperity to the greatest number of people.



Social Sensitivity

The How of the Dragon is a violent, gory book. Although it has few of the sexual overtones typical of much of Howard's work, the crunching of skulls and slicing of limbs may be a source of concern for readers. Indeed, the explicit violence may make the novel seem more appropriate for an adult audience. However, the novel's primary audience has always been young adults, who seem to seek it out. For most young readers, the bloody combats are unlikely to be viewed as anything more than conclusions to scenes that are primarily attractive for their eeriness and suspense. Even so, concerned adults may wish to make sure that impressionable young readers understand that the violence is a convention of the sword-and-sorcery genre of fantasy stories and is not to be emulated in the modern world.

Of greater concern should be the frightfulness of the novel. It features black magic and terrible unseen powers that can strike people down or drive them insane. One of Conan's assets is his strong mind, which enables him to resist the befuddling powers of evil wizards and witches. While there is plenty of good magic in the novel, sensitive young readers might find the everpresent threat of evil magic disturbing and nightmarish.

Although fierce, barbaric, and thoroughly pagan, Conan believes in the Golden Rule and holds mercy to be a high virtue. The evil wielders of black magic are not only nasty and unattractive people, but their own dark practices lead to their defeat and destruction.

Howard makes it clear that people do not use evil magic but that evil magic uses them.

Techniques

The Hour of the Dragon is escapist entertainment, intended to transport its readers into a world of wonders and magic. It is high adventure; its main character, Conan, loses a kingdom and regains it as he fights a great and evil wizard from the mythical past. The novel is admirably written, featuring vivid descriptions, a well-paced plot, and a multitude of twists and surprises.

At his best, Howard is a first-rate storyteller. His particular talent is in presenting descriptions of scenes in exciting ways. Anyone who has ever been bored by a long description in a story can appreciate this exceptional ability: "The long tapers flickered, sending the black shadows wavering along the walls, and the velvet tapestries rippled. Yet there was no wind in the chamber. Four men stood about the ebony table on which lay the green sarcophagus that gleamed like carved jade. In the upraised right hand of each man a curious black candle burned with a weird greenish light. Outside was night and a lost wind moaning among the black trees."

Here is mystery: What are the men up to? What strange place are they in?

This is the opening paragraph of *The Hour of the Dragon*; it is inviting and exciting. The paragraph succeeds because of Howard's mastery of descriptive techniques. He builds suspense with the interplay of shadows cast by candlelight on walls, tapestries, and the men themselves; the sarcophagus suggests that the men may be involved in a dangerous game with the dead.

Mystery is maintained by hinting at what the men may be doing without saying outright what it is; the strange situation suggests that they may be doing something exciting and well worth finding out about by reading further into the story. A fine atmosphere that suggests that anything, even something magical, can happen is created not only by the shadowy room and the green sarcophagus, but by metaphorical language such as "a lost wind moaning," which attributes to the wind characteristics normally associated with living beings — being lost and moaning, as if the place were a lonely spot where terrible deeds could be done far from prying eyes. Throughout *The Hour of the Dragon* are such wonderfully evocative descriptive passages, each heightening the suspense of the narrative. Far from being tiresome, the descriptions are part of the attraction of the novel.

Another aspect of *The Hour of the Dragon* that makes it stand above the average fantasy tale of adventure is its narrative pacing. A narrative that moves too fast can be hard to follow; with the many characters in *The Hour of the Dragon*, too fast a pace could jumble all the characters together as events race past. Too slow a pace can be death to a tale of high adventure; exciting action is one of the principal attractions of an adventure novel. In *The Hour of the Dragon* there is action aplenty, with battles against horrible monsters, determined warriors, and devious wizards and sorceresses. Conan is faced with awesome enemies, and at every turn he may be struck down by a fresh and terrible menace. Each conflict is given its due: Note how the story flows from Conan's



escape from the Nemedian dungeon to his rescue of the witch Zelata, and then her helping him.

Each exciting event is a set piece; each has its own introduction, development and conflict, and conclusion. For example, Conan's creeping along the wall of the dungeon begins after he has discovered the cracked bones of a human being's skeleton. This foreshadowing suggests that there is a hidden danger in the dungeon, creating suspense. The tension slowly rises as Conan realizes that something is following behind him in the corridor, trying each cell door.

