

# The Promise of "Spear and Fang": A Close Reading and Commentary on Robert E. Howard's First Sale

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*"The result was crude, but gave evidence of real artistic genius, struggling for expression."*

—Robert E. Howard, "Spear and Fang"

**E**IGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD Robert Ervin Howard achieved his first commercial success as a "fictioneer" when *Weird Tales* purchased his story "Spear and Fang" which saw publication in the July issue for 1925. The story is interesting for many reasons beyond the distinction of primacy. In its short span, the young Howard displays some traits that will remain with him as an author throughout the few remaining years of his short life and the rest of his fictional output. The story gives early testament to many of the virtues that made Howard popular then and since, and it also exhibits a few of the narrative "nods" or possible "flaws" that he was prone to — and perhaps even one or two which he never overcame.

First of all, as a work of Howard's juvenilia [or at least of this earliest period of commercial publication, and, if any time of his life might qualify to be called such, his late teens would be such a period] it must be seen as exceptionally well wrought and certainly up to the standards of *Weird Tales*. It exhibits a command of grammar and stylistic sophistication that are rare in one so young. Overall, the tale must be commended for the typical fast pace and leap into action that were to characterize the vast majority of his fiction.

The flaws are, to some extent, the typical ones of the writer just breaking into publication. There is a tendency to

"overwrite" a bit as far as the style is concerned. There are some sophistications of speech that are, at best, unlikely as effusions of the early Cro-Magnon. But the evidence of good "homework" done -- based on the limited knowledge of the prehistoric which his era had acquired -- is also present.

But let us examine some particulars, for there are many other interesting aspects of the writer and man that Robert E. Howard was to become lying within the text of this tale.

I am going to attempt a close but eclectic reading of "Spear and Fang," offering some wild surmises as well as more solidly evidenced points. In the spirit of all critical discussion, I hope that my surmises might prompt either assent or disagreement, but, at the very least, be worthy of prompting some thought; further, I hope my more defensible points will attain the rank of distinct possibilities if not convince the reader completely.

The story is brief enough that I will attempt this discussion "linearly" with threads of critical approach weaving through the discussion, but not formatted into blocks or segments of critical text. The discussion will flow and ramble linearly, following the lines of the story text.

First of all, regarding the practice of naming characters, the young REH seems taken with the need to hyphenate and perhaps speaks to a notion that primitive peoples likely built language from agreed

upon monosyllables that eventually became compounds. This, of course, even today would be mere conjecture, but still not an unlikely possibility. Regarding the names used, I find the one for the main character "Ga-nor" to be most interesting. Whether the young Howard intended (or subconsciously "intended") the name to be a pun for gainer (in other words, "one who gains, or attains") will never be known, but I put this forward as a possibility.

Beyond this, I see Ga-nor as emblematic (and I believe not merely subconsciously so -- at least not subconsciously in all respects) of the young Robert E. Howard himself. Clearly the analogy holds quite well: both are young artists, testing and extending the "boundaries" or customs of their respective crafts; both work "laboriously" at their art [I'm reminded here of Keats's great sonnet, "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" and the fear that he may never live to "trace the shadows" of a "high romance" with the "magic hand of chance."], and it might be said that both Ga-nor and Howard give "evidence of a real artistic genius, struggling for expression."

As for the girl, A-ÆA, the young artist is "too occupied with his work to notice her," which might very neatly summarize the answer to the question that still fascinates Howardian scholars: "What about Bob Howard's relationships (or the lack thereof) with women?" Yet through the tone of the piece, the desire might well be seen -- a desire I believe evident through much of Howard's work -- that he be admired by women, perhaps by all who might admire art, but, nonetheless, that he be or become a person worthy of admiration.

