

Red Nails Short Guide

Red Nails by Robert E. Howard

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Characters

The names of the Tlazitlans suggest that their place of origin in the east of the world would be the forerunner of Latin America. For instance the leader of the western faction of the Tlazitlans is named Olmec, the actual name of an ancient civilized people who lived in Central America. Olmec is the leader of the faction of Tlazitlans that Conan and Valeria fall in with. Typical of the Tlazitlans, he is treacherous. After the defeat of his enemies, he tries to engineer the murder of Conan and tries to force Valeria to become his mate.

Conan's quick reflexes save him from death, and Tascela, a princess of the Tlazitlans and much more evil than Olmec, saves Valeria from his crude desires.

Howard's letters suggest that he took special care in the creation of Tascela. He wanted her to represent a declining culture, symbolized by her unnatural desire for young women.

Although beautiful and youthful looking, Tascela is actually very ancient, having ruled the Tlazitlans in their homeland before their journey to Xuchotl. From her first appearance in *Red Nails* to her end, she shows a lustful desire for Valeria, once having her servant try to drug Conan's companion, and later succeeding in seizing Valeria from Olmec. Through evil magic, Tascela has kept herself young; she plans to kill Valeria and suck the life out of her as she expires. Her death is an appropriate end to her cruel ways.

Conan is the main character of *Red Nails*, but he is ably supported by Valeria, a strong character who is well suited to a tale of danger and adventure. She is a pirate who has fled inland to escape the vengeance of the friends and relatives of a man she slew when he tried to ravish her. Fiercely independent, she takes no nonsense from anyone, even Conan. If she has a weakness, it is that she does not think before she acts; this almost leads to her death at the claws and teeth of the dragon and does lead to her losing control of the servant who tries to drug her.

One of the outstanding qualities of Conan that sets him apart from the ordinary sword-and-sorcery hero is his thoughtfulness. In *Red Nails*, he is a lusty adventurer whose loyalty and sword are for hire. But his lustiness does not make him foolish. He plainly desires Valeria, but even though his strength and skill would enable him to force her to give in to him, he allows her the freedom of choice and shows respect for her fighting skills. He sees no value in forcing the affections of an unwilling woman; he also implicitly acknowledges her right to freedom of choice. In addition to this soulful quality, Conan has a good mind that he applies to the dangerous situations that confront him. When he and Valeria are trapped on high rocks by the dragon, they note the skeleton of someone who had apparently tried to outwait the monster. Valeria believes that their predicament is hopeless, but Conan figures out how to make a spear out of weak branches and how to poison the end of the spear so as to have the chance of at least driving the beast away for a time. The Conan stories show him at various stages of his career, eventually



culminating in his kingship of Aquilonia. In most of the stories he is as he is in Red Nails — a carefree adventurer who loves action and excitement more than treasure.

However, the stories also show as does Red Nails that he has the qualities of spirit and mind that will inspire loyalty and make him an able leader.



Social Concerns

Red Nails is about the futility of war. The Tlazitlans dwell in the ancient lost city of Xuchotl. Howard makes the point that for them the city is the whole world, a world they have turned into a perpetual battleground. When they first came to the city they gained entrance by means of deception: A slave in the city let them secretly in, and they quickly overcame the weak and ill-organized defenders. After centuries of inhabiting the city, the descendants of its builders had shrunk in numbers and had lost the knowledge of the ancient magic that had protected the city. Those who were not killed by the Tlazitlans were tortured to death by the vengeful slave Tolkemec, who had let the invaders in.

The city of Xuchotl is a wondrous place, with some corridors illuminated by glowing jewels and others always in darkness. Treasure in gold and jewels abound. The builders of the city were from the east, and they had great magical powers. They conjured up from the past monsters that had once roamed the land. These "dragons" seem to have been dinosaurs, because the one that attacked Conan and Valeria, as described by Howard, resembles a stegosaurus (although scientists say that the stegosaurus was not a meat eater, but

the one in Red Nails is). These monsters occupied the great forest and kept most people away from the city. Over time, the descendants of the builders degenerated into laziness and decadence, and their numbers dwindled to only a few hundred by the time the Tlazitlans arrived.