Whatever it is discovers the open door of the dungeon Conan has just fled, then catches his scent and begins pursuing him. The suspense rises to the inevitable fight. It concludes with Conan's victory over the man-eating gray ape. Suspense begins to build again as Conan is introduced to a new situation; it develops to a high pitch with his attack on Tarascus; then it concludes with his escape to the garden. This development of each event as its own little adventure within an adventure allows readers to concentrate on the action without losing track of who is doing what to whom. The figures of each set piece are introduced, their conflict developed and then resolved in a conclusion. What might be slow parts, the transitions from one frightful adventure to the next, are instead part of the excitement because of Howard's descriptive skills, such as when Conan rests in his flight from the Nemedians and looks over the land around him.

The details of "tall stiff grass," the "weird crying as a straggling wedge of wild geese winged swiftly southward," and the road "streaming like a white ribbon over a distant rise" come as part of a new introduction to conflict when Conan notices the raven wheeling "backward and forth" as if searching for something. The setting has been prepared for the renewed pursuit of Conan by the Nemedians, and the conflict is already beginning, to be climaxed by Zelata.

Themes

The Hour of the Dragon features an elemental struggle against evil. The title itself refers to an Hyborian belief that their own age will be followed by one of darkness and destruction, which they refer to as the Hour of the Dragon. The symbol on the invading Nemedians' flags is a scarlet dragon, which suggests that they may be the people who bring the Hour of the Dragon to Aquilonia. In the novel, the world is nearly overcome by utter evil, and only the wits and courage of fallible mortals stand against it. Central to this struggle is the theme of deception, deceit, and disguises. From the beginning of the novel, characters pretend to be what they are not. Amalric seeks to rule Nemedias and Aquilonia through puppets, hiding himself behind two kings that he props up in power. Xaltotun throughout the novel thinks himself to be a reborn living man, deceiving even himself; at the novel's end his life is shown to be fraudulent: He is only an animated corpse. The forces of good also use deception and disguises.

To escape Aquilonia after his enemies' victory, Conan pretends to be the robed escort of a deceased devotee of the Asura faith, taking it downriver for its last rites. Later, he uses deception to lure his enemies into a trap and their final battle. Notable in all the trickery and deceit is that the villains deceive themselves. Valerius falls prey to his paranoid fantasies of endless intrigues against him. He and his fellow conspirators at first delude themselves into believing that they can control the mighty wizard Xaltotun. Even Xaltotun falls prey to self-deception; he believes not only that he lives when he really does not, but that he is invincible. The thwarting of his spells in the concluding action of the novel surprises him; he is so overconfident that he has not checked his hiding place for the Heart of Ahriman; he does not realize that he has been betrayed.

Adaptations

Two motion pictures based on the Conan stories have been produced: *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Conan the Destroyer* (1984). Neither of these movies is based on a particular one of Howard's stories. Rather, they reproduce some of the elements commonly found in the Conan tales while following original story lines uniquely their own. The first one is scripted by John Milius and Oliver Stone and is entertaining fare — although its plot is almost nonexistent. Conan is played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, a one-time body building champion who turned out to be a good actor. His love interest is Valeria, played by Sandahl Bergman.

Conan's archenemy is Thulsa Doom, played by James Earl Jones, who comes off as a deeply menacing figure.

Snakes, nudity, and violence abound in this motion picture, as they do in Howard's stories. Those who like strong imagery and symbolism will probably enjoy the picture. The movie is directed by John Milius, who successfully captures the magical atmosphere of the stories. It is produced by Buzz Feitshans and Rafaella de Laurentiis.

