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The Conscience of Solomon Kane: Robert E. Howard's Rhetorics of Motive, World, and Race

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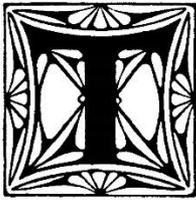
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Abstract

In this article I use key definitions from the writings of C. S. Lewis and Hannah Arendt to analyze the portrayal of "conscience as motive" in Robert E. Howard's Solomon Kane stories. I propose a reading of "Kane Saga" as unified by a single underlying fantasy narrative structured around the development of Kane's conscience across several adventures set in Europe and Africa. In doing so, I attempt to construe these stories of Howard's earliest "Sword and Sorcery" hero as a fruitful place for critical engagement with Howard's rhetorics of race, motive, conscience, and action. In doing so, I push back against the dearth of scholarship about Howard's Kane stories relative to scholarship about his Conan stories, and I offer some potential ways in which scholars of fantasy might more effectively navigate Howard's rhetorical treatment of race.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; The Conscience of Solomon Kane; Robert E. Howard's Rhetorics of Motive, World, and Race; Solomon Kane; Robert E. Howard; Conscience; Motive; Race; Hannah Arendt; Africa; Sword and Sorcery



THE CONSCIENCE OF SOLOMON KANE: ROBERT E. HOWARD'S RHETORICS OF MOTIVE, WORLD, AND RACE

GABRIEL MACOLA

INTRODUCTION: KANE'S SAGA

ALTHOUGH PRIMARILY RECOGNIZED AS THE CREATOR of Conan the barbarian, Texan fantasist and pulp author Robert E. Howard invented several other compelling figures of heroic fantasy. One of the earliest, conceived when Howard was just 16, is Solomon Kane, a 16th century English Puritan swashbuckler whose vengeful adventures formed the basis of some of Howard's earliest literary successes. Yet, as Hoffman and Cerasini point out in *Robert E. Howard: A Closer Look*, Kane stands apart from many of Howard's other protagonists. "While the adventures of Howard's other fantasy heroes take place in ancient or imaginary prehistoric epochs, Kane's exploits take place in a comparatively modern period. The others are barbarians; Kane is a civilized man, a child of the Renaissance and part of an era of exploration and discovery. Solomon Kane is an English Puritan who takes his faith very seriously; he seeks to redress any wrongdoings and injustices that he encounters" (ch. 3). In this respect, Kane has served as a particularly useful foil for understanding Howard's other major fantastical figures such as Bran Mak Morn, Kull, and, of course, Conan. But Kane is a fascinating character in his own right, apart from how he stands in relation to Howard's more popular fantasies, and the particulars of his character deserve greater critical attention. This is in part because the Kane stories, written and published over a five-year period between 1927 and 1932, represent something like a finished character arc and, concomitantly, a completed (in a certain sense) artistic experiment that together provide unique insight into Howard's story-craft.

This loose unity can be seen in the Del Rey collection of Howard's Solomon Kane stories edited by Rusty Burke which carries the suitably pulpy title *The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane*. This volume presents all of Howard's extant Solomon Kane stories, poems, and fragments in as close an approximation of compositional order as is probably possible. Approached in such a context, these savage tales take on a wonderfully half-formed, fragmentary unity that is as evocative of Howard's Modernistic age as it is clearly unintentional on the part of avowed anti-Modernist Howard. The blurb on the back cover of the volume declares that *The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane*

"constitute a sprawling epic of weird fantasy." While perhaps an exaggeration on the part of an enthusiastic copywriter, this is not an unhelpful characterization of the Kane tales taken altogether, and I bring it up not to serve as an offhand review of the volume, but to propose, as the central contention of this essay, that *The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane* correctly implies a fruitfully unitary perspective from which to engage with this lesser known of Howard's fantastical heroes.

What this essay hopes to offer is as much an interpretive reading of the Solomon Kane saga as it is an explication. Howard wrote the stories and poems featuring Solomon Kane as individual works; I want to argue for their greater significance when viewed as, well, what we might as well call an epic of weird fantasy. The material connections between the stories, poems, and fragments are objectively demonstrable: Kane in early stories has no magic staff. He eventually receives one, and in subsequent stories he has it and recalls receiving it. Likewise, events in Kane's life that are recorded in snippets and poems are recalled in Kane's memory and speech in other tales and poems. It is the chronology of these connections, in fact, that organizes the presentation of the stories in the *Savage Tales* volume. But it is not for a materially unitive reading simply that I will argue. I want instead, taking this material unity as a given, to address Kane's character as it is constituted across the writing that features him. More to the point, I want to explore the development of his *conscience*—as the concept is defined by C.S. Lewis in his book *Studies In Words*—as a motive for the actions Howard presents Kane as undertaking across this loosely unified narrative.

