

CONAN der Übermensch

by David Scherpenhuizen

Robert E. Howard's most famous creations, Conan and Kull, are ruthless, strong-willed men who through their will-to-power carve out kingdoms for themselves. They rule vast, martial nations who conquer all those weaker than themselves. Not surprisingly, in light of the ferment of nationalist and proto-fascist ideas in which they were born.

Robert E. Howard's work was influenced by the *völkisch* ideas prevalent in Austria and Germany before the Second World War that fuelled the rise of fascism. His work has in common many of the misguided racial theories of the time and Howard's heroes are in some ways examples of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*.

Völkisch ideology can be described as a sort of pan-nationalism based on race or blood kinship instead of a nation. It was widespread in Germany and Austria from the late 19th century up until World War II and had its roots in romantic notions about race, *volkstum* (a German term embracing ideas on national identity) and folklore. It held that races were not solely determined by geography, but that they were connected by blood and shared traditions and beliefs. It also held that some races were naturally superior to others. Supporters of *völkisch* ideology believed that the Germanic race was superior to all others. They claimed that their core values and beliefs were not Christian, but were Nordic and found their most articulate expression in the Eddas, the Norse cycle of mythology. The key virtues were a love of nature, bravery, ruthlessness, racial cohesion, obedience and a compulsion to conquer by strength of arms. It was a warrior's creed, not a charitable one. These romantic but martial beliefs were expressed in romantic literature, political pamphlets, the poetry of Fichte and Schiller, Wagner's music, the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and the mystic Madame Helena Blavatsky. These ideas contributed to the breeding ground of discontent and the ideology of racial purity, which made Germany (and Austria) receptive to the Nazis.

Many of Howard's main characters are ostensible incarnations of these *völkisch* beliefs and are prototypical fascist *Übermenschen*.

Conan's actions are mainly driven by his will and desires, predicated by a primitive code of honour, which has misogynistic and racist traits. Only the strong and daring are fit to survive in Conan's worldview. All others are to be subjugated and/or ignored. Conan is presented as the pure, uninhibited "noble savage," who is implicitly superior to decadent civilized men in Howard's works, especially priests and potentates.

Howard's work seems to express the idea of racial superiority and purity. His tales are full of lower, degenerative sub-races and the notion that certain forms of culture are inherently superior to others. Howard was aware of the works of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, who first popularised the notion of superior races in his book, *The Coming Race*. The writer from Cross Plains was also familiar with the outlandish theories of the notorious Madame Blavatsky, as Patrice Louinet points out in the appendices to the *Kull: Exile of Atlantis* anthology. Blavatsky's pseudo-scientific, mystical writings were full of scurrilous theories on the innate superiority of certain races. Howard's work mirrored her ideas on a hierarchy of *root* races. The Hyperboreans for instance were superior to the Cimmerians, who most of the western kingdoms considered barbarians. Picts and the blacks of Kush were on the lowest rung of the racial ladder. These ideas do not necessarily express Howard's ideas on race because his sympathies clearly lay with barbarism, which he claimed would always inevitably triumph over civilization.

Howard's first published Kull tale; *The Shadow Kingdom*, furnishes further proof that Howard was well aware of the *völkisch* sentiments and the Nietzschean notion of the Superman circulating in Germany before the war. The story is in essence a meditation on the differences between barbarism and civilization and makes obvious references to Nietzsche, echoing his views on the Superman and organized religion, particularly Christianity, which he typified as engendering a slave mentality.

Kull – like Conan – is a prototypical Nietzschean Superman, who, eschewing the mores of society, rises to a position of

prominence through his strength of limb and sheer will-to-power. Kull has a strict code of honor, but it is very much self-generated; his behavior, desires and needs are not predicated on any soft, weak-willed religious creed. Everything is subordinate to his ambitions and urges.

The title of Part 2 of "The Shadow Kingdom," *Thus Spake the Silent Halls of Valusia*, echoes the title of Nietzsche's most famous work *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. The chapter describes a nocturnal meeting between Kull and Ka-nu, the ambassador of the Picts. It seems to represent Howard's views on the virtues of the Superman – the uninhibited man-of-action – embodied in Kull, compared to the weak-willed, decadent modern man, symbolized by Ka-nu; the wily, cynical, sybaritic ambassador. The king and the ambassador meet and Howard describes Kull's reaction:

...Kull watched Ka-nu...wondering if civilization would make him a thing like the Pict. For Ka-nu was soft and paunchy.

Then follows a lively scene, nicely juxtaposing the debauched, modern philanderer (Ka-nu) with the steely-willed, uncompromising savage Superman (Kull). It's abundantly clear where Howard's sympathies lie.

...Ka'nu's eyes twinkled above his white beard as he surveyed Kull, who sat erect, grim and uncompromising.