The second picture *Conan the Destroyer* also stars Schwarzenegger as Conan. The screenplay is by Stanley Mann, who gives the movie more of a coherent plot than that found in *Conan the Barbarian*. Directed by Richard Fleischer and produced by Rafaella de Laurentiis, this movie does not ring as true as the first one, with some scenes seeming amateurish. Although the first movie opened to generally positive reviews, with some critics disliking the movie for its painful violence, the second movie was greeted by mixed reviews. It lacks the symbolic imagery of its predecessor and misses the hard edge that gives the previous movie its tension and suspense.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why did the conspirators Orastes, Amalric, Valerius, and Tarascus not think of the possibility that Xaltotun might be too powerful for them to control before they brought him back from the world of the dead?
2. Why is it important to the story to know that Xaltotun was not really reborn but is instead a corpse that looks alive?
3. Why is Xaltotun so sure that he has the Heart of Ahriman hidden away, when in fact Tarascus has taken it?
4. Why would Howard tell his readers about the Heart of Ahriman's danger for Xaltotun and then have it sent to the seacoast, without also letting Conan know about it? Does this create suspense? Or is it merely annoying?
5. Why does Conan allow Tarascus to live at the end of the novel? After all, he tried to kill Tarascus earlier in the book. What does this act of mercy tell you about Conan?
6. If Conan is such a benevolent ruler, why do the people of Aquilonia accept the rule of Valerius with little resistance? Are the reasons offered in the novel sufficient to explain this?
7. Conan is huge, strong, and agile. He could seem like a superman. How does Howard humanize him?
8. Xaltotun's own arrogance contributes to his defeat. What point might Howard be making with this?
9. Why does Conan choose to marry Zenobia instead of an attractive, faithful noblewoman such as Albiona?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some readers suggest that the Conan stories are tainted by hints of racial prejudice against dark complexioned people. Is this a valid observation? How are people with dark skins portrayed in the Conan adventures? Are they portrayed as both good and evil, intelligent and stupid, strong and weak, courageous and cowardly, all of which would suggest that they are portrayed no differently than everyone else in the stories? Or are they consistently portrayed as only bad, stupid, weak, and cowardly or only good, intelligent, strong, and courageous, which would suggest bias on Howard's part? What are Conan's views on race?
2. How are women portrayed in *The Hour of the Dragon*? Which one is the most fully developed character? Which is the most helpful to Conan? Which is the most dangerous to him? Do you find any one of them interesting enough to want to read more about her?
3. How well imagined is Howard's Hyborian Age? Can you trace its origins in his early pre-Conan works? Why would Howard go to so much trouble to create the world of the Hyborian Age before writing the Conan stories? How well does Howard's imaginary world compare with the one developed by J. R. R. Tolkien for *The Lord of the Rings* books?
4. Howard wrote poetry as well as fiction. Do any of his poems have similarities to the Conan adventures and to *The Hour of the Dragon* in particular?
5. Magic appears in many forms in *The Hour of the Dragon*. What are these forms? Are any aspects of magic associated exclusively with evil? Are other aspects associated only with good?
6. Throughout *The Hour of the Dragon* there is a solid moral foundation against which good and evil can be compared. What does the novel indicate about Howard's own ethical views?
7. What are the characteristics that make Conan a good guy rather than just another amoral, violent adventurer? Can you justify his violent behavior?
8. The Conan stories are the foundation for many of the sword-and-sorcery fantasies of the modern day. How well does *The Hour of the Dragon* compare with its successors? How well does the character Conan compare with later main characters in sword-and-sorcery adventures? (This could become a very long paper, so you might focus on just one of these two questions.)
9. Why does *The Hour of the Dragon* have a particularly strong appeal for young adults? Is it good reading for them, or is it bad? Why?



10. Several authors have written stories about Conan since Howard's death. How do their Conan writings compare with those of Howard? How do they compare with each other? Which author does the best job of imitating Howard's style? Which author best captures the characterization of Conan? Which of these authors has written the best Conan tales?

Literary Precedents

The Conan tales are seminal works, meaning they are the seeds from which works by other authors grow. As such the Conan stories lack precise literary precedents. Instead, the stories seem to be a stew made from varied literary traditions. Perhaps the most important of these would be Zane Grey-style westerns, with their self-sufficient lone gunmen facing down evil doers. The battle scenes, with their shining armor and waving pennants, echo nineteenth-century historical romances set in the middle ages such as *Ivanhoe* (1820) by Walter Scott. The tone of *The Hour of the Dragon* is distinctly Modernist and has echoes in such American-style detective novels as *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) by Dashiell Hammett, in which a lone detective faces ancient evil in the form of the statue of a falcon, and in which the tone is hard-bitten, blunt, and unsympathetic. On the other hand, the morality of *The Hour of the Dragon* is atypical of Modernist writings: The traditional values of mercy, charity, and tolerance are fundamental to *The Hour of the Dragon*, and they set its world apart from the often amoral contexts of much of the popular, Modernist fiction of its day.

