

The Cross Plainsman

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Robert E. Howard and the Sonnet (part one)

by Frank Coffman © 2000

Robert E. Howard's gifts as a poet have been greatly overshadowed by his well-deserved fame as a teller of tales. Indeed a great number of his millions of admirers and overly selective (or "under-initiated") readers do not even know him as a poet at all, let alone a poet of surpassing skill and intensity. But such a poet he was, exhibiting not only the conscious and sometimes strained imitation of the poets he admired, but also his own developing and distinctive flair while working within the old forms of the rhymed verse which he embraced, striking those notes of measured language as part of his general anti-modern philosophical bent.

Howard has left us an interesting corpus of poetry and some equally intriguing experimentation with the prose-poem (as close as he came to the vers libre which was gaining ascendancy in his day). He experimented with the heroic blank verse of Shakespeare, the ballad of tradition (heavily influenced by the work of Rudyard Kipling and Robert W. Service, to name but two), but he was also clearly enamored of the sonnet in the original Italian (Petrarchan) mode, comparatively more challenging in the rhyme-poor language of English.

Since the Renaissance, the sonnet form has been considered the true test for the poets of the West, challenging the poet by its tight pattern of fourteen

lines, precise meter, and confining rhyme scheme to strive for lyric concision and precision. No occidental verse poet of note for more than 700 years has neglected to attempt the form, and it remains an intriguing challenge to this day. Great sonneteers not only work within but, paradoxically, break free of its ancient bounds with seemingly endless and surprising discoveries of its inherent potential. Like the chess board that it approximates in shape, it seems to offer limitless possibilities for "the masters."

And Bob Howard was a master of the sonnet form, displaying virtuosity in many ways. Sadly, both then and now, the market for poetic work neither was nor is a lucrative one. Howard was a "pro" by his own admission, a writer who decided to make a living by writing and by "splashing the field" of markets for his more profitable prose. He wove in his poetry where he could, but—unfortunately—ended up leaving unwritten many of the poems that could have been.

The sonnets comprise a distinct sub-genre of Howard's poetry and offer an interesting spectrum of content while remaining very consistent in form and true to the Italian mode polished and perfected by Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) in the 1300's. While all sonnets are fourteeners, the established norm for the Italian variety is based upon a division

of eight and six—the *octave* and the *sestet*. The lines are almost always in iambic pentameter with the standard rhyme scheme of the octave working on the two initial rhymes: abbaabba. The *sestet* added two different end rhymes, with the standard rule to never end with a couplet. The most common varieties were: cdcdcd and cdecde. Howard experimented a bit with the *sestet*, but never really varies from this form to any great degree.

The sonneteer sets a task for himself to fit verse within the fixed form. Most English poets, following the lead of Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey (who invented what has become known as the “English” or “Shakespearean” form of the sonnet) and Shakespeare (whose sequence established it as the mode to follow in English) have opted to use the freer rhyme pattern of that form due to the relative “rhyme poverty” of our language. It is much easier to fit the *abab cdcd efefgg* pattern than to work with the scant four rhymes of the Italian as did Howard. That Howard opted for this more confining form tells us something about him from the outset: first, that he must have relished a challenge which is in keeping with what we know of his character from other evidence; second, that he believed in fitting content to structure and admired the traditions of literature—to paraphrase and invert Robert Frost’s famous disparagement of free verse (“like playing tennis with the net down”), Bob Howard played the game “with the net up,” loving the challenge of innovation and invention within the rules established by tradition.

Indeed so much was Howard a lover of tradition that the specific literary inspirations for much of his work—both prose and poetry—can be readily conjectured (even if not verified with complete certainty). And this leads to my first examination of the sonnets of Robert E. Howard — his use of the sonnet as narrative.

Just as the sonnets as a group may be seen as a distinct sub-genre of Howard’s poetry, so there are distinct subtypes and nuances within Howard’s small collection of sonnets. One thing that Howard did with the sonnet was to adapt it as a narrative poem and steer it away from the lyric of tradition. Others had done this before (see Percy Shelley’s

“Ozymandias” and, of course, Lovecraft’s *Fungi from Yuggoth* sequence), but the brief narrative is a thing seldom tried with the sonnet. Other elements that we see in the prose of Howard as well as his poetry include his interest in the Oriental Adventure (a la *Magic Carpet* and other exotic adventure pulps). His knowledge and appreciation of Edward Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* is well recounted in his letters and is visible in much of his poetry and some of his prose, each drawing elements from the *Rubaiyat*

Let us turn to an examination of three narrative sonnets by Robert E. Howard.