"You are thinking, Kull," said the old statesman, suddenly, "that Ka-nu is a useless old reprobate, fit for nothing, except to guzzle wine and kiss wenches!..."

The old scoundrel had lost all the primitive virtues of his races and of Kull's race...

It's clear that Howard thinks the barbarian/primitive is more authentic than modern man, who he considers decadent and duplicitous.

In an oft-quoted paragraph from the Conan tale *"Beyond the Black River,"* Howard states that barbarism is man's natural state and that it will win out in the end. Here's more proof of Howard's admiration of barbarian virtues. During the same meal, Ka-nu, echoing Howard's beliefs, claims that someone of Kull's qualities, unencumbered by weakness and false morality, could virtually rule the world *"...if you live!"*

...Kull's lean hand closed on his hilt and he half rose, with a sudden move of such dynamic speed that Ka-nu...felt his old blood leap with a sudden thrill. Valka what a warrior! Nerves and sinews of steel and fire, bound together with the perfect coordination, the fighting instinct, that makes the terrible warrior.

This passage clearly expresses Howard's admiration of the primitive Superman.

Howard's depiction of the treacherous, will-sapping, servility-inducing sect of Set, very much mirrors Nietzsche's harsh condemnation of Christianity as sapping man of the will-to-power and inculcating false and emasculating morality. Curiously, early Christians were sometimes condemned as "Ophites" – snake worshippers. The oily, duplicitous, fork-tongued priests of Set insinuate themselves into society, preaching false morals and subservience to God, undermining man's autonomy and personal responsibility, much like Nietzsche described the Christian church turning potential Supermen into Super-mice.

As priests they came... the snake-men, in the guise of teachers of a new and truer cult, built a monstrous religion about the worship of the serpent god. Such is their power that it is now death to repeat the old legends of the snake-people [similar to the church's accusations of heresy to bury the true origins of Christianity]... and blind fools that they are, the great hosts of men see no connection... As priests, the snake-men are content to rule...

The story ends with Kull cleaving through the lies and deception of modern man – symbolized by the decadent, indolent courtiers and the priests of Set – by relying on his primitive strength and instincts. The obsequious, belly-crawling mob is slaughtered in a paean of praise to the unfettered will of the Superman and ends with this:

"Valka... but here is such a man as I knew not existed in these degenerate days. He will be in the saddle in a few scant days and then may the serpent-men of the world beware of Kull of Valusia. Valka! But that will be a rare hunt!"

Once the ensorcelled courtiers cast off the sibilant, seductive spells of the priests of Set, Ka-nu describes them as *true men*, indicating that a man needs to shrug off the teachings of the church to become the Superman.

Howard's barbarian characters eschew all Christian values, and Conan and Kull could be considered fascists by some. Might makes right in "By this Axe I Rule," and similarly, Conan describes his grim grey god, Crom, as only instilling man with the "*will and strength to survive and conquer*," or words to that effect. These are basically fascist ideals. The collective must subordinate their will to a Superman or a group of supermen – the *Fuhrerprinzip* – who have the vision and will to hack out a place of prominence for themselves and their followers.

It is Conan's unflinching confidence in his own righteousness and physical prowess that make him such a force of nature. He is pig-headed to a fault, which is why he thinks and acts simultaneously. This is part of what makes him the ultimate survivor; he is not dogged by the morality or consequences of his actions. When all Hell breaks loose, he acts without hesitation, doing almost anything to ensure his survival and/or the survival of those in his care.

But how does Solomon Kane, who is ostensibly a Christian, fit into all of this? Perhaps it is significant that Howard dropped him shortly after his introduction and moved onto Kull and Conan, who he found more befitting his views. Nevertheless, despite his nominal Christianity, Kane is almost as primitive and barbaric as his successors; practicing a very Old Testament sort of Christianity, in which he is the instrument of the lord's vengeance and justice. In *Red Shadows*, in which Kane travels to Africa, he responds to the barbarism and primitiveness of the Dark Continent, as envisioned by Howard, recognizing the innate justness in the law of the jungle, which is based on might makes right.

However, even though Howard's heroes seem to embody many of the characteristics of the Nietzschean Superman, and even though Howard undeniably held attitudes that today would be deemed *racist*, I do not contend that Howard was a fascist. On the contrary, given his fierce independence, expressed by his desire to be a writer to safeguard his personal autonomy, I find it highly unlikely that he ever would've been able to follow a leader. He was also too cynical and distrustful to ever fully believe in a *Fuhrer*.

Conan, however, has no room for soul searching. He isn't bothered by the doubts and niceties of morality, ontology or philosophy. As he says to Belit in "Queen of the Black Coast":

Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I am content. Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion... I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and I am content.

In many ways, Conan is the ultimate existentialist hero; not accepting any moral or religious authorities and generating his own subjective code of honor and conduct. Existence precedes essence and life is what you make it. By Crom, it's great to be a barbarian!