The metaphor of the cave painting is also indicative. Howard could not have known of the Lascaux, France cave paintings (discovered 1940) but he must have been aware of the archeological

explorations and discoveries of the prehistoric past quickly advancing in the early 20th century. The fact that such had survived for tens of thousands of years appealed to the young artist in Howard in the way that art lures many, perhaps most artists -- at least one appeal is the potential for a relative "immortality" of sorts, a living on through ones work.

Interesting also is the view of social progress supposed by the young REH to have taken place. A-ÆA "should have played the modest, demure maiden, perhaps skillfully [SIC] arousing the young artist's interest without seeming to do so. Then, if the youth was pleased, would have followed public wooing by means of crude love songs and music from reed pipes." Here, though possibly presenting a far more structured civilization than perhaps existed, Howard tells us something else about himself as well. That there was something to the traditions of the tribe, but as we are told, "little A-ÆA was herself a mark of progress" -- in other words the bold and forward and assertive woman -- Howard is, I believe, making an interesting parallel to the girls he would have known in the "Roaring 20's" (even if they didn't "roar" quite so loudly in Cross Plains and Brownwood and environs).

The story then shifts to A-ÆA's retreat from the what we might call the "cave of creativity" for Ga-nor and the character development of two avant garde cave dwellers -- innovative artist and assertive woman -- to the foreshadowing of danger and adventure with the mention of the "gur-na's," the Neandertal's footprints.

Interestingly, the narrator ascribes to these "man apes" the beginnings of the Cro-Magnon (*homo sapiens*) legends of "ogres and goblins, of werewolves, and beast men." Also, of course, we may see the emergence of the thread of species (race?) superiority and the decided notion that there are (at least were) distinctions

between the human and near human -- and that Cro-Magnon man was superior.

We then meet Ka-nanu ("canine"?, the "dog," at least the cad). And we begin to see a few "nods" by the young REH. First of all, the sophistication of Ka-nanu's "Turn not away, fair maiden . . . It is your slave, Ka-nanu" is not only so much out of keeping with the prehistoric society that Howard hopes to depict, but it is also far out of character for the Ka-nanu we have just been introduced to ("He wooed her with a mocking air, as if he did it merely for amusement and would take her whenever he wished, anyway. He seized her by the wrist"). And, to top that off, A-Æa has been described as anything but "fair" ("A-Æa herself was very easy to look upon. Her hair, as well as her eyes, was black and fell about her slim shoulders in a rippling wave."), unless "fair" might be meant in the other sense as the antonym of "foul." Right after this, Ka-nanu calls her "moon of delight," which is more metaphoric than we might usually allow a cave dweller, but which does give interesting evidence of one of REH's decided and well-attested early literary influences, Edward Fitzgerald's translation of "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam" — specifically Section 74 of the First Edition:

Ah, Moon of my Delight who know'st no wane,  
The Moon of Heav'n is rising once again:  
How oft hereafter rising shall she look  
Through this same Garden after me—in vain!

And not much later, Ka-nanu calls A-Æa "my little antelope." Simply too poetic for this boorish thug.

A telling passage about the differences between Ga-nor (can we read him as Howard?) and Ka-nanu and their attitudes regarding women follows:

"Ga-nor was known to be gentle with women, if careless of them, while Ka-nanu, thereby showing himself to be another mark of progress, was proud of his success with

women and used his power over them in no gentle fashion."

Is Ga-nor's gentle carelessness perhaps the truth about Howard in a very interesting way, about the young artist so caught up in his art and that mission that no woman could dissuade him from that art and that mission? And did REH see Ka-nanu's callousness typical of the "progressive" attitudes of his own era? It seems from the positioning of the clauses that Ka-nanu must be the "progressive" one here, but is this perhaps a grammatical nod? We can but speculate.

With the next transposition of scene, Ka-nanu is leading hapless A-Æa off into the forest to do his worst, when the first passage of what is to become distinctive Howardian style strikes us between the eyes:

. . . in the midst of a glade he paused, his hunter's instinct alert.

From the trees in front of them dropped a hideous monster, a hairy, misshapen, frightful thing.