Forbidden Magic¹ **(July 1929 WEIRD TALES)**

There came to me a Man one summer night,
When all the world lay silent in the stars,
And moonlight crossed my room with ghostly bars.
He whispered hints of weird, unhallowed sight;
I followed — then in waves of spectral light
Mounted the shimmery ladders of my soul
Where moon-pale spiders, huge as dragons, stole —
Great forms like moths, with wings of wispy white.

Around the world the sighing of the loon
Shook misty lakes beneath the false-dawn’s gleams;
Rose tinted shone the sky-line’s minaret;
I rose in fear, and then with blood and sweat
Beat out the iron fabrics of my dreams,
And shaped of them a web to snare the moon.

[NOTE 1: I’d like to thank Glenn Lord for a photostatic copy of Howard’s typescript of this poem which was also intended for inclusion in the collaborative book of poetry IMAGES OUT OF THE SKY (which was never published, but the title of which was used by T. C. Smith for his own self-published collection of verse some years later)]

This is an interesting sonnet in that it varies from the traditional Italian form, showing REH’s willingness to be innovative and to be unconfined by strict adherence to a form if the rhymes just “don’t come.” The octave is regular in the A rhymes, but the young poet decided that the B rhymes of the first four lines

[ABBA] could not be—or were better not—repeated in the next four [ACCA]. Likely he found a couplet of lines that suited his content and they best fit in the octave.

Note the break of thought and image between the octave and the sestet (here keeping the Italian tendency to divide in sense (as well as rhyming arrangement and usual typographic presentation) between the 8th and 9th line. We shift from the night visitor to the different and generally more precisely delineated images of the sestet. The sestet is also interesting for its DEFFED arrangement (a distinct variance from the accepted norms which would have suggested DEDEDE or DEFDEF), the rhymes working from the outside to the central couplet in the group.

Both the “false dawn” and the minaret establish the Middle Eastern atmosphere and are very likely inspired by the opening of Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat*:

Stanza One/Version One:

Awake for morning in the bowl of night,
Has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight.
And, lo, the Hunter of the East has caught
The sultan’s turret in a noose of light.

And Stanza Two:

Dreaming when *Dawn’s Left Hand** was in the Sky
I heard a Voice within the Tavern cry,
"Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup
Before Life’s Liquor in its Cup be dry
(italics mine)

[**Dawn’s Left Hand* which Fitzgerald glosses: “(II.) The “*False Dawn*”; Subhi Kazib, a transient Light on the Horizon about an hour before the Subhi Sadik or True Dawn; a well-known Phenomenon in the East.” (italics mine)]

Also interesting and worthy of note regarding Howard’s “Forbidden Magic” is the curious coincidence of images with those in the famous sonnet “Design,” by Robert Frost. And coincidental it first seems that it must be, for the Frost poem was not published until 1936, the year of Howard’s death. The eerie connection in the images of spider, moth, and weird whiteness or palor are unmistakable:

Design

Robert Frost, 1874-1963
(first published 1936)

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witch’s broth—
A snow-drop spider, a flower like froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth hither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

But, as it turns out, an earlier version of this poem, “Design,” was finished and published as early as 1912 and entitled “In White.”

In White

Robert Frost
(first published 1912)

A dented spider like a snow drop white
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of lifeless satin cloth—
Saw ever curious eye so strange a sight?—
Portent in little, assorted death and blight
Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth?—
The beady spider, the flower like a froth,
And the moth carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The blue prunella every child’s delight.
What brought the kindred spider to that height?
(Make we no thesis of the miller’s plight.)
What but design of darkness and of night?
Design, design! Do I use the word aright?

I think it quite likely that there may be some inspiration between the earlier Frost version and Howard’s experimental and innovative sonnet. Howard, the student of the sonnet, could hardly have been unaware of the work of Frost, and this poem hints at a definite inspiration.

There is clear evidence of the overall musicality of his language and love of alliteration (“with wings of wispy white,” the frequent Ss and Ws in the octave and these two and also Ms throughout the poem.) and other phonic devices such as assonance (vowel rhyme: “mOOOn,” “lOOOn” “shOOok” and again in “wIth-wIngS-wISpy”).