For five years, the Tlazitlans enjoyed the bounty of the city, but their ruling brothers, Xotalanc and Tecuhlti quarreled over a woman they both desired — a woman also desired by the former slave, Tolkemec, who had developed a following of his own among the Tlazitlans. Xotalanc took her for his wife, but Tecuhlti stole her from him. Their tribal council decided to let the woman choose for herself which man she wanted to be with, and she chose Tecuhlti.

Xotalanc tried to take her back by force and thus began the endless war. Some of the tribe sided with Tecuhlti, others with Xotalanc, and others with Tolkemec. The brothers each fortified an end of the oval city — Tecuhlti in the western quarter and Xotalanc in the eastern quarter. Tolkemec took over the southern quarter of the city. The original reason for the conflict became irrelevant to the fighting, with each side seeking revenge for its own dead that were lost in battle, creating an unending cycle of violence. After fifty years the thousands of Tlazitlans had whittled themselves down to less than a hundred people. The followers of Tecuhlti eventually exterminated the followers of Tolkemec; they captured and tortured Tolkemec himself, leaving him to be eaten by the rats in the catacombs. The war is foolish; the Tlazitlans could enjoy the bounties of a wonderful city, but instead they fight a war of endless cycles of attack and reprisal.

Eventually, they destroy themselves, leaving the city to be inhabited by rats, monstrous creatures called crawlers, and perhaps the spirits of the dead.



Techniques

The magical worlds and fast action probably are the Conan tales' principal appeal. *Red Nails* has most of the qualities that have made the Conan stories popular. It features nonstop action, a dinosaurlike monster, a mysterious lost city, eerie hallways, slithery monsters from the catacombs, derring-do, and swordplay. The novella can transport its readers into a world of mystery and magic.

The Conan stories all feature exceptional imagery. Much of their appeal depends on the evocation of strange places and mysterious people. The city of Xuchotl and the Tlazitlans are strange and mysterious. The red nails of the title symbolize the dead enemies of Olmec and his faction. For each enemy slain, a copper nail is driven into an ebony column in the throne room. The nails are red like blood, and the column is black.

In a story that emphasizes action and adventure, an author will usually try to leap right into the action, trying to capture a reader's interest. In *Red Nails* Howard does not follow this typical pattern. He first introduces Valeria, making it clear that she is a battle-hardened warrior as well as a beautiful woman. The first element of action comes only after Conan has joined her, has explained how he came to be with her, and has had his initial romantic advances firmly rebuffed.

Then the dragon attacks their horses.

This beast is described as having a lizardlike head, a spiny back, and a thorny tail, much like the dinosaur the stegosaurus would have had in the age of the dinosaurs. In this Howard follows an old line of speculation that the fossils of the dinosaurs could have inspired the ancient tales of dragons; in *Red Nails* he takes the speculation a step further by making the dragons revived dinosaurs.

The conflict with the dragon is a well-constructed drama that illustrates the characters of Valeria and Conan.

Valeria is shown to be courageous and obsessed with maintaining her sense of independence. Conan is shown to be a strong and able fighter who uses his head as well as his muscles to overcome a foe. This serves to set up the rest of the story; Howard has given examples of what the two most important characters are like, making their behavior amid the dangers of Xuchotl credible. On the other hand, the vast enclosed city of Xuchotl forms much of the attraction of the story; the dragon is a side issue. The challenge for Howard is to make the battle against the dragon interesting enough that readers will not set aside the story before the central action begins; the opening is intended to acquaint readers with Valeria and Conan and establish their relationship that will continue to develop once the main plot line is underway.

Themes

Red Nails and the other Conan stories feature matter-of-fact nudity, violent fights, and frightening magic.

Nudity is a common theme of fantasy adventure fiction, for instance often found in the fiction of Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of the Tarzan books.