A-Æa's scream re-echoed through the forest, as the thing approached. Ka-nanu, white-lipped and horrified, dropped A-Æa to the ground and told her to run. Then, drawing knife and ax, he advanced.

The Neandertal man plunged forward on short, gnarled legs. He was covered with hair and his features were more hideous than an ape's because of the grotesque quality of the man in them. Flat, flaring nostrils, retreating chin, fangs, no forehead whatever, great, immensely long arms dangling from sloping, incredible shoulders, the monster seemed like the devil himself to the terrified girl. His apelike head came scarcely to Ka-nanu's shoulders, yet he must have outweighed the warrior by nearly a hundred pounds.

Here we have three markers of Howardian style sprung full-blown in his first sold story.

First of all, we have the tendency that could be called by various names but I will

define it by calling it simply "action packing." To be more specific about this, we may add that its achievement is often effectively carried out by "verbal packing," by what, in most writers, is a flaw, but which Robert E. Howard gets away with beautifully, again and again: the tendency toward "hypermmodification" by the liberal use of adjectives and adverbs. This hypermodification can occur serially ("serial modification") as we see in such strings as "hairy, misshapen, frightful" and in frequent "compound modification" (usually done by two qualifiers linked by the word and. This we can see as on marker of REH's style thenceforward. Somehow -- he usually (I will not say always) keeps it from cloying or being overdone. Mark Twain once wrote, "If you can catch an adjective, kill it." and creative writing coaches everywhere suggest that we should write in vivid nouns and action verbs and modify sparingly, but Robert E. Howard achieves both economy and compression of excitement in his practice of hypermodification. . Another marker of his style is the use of nominal (nouns) and verbal (verbs) compounding (to be discussed in the third point below).. Suffice it to say that, in the majority of Howard's action scenes, nearly every key noun and many verbs get extra reinforcement from adjectives and adverbs. This is often in the form of plural modifications made to a single nouns or verbs and not merely a tendency to modify most nouns and verbs a single time (which also occurs in many sentences).

Second, in keeping with the catalogue lists of Homeric style (see the "role call of heroes" in the cataloguing of the hosts of the Greeks in *The Iliad*), Howard will not infrequently run through a quick and extensive listing of details as we see in the vivid depiction of the Neandertal:

"Flat, flaring nostrils, retreating chin, fangs, no forehead whatever, great, immensely long arms dangling from sloping, incredible shoulders . . . ."

The young Robert E. Howard already displays his sense of scenic depiction and narrative pace (along the lines of Aristotle's mimesis [mimicking of "real time" action and dialogue] distinct from diegesis [the summary of the narrator]). Howardian scenes of action and danger and physical encounter to the death strive to keep "reading pace" with the "story pace." So, his language becomes as packed as the action depicted.

Third, we see the young writer's virtuosity with the language and a very sophisticated command of English. He exhibits complexity and diversity in his phrasing and clausal arrangements. He likes the periodic effect of saving the main clause until that last part of the sentence -- always a way to build suspense. He uses interjected appositives and inversions of syntax well, both in this early tale and throughout his work. Other markers of distinctive style include the frequent use of both metaphor and simile and the occasionally use of compound subjects, compound verbs, and compound (as opposed to serial) modifiers and the frequent use of the rhetorical device of tricolon or three-part parallel structure as in the following passage:

On he came like a charging buffalo, and Kananu met him *squarely* and *boldly* [**compound adverbs**]. With *flint ax* and *obsidian dagger* [**compound subject**] he *thrust* and *smote* [**compound verbs**], but the *ax* was brushed *aside* like a toy and the *arm that held the knife* *snapped* like a stick in the misshapen hand of the Neandertal. [**compound subject nouns, compound verbs, and compound similes**] The girl SAW the councilor's son *wrenched* from the ground and *swung* into the air, SAW him hurled clear across the glade, SAW the monster *leap* after him and *rend* him limb from limb [**tricolon of clauses with the first and last exhibiting compound verbs, and also exhibiting the rhetorical sophistication of the use of *asydeton* (no conjunctions in the series)**] .  
—(emphasis mine)

But more and much more specific on these points for a later essay and a more complete narratological and rhetorical examination of Howardian techniques.