We may now conjecture about the content of the poem, most intriguingly the possible identity of the “Man” (the capitalization of the word is undoubtedly significant) he “followed.” A good guess about the identity of this fellow who “whispered hints of weird, unhallowed light” would be Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Bob Howard began his epistolary relationship with Lovecraft only a year after the publication of this poem in *Weird Tales*. There is no doubt that Howard had been influenced by Lovecraft's work. In a letter to HPL dated 9 August 1930, Howard begins: “I am indeed highly honored to have received a personal letter from one whose works I so highly admire. I have been reading your stories for years, and I say, in all sincerity, that no writer, past or modern, has equalled you in the realm of bizarre fiction.”

There is at least good evidence that this poem may be viewed as an *homage* to HPL, influenced by Howard's boyhood reading (Fitzgerald) and study of the sonnet form (Frost). It also exhibits early the ability of Howard as sonneteer to work within the form without being a slave to it, considering the liberty REH takes with the rhyme scheme of the pattern.

Another interesting thing that Howard does with the sonnet is the occasional use of the poem to present dialogue as well as narration. This is exceedingly rare in the sonnet form, since there is little room to spare for narration, let alone the “real time” presentation of dialogue or scene. Shelley comes close to it in “Ozymandias” [“I met a traveller from an antique land who said: / ‘Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand on the desert . . .’” with the rest of the poem being the “frame narrative” of the traveller. but this, even though inclusive of two voices, the frame narrator's and the traveller's, is hardly dialogue. Howard uses the sonnet interestingly to include two speakers

in a conversation. Here is Howard's “The Weakling” (*The “New” Howard Reader #4*, page 29):

The Weakling

Robert E. Howard

I died in sin and forthwith went to Hell;
I made myself at home upon the coals
Where seas of flame break on the cinder shoals.
Till Satan came and said with angry yell,
“You there — divulge what route by which you fell.”
“I spent my youth among the flowing bowls,
“Wasted my life with women of dark souls,
“Died brothel-fighting — drunk on muscatel.”

Said he, “My friend, you've been directed wrong:
“You've naught to recommend you for our feasts —
“Like factory owners, brokers, elders, priests;
“The air for you! This place is for the strong!”
Then as I pondered, minded to rebel,
He laughed and forthwith kicked me out of Hell.

The poem is distinctive not only because of its heavy dialogic content, but also because of its variance from the usually more lofty poetic diction that Howard uses in most of his poetry, certainly most of his sonnets. But this is certainly in keeping with the notion of dialogue and the conversational tone of the piece.

It is always dangerous to try to connect the “I” of a poem with the poet. For the same reasons that the narrator of a story should not be confused with its author, so the first person here as representative of Howard himself needs to be seriously questioned. I say this for several reasons. First, the mere association of the “weakling,” the “I” of the poem whose sins are too pale to be admitted to Hell, with Howard would run counter to, at least, his image of himself. Still, the suggestion of overdrinking and resorting to brothels is intriguing and would certainly hold true of REH in the former — at least on occasion. Regarding the latter, the jury must, I believe, remain out. Howard's sexual experiences (or lack thereof) have been and will continue to be the stuff of conjecture among the psychological and biographical and some other critics until more definitive evidence is

found, if ever. It may well be that we will never have good evidence regarding Howard's sexual experiences.

The poem does show REH wrestling with some of the more Puritanical doctrines of his received religion and serves as a platform for brief social comment and the Marxist-socialist leanings of his youth with "factory owners, brokers, elders, and priests" being numbered among those who are qualified candidates for Hell.

Technically the poem is typically Italian in the octave rhymes, but, again, exhibiting Howard's tendency to alter the sestet — this one ending CDDCEE with the rhymed couplet closure taboo in the true Italian/Petrarchan form. John Wyatt (this form is sometimes called "Wyatt's Sonnet") and, more famously, John Donne (see his Holy Sonnets and such offerings as "Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God") made use of this couplet-closure form as an early English variance from the Italian norm. Interestingly, Howard uses it in one of his few poems touching upon religion.

Perhaps the best narrative-dialogic sonnet in the Howard corpus, "Miser's Gold" [*The "Nav" Howard Reader #3*, page 6] tells a complete brief narrative with insinuated surrounding plot and wonderfully compressed content:

Miser's Gold

Robert E. Howard

"Nay, have no fear. The man was blind," said she.
 "How could he see 'twas we that took his gold?
 "The devil, man! I thought you were bold!"
 "This is a chancy business!" muttered he,
 "And we'll be lucky if we get to sea.
 "The fellow deals with demons, I've been told."
 "Let's open the chest, shut up and take a hold."
 Then silence as they knocked the hinges free.