Red Nails features no graphic physical descriptions of naked people; the women tend to be undraped from the waist up, and Valeria is a notably muscular woman; the men tend to be undraped, as well, with Conan's magnificent chest formed by well-shaped muscles. The nudity does not titillate so much as it symbolizes the primitiveness of the peoples and cultures that are presented. The climate is temperate, the physical exertion is hot, and the people have no notions of physical modesty. The primary attraction of the novella is its adventure and mystery, without which the nudity is of no interest.

Violence is a more important theme than the nudity because it is closely linked to the mindlessness of the warfare in Red Nails, The sword-and-sorcery tales of Howard are notable for their intensity of emotions; this intensity serves to elevate them above even more polished stories of other writers; it is often manifested in violent episodes. In addition to the battle against the dragon and the sword fights against enemy Tlazitlans in the city, there is a scene in which a naked woman is whipped by Valeria and a torture scene in which Olmec is tied to an infernal machine, and there is the near ritual sacrifice of Valeria. All three of these notable incidents end in failure: Valeria does not learn what she wants to know, and her victim escapes; Olmec is freed by Conan; and Valeria escapes her doom when the past evil catches up with the Tlazitlans and they are consumed in a cataclysmic last conflict. An appealing aspect of the Conan stories may be the seemingly simple black-and-white solutions to problems — the kill your enemy before he kills you mentality. The themes and characterizations of Red Nails suggest that Howard did not intend to show violence as the solution to problems; the bloodthirsty mentality of the Tlazitlans leads to their destruction, and the violence offers few solutions to the characters' central problems.

Mystery is an important theme running through Howard's Conan fiction and is one of the most important attractions of the tales for a popular audience. Red Nails opens in a vast forest near the edge of the known Hyborian world. It is dense and seems endless, but in the middle of it is an ancient city, completely walled in and completely covered over by roofs, spires, and towers. This city, Xuchotl, is oval shaped, with the long ends facing east to west. It has four aboveground floors and no-telling-how-deep catacombs below ground. The descendants of the builders of the city were killed about fifty years before the opening of Red Nails. Now, the north and south ends of the city are inhabited by the descendants of those who destroyed the previous inhabitants, and these people are locked in a feud to the death.

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 turns 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.



Key Questions

People who enjoy sword-and-sorcery novels tend to love to talk about them and their authors. The Conan stories have become the standard by which other sword-and-sorcery tales are measured, and almost any discussion of authors such as Fritz Leiber and L. Sprague de Camp will include comparisons of techniques and subject matter to Red Nails and other Conan adventures. Discussions of the Conan adventures often drift into comparisons with the Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser stories (*The Swords of Lankhmar*, 1968; *Swords Against Wizardry*, 1968; *Swords in the Mist*, 1968; *Swords Against Death*, 1970; *Swords and Deviltry*, 1970; *Swords and Ice Magic*, 1977; *The Knight and Knave of Swords*, 1988, by Fritz Leiber) and a multitude of other pastiches, send-ups, satires, romances, and raw adventures.

If a general discussion of sword-and-sorcery fiction is what is wanted, then the Conan tales are a good place for beginning what will likely become a broad discussion, indeed.

If the discussion is to remain focused on Conan, a number of topics are possible. One topic is the characterization of Conan. People who have never read a Conan story seem quite sure that they know what he is like: a bumbling brute who molests women and mindlessly eviscerates hoards of enemies. In fact, Conan is a complex character whose behavior is complexly motivated. Sometimes he is rough with women; other times he is very gentle with them. Why is this? One moment he is ready to kill an enemy, at another moment he is merciful toward the same enemy. Does this represent growth in his character, a change in circumstances, or an already established set of moral values? He is a lone adventurer, relying on his wits and brawn to keep himself alive, yet although very independent of spirit, he adjusts well to the demands of society, such as when the duties of leadership compel him to serve the needs of society rather than just his own needs. What does this say about his development? What does it say about Howard's attitudes toward heroism and leadership?