Ga-nor's successful pursuit of the kidnapping "Neandertaler," his close-call defeating of the man-beast, and the rescue of A-Æa mark the culmination of the narrative. Not to be overlooked is Howard's "sprinkling in" of various beasties and dangers to add to the atmosphere of the tale: mammoth, tiger, python. He gets in his gory details (especially noteworthy is the offer of a morsel from the monster to A-Æa after he has her in his lair -- the uncooked meat being "the arm of a Cro-Magnard child."). The brush strokes of horror and danger are already being practiced and developed by the young Howard.

And we have the marker that perhaps makes Robert E. Howard stand out most as the young man who would become the pre-eminent writer of adventure fantasy for the pulp market of his day and the popular market since: the frequent creation of a scintillatingly brilliant image that simply reaches from the page and grabs the reader and captivates and even enthralls. At least for me the depiction of Ga-nor after he finds the remains of Kananu's dismembered corpse shines as one of the frequent diadems of language waiting to be wrought by the mature Howard yet to emerge and develop:

**He was racing now, and his face was a devil's mask, for he had come upon the bloody**

**glade and had found the monster's tracks leading away from it.**

That metaphor of the "devil's mask" and the lovely poetic echoes of the "l" and "d" sounds in "bloody glade" makes one realize that Howard had a genuine vision of his creations in action as well as a keen poet's ear for the music of words as well as their meaning, for their sound as well as their sense. Moreover, he was able to transform that vision through the medium of language, mankind's most potent artistic medium.

The battle scene itself is one grand example of how even the young Howard could visualize and mentally choreograph (eventually, of course, often physically "choreograph") his action stories. Howard had the mind's eye of a director of cinema (one can only speculate how interesting might have been his possible eventual attention to screenplay or direction). His stories (to play off the famous line of Hamlet's) never "lose the name of action."

At the end, the battle and the girl are won. "What I have fought for I will keep," says Ga-nor, who, like the hero of a legion of legends, wins the battle over the evil and daunting adversary and wins "a lover and a mate." The last sentence has the final tone of a story of legend: "And so it was that . . ." The last sentence also shows that spark of romance, still alive it would seem in the young Howard, but which would recede if not diminish in the maturing fictioneer.

# Robert E. Howard and the Sonnet (Part Two: Experimental Sonnets)

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. . . I heard, this wintry day,  
Thy spirit thank me, in his young delight  
Stepping again upon the yellow sands.  
Go forth: amidst our chaffinch flock display  
Thy plumage of far wonder and heavenward flight

—from Robert Bridges  
(dedication poem to his belatedly published  
collection of the work of his late friend —  
Gerard Manley Hopkins)

There are a few sonnets in the collection *SHADOWS OF DREAMS* (Grant 1989) that show Robert E. Howard's experimentation with the sonnet form. These poems prove both his knowledge of poetic tradition generally and the sonnet specifically and give good evidence that Howard was, perhaps, even more voracious a reader than has previously been noted.

These innovations are of at least three distinct types.

First, Howard uses metrical lengthening of the usual iambic pentameter line plan of the sonnet of tradition (u/u/u/u/u/) to a plan based upon hexameters with a medial caesura (u/u/u/ pause u/u/u/). This is interestingly close to the meter used by William Morris in his great work *SIGURD* (full title of the poetic epic — perhaps the last great one in English — *THE STORY OF SIGURD THE VOLSUNG AND THE FALL OF THE NIBLUNGS*).