For Further Reference

De Camp, L. Sprague, Catherine Crook de Camp, and Jane Whittington Griffin. *Dark Valley Destiny: The Life of Robert E. Howard*. New York: Bluejay Books, 1983. This is the standard biography. It includes a good analysis of *The Hour of the Dragon*.

Edwards, Malcolm J. "Robert E. Howard." In *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, edited by Peter Nicholls, et al. Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books (Doubleday), 1979. A good summary of Howard's works, emphasizing his Conan stories.

Howard, Robert E. "The Hyborian Age."

In *Red Nails*, edited by Karl Edward Wagner. New York: Putnam's, 1977.

Howard describes the history of his imaginary Hyborian Age.

Wagner, Karl Edward. "Foreword" and "Afterword." In *The Hour of the Dragon*, by Robert E. Howard. New York: Putnam's, 1977. This is an authoritative edition of the novel, restoring it to its original published form. Wagner provides a good history of the novel's creation and publication and offers insight into Howard's methods of writing.

Related Titles

The Hour of the Dragon (also published as Conan the Conqueror) is the only full-length Conan novel that Howard wrote. A few of his other Conan adventures are novellas, but most are short stories. In each, Conan must battle wicked forces, but his goals are usually not so well focused as they are in The Hour of the Dragon, in which he struggles to regain his kingdom and to save his subjects from awful villainy.

In the novella "Red Nails," for instance, Conan is simply a roustabout adventurer who, while in pursuit of a woman, falls in with some of the weird inhabitants of an ancient lost city. His struggles focus on simply surviving and on protecting the woman, Valeria, who is herself a notably gallant warrior.

The events in The Hour of the Dragon are set in the imaginary Hyborian Age.

When he began writing his Conan stories, Howard developed the history and geography of the world in which Conan would live. This helped him keep each of his Conan stories consistent in setting and events with the others.

Howard's history of the Hyborian world begins with the Pre-Cataclysmic Age, a world of savages and near barbaric civilizations, such as that of Atlantis. The Cataclysm consisted of great movements of earth. Atlantis slowly sank into the ocean, the islands of the Picts thrust up to become mountains on the western edge of the world's central continent, and the lands of the Lemurians of the east also disappeared under the ocean. The world that resulted seems to consist of all the major continents of the modern world squeezed together. There is no Mediterranean Sea; instead, there are lowlands that are bounded on the south by the river Styx (later called the Nile), which flows north then bends and flows west to the ocean. The Cataclysm is so destructive that the civilized peoples of the world sink back into savagery.

Eventually a northern people, the Hyborians, form a primitive civilization consisting of great stone cities. By dint of intelligence and courage, the Hyborians become the dominant culture of the western part of the world, and they give their name to an age that lasts more than a thousand years, ending when the Picts and other enemies sweep away the major Hyborian kingdoms. Eventually, an ice age erases most of the remnants of their culture, leaving primarily their names of places and peoples, such as Picts (in real history the ancient inhabitants of what is now Scotland), Brythunians (Howard's ancestors of the Britons), and Iranistan (a place name that becomes Iran). The Conan stories are filled with names of people and places that are reminiscent of ancient lands in both the Old and New Worlds, as well as of ancient myths and superstitions — Asgard, Amazonia, the Styx.

The word Cimmerian comes from Homer, who describes Cimmerians as people who live in a land of perpetual darkness. In Howard's imaginary history, the Cimmerians are descendants of the Atlanteans who escaped from their sinking land during the Cataclysm. During the period of The Hour of the Dragon, the Cimmerians are a barbaric



people who are loosely organized as clans and tribes. Conan the Cimmerian is one of these people. By the time *The Hour of the Dragon* begins, he has won himself the kingship of Aquilonia.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress

Cataloging-in-Publication Data



Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994