Other aspects of the Conan adventures also offer excellent material for discussion. How well depicted is the imaginary world of Hyboria? Do characters behave as people might if raised in Hyborian societies? Can the social background of Hyboria account for the attitudes and actions of figures other than Conan? How do women fit into the ethos of the Conan fiction? How many of the characters and how much of the social background are just window dressing and how many and how much are integral to the plots? In his short life, Howard created an amazing world of adventure that authors to this day continue to mine; the possibilities for characterization and plot represented by the hard-bitten, sometimes crude, Conan tales seem limitless.

Readers tend to spin out imaginative speculations of their own about Conan and his world. Discussion groups that encourage the expression of members' imaginations are likely to have plenty to say about Hyboria.

1. Why are the Tlazitlans darker skinned than Conan and Valeria?



Could their geographical origins have any effect on their complexions (Conan and Valeria are from northern areas whereas the Tlazitlans are from a southeastern region). Does Howard mean anything by these differences in complexion? Is he racist, or would that be reading too much into his story?

2. Is the mysterious city of Xuchotl worth the amount of time it takes for the story to get there? Was it disappointing? What do you like about it, and what about it needs to be better?

3. What makes Valeria an interesting character? Do you like her ability to outfight most men? Will she give in to Conan's efforts to woo her?

4. What makes the character Conan more admirable than the other violent people around him? Is he no better than Olmec?

5. Howard has taken advantage of his enclosed city by making it a miniature world apart from the outside world. In it he has created two perpetually warring camps. What does Howard have to say about war and its effect on people and society?

6. Conan and Valeria fall in with one side in the war in Xuchotl. Is this good? Have they joined the good side?

Is there a good side? Is the willingness of Valeria and Conan to sell their warlike services good?

7. How does Howard go about building his imaginary Tlazitlan society? Note how he gives it a past history.

8. Why does Howard make the people in Xuchotl invaders who destroyed the original inhabitants of the city?

Why not just have the original inhabitants at war with each other when Conan and Valeria enter the city?

9. Why is torture mentioned in Red Nails? How does Howard seem to view torture?

10. Why do Conan and Valeria not take any loot with them from Xuchotl?

11. The character Valeria shows up in the motion picture Conan the Barbarian (1982). Is she accurately portrayed in the movie? How has she been changed? Is her characterization better or worse in the movie? Is her death in the movie appropriate according to what you learn about her in Red Nails?

12. Howard wrote poetry as well as fiction. Do any of his poems have similarities to the Conan adventures and to Red Nails in particular?

13. What are the characteristics that make Conan a good guy rather than just another amoral, violent adventurer? Can you justify his violent behavior?



14. The Conan stories are the foundation for many of the sword-and-sorcery fantasies of the modern day.

How well does Red Nails compare with its successors that also focus on ancient cities with isolated societies? How well does the character Conan compare with later main characters in sword-and-sorcery adventures?

15. 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?

16. Are there any other stories by Howard that portray dinosaurs as dragons? Are there other works of fiction by other authors that also portray dinosaurs as dragons? Why would the authors use dinosaurs instead of making up their own dragons or simply using traditional dragons? What effect does the use of dinosaurs for dragons have on the works of fiction?

17. Look at the story of Red Nails from the point of view of the Tlazitlans who are the enemies of the faction Conan and Valeria join. How would they view the arrival of Conan and Valeria? Why would they risk everything in a desperate attack when they have control of magic that their foes do not have? Do they love? Do they hate?

What are their reasons for staying in the city rather than leaving (or do some leave)? Why do they continue the war?

18. Do other of Howard's Conan tales have war as a central theme?

What view of war does he develop in his Conan writings?



Related Titles

A few of Howard's other Conan adventures are novellas, but most are short stories, and only one, *The Hour of the Dragon*, is a full-length novel. In each, Conan must battle wicked forces.

In most of the tales, he is the roustabout adventurer portrayed in *Red Nails* but he matures as the king of Aquilonia, becoming a leader who inspires trust and loyalty, a good military tactician, and a benevolent ruler.

He even decides to marry.

Red Nails is set in the imaginary Hyborian Age. When he began writing his Conan stories, Howard first 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 *Red Nails* the Cimmerians are a barbaric people who are loosely organized as clans and tribes. Conan the Cimmerian is one of these people.

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