Second, he creates/invents of can only be called a "ballad sonnet," masterfully blending the virtues of the narrative ballad stanza and its short lines of 4-3-4-3 accentual rhythm into the 8-6 plan of the sonnet (which, as has already been noted, REH used as a narrative form more ofte than as a traditional lyric).

Third, he creates what must be compared to (and which was quite possibly influenced by) the "curtal sonnet" proposed and practiced by Gerard Manley Hopkins — a Howardian shortened "sonnet" form of 6 and 4 line sections, adding to only 10 or course (instead of the traditional sonnet's 14) but very close to Hopkins mathematically theorized "curtal" or shortened (*curtailed*) sonnet of 6 to 4 and a half (the same 4:3 proportion as 8 to 6 in the fourteenner). While these poems are shorter in number of lines, Howard makes up for something closer to the sonnets normal word count by making use, again, of the longer 6-beat or hexameter line.

In *SHADOWS OF DREAMS*, the poem "The Gladiator and the Lady" (37) is an innovative and experimental sonnet in more than one way. Its rhyme scheme is based on couplets, but it keeps the octave and sestet arrangement of the traditional Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet form: AABBCDD followed by EEFFAA. So, a "couplet sonnet" in

a sense as to this variant rhyme scheme. It is also innovative in its meter in the use of hexameter lines with medial caesura (pause). Howard also adds the occasional extra accent (as in line 2) and he often uses irregular feet (the frequent replacement of iambic rhythm [unstressed-stressed, repeated] with anapestic [unstressed-unstressed-stressed]). I've scanned the first three lines below to emphasize the pattern of accents and caesural pauses:

### The Gladiator and the Lady

/            /            /    /            /            /  
 When I was a boy in Britain            and you were a girl in Rome,  
 /            /            /            /    /            /            /  
 Forests and mountains lay between,            and the hungry, restless foam.  
 /            /            /            /    /            /            /  
 Today naught lay between us,            only the wall, at least,  
 That guards the proud patrician from the slave and the dying beast.  
 Our hearts we read that instant my eyes with your eyes met,  
 But there were swords to sunder and life blood to be let.  
 And you will marry a consul and live on the Palatine  
 And I will take some slave girl from the Garonne or the Rhine.

But you will dream at the banquet, while the roses scent the air  
 Of a blazing-eyed barbarian with a shock of yellow hair.  
 And through the roar of the lions and the clang of sword and mace,  
 I'll dream of a pair of dark deep eyes and a proud patrician face.  
 We still are as far asunder as the hut and the arch and dome  
 When I was a boy in Britain and you were a girl in Rome.

This rhythm of line is the exact form chosen by William Morris for his long epic, *SIGURD*, which begins:

/            /            /    /            /            /  
 There was a dwelling of kings            ere the world was waxen old.  
 /            /            /            /    /            /            /  
 Dukes were the door-wards there            and the roofs were thatched with gold.  
 /            /            /            /    /            /            /  
 Earls were the wrights that wrought it,            and silver nailed its doors;  
 Earl's wives were the weaving women, queen's daughters strewed its floors,  
 And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast  
 The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.

I don't believe there is any connection with Morris and his work yet established for REH, but the similarity here must give us pause. I believe that the influence is possible, and Morris was one of the great narrative and epic poets of his day — along with Tennyson and Browning (and Longfellow on this side of "the pond"). I think it likely that the young Robert E. Howard had encountered some of Morris's work, likely *SIGURD* at least— the man generally acknowledged as the progenitor of mythopoeic fantasy. [of course Morris's influence upon Tolkien ("door-wards" and roofs "thatched with gold" — Meduseld anyone?) and Lewis is well-documented].

I can't read that poem now without thinking of SPARTACUS and GLADIATOR, but we certainly see the juxtaposition of Briton barbarian and patrician woman in more

than a few of Howard's great works of fiction. Biographical possibilities? An interesting thread to pursue, but not in the present context.