A glint of silver and a sheen of jade —
 Two strange gems gleaming from a silken fold —
 Rare plunder — gods, was that a hidden blade?
 A scream, a curse, two bodies stark and cold.
 With jewel eyes above them crawled and swayed
 The serpent left to watch the miser's gold.

This is the truest to purpose and most successful of Howard's narrative sonnets. The wonderful achievement of REH's poetic and image-laden prose fiction is here distilled and encapsulated and seen in its essence. Great writers leave some work for the reader, and the sin of most novices at the craft of fiction is to overwrite, both in language and in content, giving too much verbiage and too much detail and too little credit to the reader's intellect. Much of the delight in reading is filling in the intentional gaps that the skilled fictioneer has provided.

We see many Howardian tendencies in this micro-story.

First, we see Howard's decided preference for the omission of introductory exposition (no room for it in the sonnet of course, but REH almost always omits it in his prose narratives as well). We leap into the narrative *in medias res*, in the good old epic plan of Homer; the blind miser has already been robbed.

Second, the suggestion of setting and specifics of the theft are done through the use of dialogue: ". . . we'll be lucky if we get to sea" suggesting both setting and the concept of sea + theft = pirates; the fact that the theft is a "chest" gives both specificity of the crime and enhancement to the pirate conjecture. The fact that the cautious "he" of the poem has heard that "the fellow deals with demons" adds that supernatural aura consistent with Howard's adventures. That the "she" seems more bold and daring — even if reckless and foolhardy — is interesting, especially in light of REH's frequent depiction of strong female characters (something his few feminist critics often fail to appreciate).

Third, the luscious imagery and descriptive power of Howard's language is exhibited in the opening of the sestet with the wonderful sound devices of assonance: "glInt," "sIlver," "sIlken" and in "shEEen" and "glEAming"; splendid alliteration: "GLint," "GLEam" (even exhibiting double alliteration) and shortly thereafter "Gods" and "Gold"; and also, of course, with the Ss of "Silver," "Sheen," "Strange," and "Silken"; and also consonance on the letter L: "gLint," "siLver," "gLearing," and "siLken."

Fourth, wonderful economy of detail, necessary of course for the compressed narrative of sonnet, but

also a distinctive marker of Howard's prose fiction is seen in the two central lines of the sestet. Howard achieves the economy of the ballad of tradition. Just enough words are given to suggest the initial elation of the robbers/pirates in forcing open the chest (mythic allusion here to Pandora's Box?), the painful surprise of what is first supposed to be a concealed blade, and the lovely economy of "A scream, a curse, two bodies stark and cold." No ballad of tradition exhibits better concision of detail. Enough is provided for the reader to see clearly what has happened, the details are sufficient to establish atmosphere and setting in the mind's eye, and the poem swings through the final two lines to reveal the jewel-eyed serpent (Biblical allusion to Eden?), the guardian of the treasure and bane of the thieves.

None of the narrative sonnets of Lovecraft's *Fungi From Yuggoth*, one of the few other groups of poems to make use of the sonnet as a narrative rather than lyric, are handled as skillfully or achieve such a full narrative completeness and compactness.

The poem is also most interesting in rhyme economy as it moves on only three rhymes, the sestet being in one of the two traditional patterns this time, but including the B rhymes from the octave: ABBAABBA | CBCBCB. Here Howard sets himself an even more difficult task than in the normally difficult Italian form. Seemingly simple on the surface, "Miser's Gold" reveals both Howard's poetic virtuosity and his consummate narrative skill, exhibiting its own "silken folds," offering a narrative poetic gem sparkling like the jade-green eyes of the serpent.

Future parts of this discussion of the sonnets of Robert E. Howard will touch upon his use of the form as self-expressive lyric covering a variety of his consistent and persistent themes and philosophies.

**So Ends Coffman's First —
But likely not Last —
Barely-Over-Minac (hopefully it won't B.O.M.)
Submission**

I promise to catch up with READ MAILS, my MCS section, next time. Semester will be ending in a couple weeks and I'll have to get to more Howardian (and Chestertonian — my dissertation in progress) studies.

The Dark Man

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Submissions are Welcome
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Suggestions are welcome.