Two poems in SHADOWS OF DREAMS stand out as innovative "ballad sonnets," as interesting blends of two old traditions into a composite form that works quite well. The first of these to be encountered is "The Call of Pan" (64) which is an interesting little lyric. And later in the text, the poem "Love" (84) makes us ponder possible biographical connections as well. Let's examine these two in that order. With these "ballad sonnets," as I have termed them, REH uses the opposite device from the hexameter lines, he shortens the accent count to 4s and 3s (the standard ballad is 4343 accentual over four lines and rhymes ABCB). I've included accent counts and rhyme scheme in the presentation below:

### The Call of Pan

My heart is a silver drum tonight —	4	A
And the moon is red in the East —	3	B
And he drums with a rattle eery and light,	4	A
The god with the hoofs of the beast.	3	B
Drums with a thunder gold and light,	4	A
And the silence breathes like a mist rose white	4	A
Is it my heart that he drums tonight,	4	A
Or the moon in the dreaming East?	3	B
His call to the sons of men at dawn —	4	C
And they falter and halt and start —	3	D
Is the haunting wail of pipe soon gone;	4	C
Oh, they hear his pipes in the brooding dawn,	4	C
But he shouts to me and he leads me on	4	C
With the drum that is my heart	3	D

This is a sonnet due to its fourteen line arrangement of 8 and 6, but, this time, the rhythms are ballad like with the lovely alternation of 4 and 3 accents and the final lines of sections ending with the short, three-accent closure or clincher. Also typical of the ballad, near refrains are used and there is no hesitancy to repeat ending words and images. The "heart-drum" beats throughout. The spring, when a young man's fancy turns to . . .

Thoughts of "Love" —The poem, that is. Few of the poems in REH's impressive poetic output get as close to explicit sensuality and suggestion of realized romance as the following which is a subtle variant of what I have termed the "ballad sonnet" with the first eight lines (the octave, but in this poem actually separated as two "ballad groups" of four lines) actually being the equivalent of two stanzas of the 3343 accent pattern — known as the "short ballad":

### Love

I have felt your lips on mine  
    Your hair has veiled my eyes  
When my blood was wild as singing wine  
    And star-gold flecked the skies

We have watched the moonlight dance  
On the breast of the still lagoon  
But now I am tired of your changeless glance  
In the eye of the wrinkled moon.

What have you given me  
To name as an ultimate bliss?  
Am I more strong, more free?  
What slavery is this?  
For a single star on the dusky sea  
I would barter your hottest kiss.

The sensuality of the first stanza begins to be muted by the end of the second as the speaker (Howard?) becomes "tired of your changeless glance"— and herein is a key word, I believe — *changeless*. That REH somehow viewed entanglements with women as either "changeless" or (later in the poem) a type of "slavery" might be hinted here. The lure of broader experience and the chasing of the "single star on the dusky sea" was more attractive to young Bob Howard (again, I cannot help but be reminded of Keat's poem "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be," written by the young man, knowing he is dying of tuberculosis ["consumption" in his day] and the attitude expressed about that other kind of deterrent from the completion of ones artistic work:

. . . When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,  
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And feel that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance; . . .

Although Keats is yearning for both the completion of his work and the attainment of lasting love

. . . And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,  
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

I believe that, in the case of Robert E. Howard, "fame" came before "love" and the need to follow his "star," and maybe to trace some shadows with his art left him with the viewpoint that a shared life was a confinement and a hindrance — hence his never-actuated brief excursions at "Love" as this poem is ironically entitled. There's LOVE here all right, but in the final analysis, it's Robert E. Howard's love for the fulfillment of his dream and the need to follow his star on the "dusky sea" that was to sail upon into legend.

A final experiment with the sonnet form that I will consider is the interesting couple of 6-4 (rather than 8-6) arrangement poems of "I Praise My Nativity" (42) and the wonderful final poem of SHADOWS OF DREAMS, "Surrender" (92). To understand more fully my speculation that this form may have been influenced by the metrical theorizing of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (posthumously published by his

friend, Robert Bridges in 1918 and widely and highly regarded for its impact on English poetics in the 20's and 30's). To understand Hopkin's notion of the "curtal" or shortened sonnet, I quote from the "Author's Preface":

**Nos. 13 and 22 are Curtal-Sonnets, that is they are constructed in proportions resembling those of the sonnet proper, namely 6+4 instead of 8+6, with however a halfline tailpiece (so that the equation is rather  $12/8 + 9/2 = 21/2 = 10.5$ ).**

—from the Author's Preface to *The Collected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (ed. Robert Bridges, London, 1918).

Howard makes use of this 6-4 arrangement in the abovementioned poems. First, let's examine, "I Praise My Nativity":

### **I Praise My Nativity**

Oh, evil the day that I was born, like a tale that a witch has told;  
I came to birth on a bitter morn, when the sky was dim and cold.  
The god that girds the loins of Fate and sends the nighttime rain,  
He diced my game on an iron plate with dice carved out of pain.  
"This for the shadow of hope," laughed he, as the numbers glinted up,  
"This for a spell and this for hell, and this for the bitter cup.

A Shadow came out of the gloom of night and covered me with his cowl  
That carried the curse of The Truer Sight and the blindness of the owl.  
Oh, evil the day that I was born, triply I curse that day,  
And I would to god I had died that morn and passed like the ocean spray.

Again we have rhyme in couplets and the hexameter line with a pause in the center, nicely dividing the lines with three accented syllables on either side. There is a fine musicality to the poem with use of internal rhyme as well as end-rhyme. I fairly typical Howard fashion, the title is grimly ironic. If the "I" in the poem is Howard (and there is some evidence that lend support to the possibility — especially the bitter cold morning of birth (January X? still a matter of discussion. It would be interesting to know if REH was born with a cowl or if he is simply spinning off his knowledge of folklore which often attributes mystical powers or "sight" to children so born. Typical of much of REH's more personal poetry are the iron-grim images and the overall coldness and somber mood of the poem. The "curse of the Truer Sight" might indeed be what Howard thought of as a legacy or as a received — or attained — power.

The final poem in the volume, "Surrender," has the grim finality expressed in several of Howard's poems and the recurrent theme that even a short life may be overfull of sorrow. Again, we have the mutated sonnet form, longer lines than normal, fewer lines than normal — sort of the typical square of the sonnet squashed or compressed with the weight of the world — of the worldS?:

### **Surrender**

Open the window and let me go, I have tarried over long;  
I hear the tides on the sands below but there is no joy in the song.  
My heart is hollow with endless pain, my temples are growing white;  
Open the window against the rain and let me go to the night.  
Once I hailed Tomorrow, I lifted a glad refrain,  
But my heart is thin with sorrow and my eyes are blind with pain.

My wine has been the salt of tears, my bread is hard and stale  
Close the door on the bitter years and let me go to the gale.  
Oh, wind, sea wind on the bitter lea, that harries the ships with fright,  
Toss me and rend me and set me free, mingle my soul with the night.

The symbols are several here and universal: the window and the door, symbolic of the portal into the beyond, emblematic of that transition of life into death; the storm of a troubled existence; the journey of life as a difficult voyage over storm-tossed seas; and the ubiquitous symbol of the night.

Again, there is fine euphony in the poem with internal rhyme and occasional alliteration adding to the music of the end rhymed couplets.

Overall, Robert E. Howard's adaptation and transmutation of the sonnet form add support to the idea that his poetic achievement is worthy of much greater discussion and critical attention than has presently been the case. Howard as sonneteer, unafraid to break and transmute tradition while also exhibiting the ability in many poems to work solidly within it, is enough to warrant serious consideration of his merits for inclusion among the great American poetic voices of the early twentieth century.

His depth as a sonneteer has only been hinted at in the first two installments of this series. In the next issue, I will examine Howard's sonnets about women.