A reading of Kane's character as unified in a development of conscience across the various stories is nonetheless justified and buttressed by the saga's material and narrative connections. These connections make it much more likely, to my mind at least, that Kane's character developed in Howard's imagination than that Kane's changes in temperament which I intend to highlight and explore are variations on a static theme or mere formal distortions like the colors and blurred lines in a block of Warhol's Marilyns. The Modernist scholar in me would probably jump at the chance to dig into the particularities and unintended rhetorical effects of this reconstructed yet fractured, fragmentary narrative and the relationship this accidental but rather wonderful narrative form may have to Howard's depiction of consciousness, action, and world. But this is not the task to which I have set myself at present (although it is one that I believe could prove promising in future inquiries into the saga). The fragmentary nature of this shored-up ruin is more something to be discounted than embraced in such an attempt to follow the thread of Kane's conscience and character as I intend to make.

The question remains of why this investigation of the unified Kane saga ought to be undertaken. The answer can, I think, be found in noting two loosely connected facts. First is the fact of the disparity between the importance and influence of Robert E. Howard for and on the development of fantasy literature and the relative dearth of professional critical scholarship concerned with his work when compared to authors such as H.P. Lovecraft or J.R.R. Tolkien. Howard is often taken, when he is considered at all, as a kind of fantastical *enfant terrible* or an action-writer savant by whom nothing but the entertaining is promised and from whom nothing but the superficially juvenile can be derived. I am not, however, taking it upon myself to prove, as though such a thing were possible, that critics have somehow missed or overlooked Howard's hidden depths. I am instead trying to demonstrate, granting the common opinions concerning Howard's superficiality, that Howard presents very significant surfaces—or, what is perhaps more precise, I am trying, in my emphasis on motive, conscience, and action in the Kane saga, to apply the kind of rhetorical definitions (in both a Burke-ian and a Booth-ian sense) that can draw a particular kind of significance from Howard's wildly popular and influential fiction however superficial it may be when compared to more fully developed works of sword and sorcery influenced by Howard such as Gene Wolfe's *The Wizard Knight* or even Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and Mouser stories.

Second is the fact that race in the Solomon Kane saga is complex topic, and it remains a subject which I believe has forestalled some degree of critical inquiry into Howard's profound influence on the fantasy genre. History, for Howard, was a nightmare and one from which he never successfully awoke. As Deke Parsons writes in his book *J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard and the Birth of Modern Fantasy*, "History serves Howard as an endless procession of racial conflicts from which he can choose sides," in order to "dictate his reactions to the world" (68). The Kane saga, from Kane's first venture into Africa, is deeply, if confusedly, concerned with race as the determination of history and, what is more germane to this essay, concerned with the *meaning* of race in light of human history. Howard, in both the narration and the presented action of the Kane saga, wrestled with and struggled through his own nightmarish depiction of a racialized cosmos. But Solomon Kane's incursions into an Africa that is depicted through stereotypes of Africans and of a fantastical and othered "Dark Continent," are nonetheless bound up in an exploration of the relationship between race and motive that is developed across the stories in ways that trouble and perhaps even undermine—eventually—Kane's and the narration's assumptions about the meaning of race. Through Kane, Howard's narrative art confronts and, to a degree and certainly only haphazardly, transcends the negative assumptions and beliefs concerning race encoded in the architecture of his myth of history. This is not to excuse the influence of Howard's well-

documented racist beliefs on his art, but in Kane's saga, we see an artist, however obliquely, deconstructing his own preconceptions, anxieties, and ideologies about race through the projection of them onto a fantastical world that is then rejected and revolted against by his fictional hero.

Whether crafting and drafting Kane's saga helped Howard *in fact* work past some of his own prejudices is an open question, and one I will touch on only briefly. For us, at least, it is enough to recognize that a question of the meaning of race is not the background to the Kane saga but its subject, and that there are profound struggles going on in Kane's conscience that complicate the racist and racialist attitudes and tropes in Howard's narratives and narration. I don't pretend that this investigation of Howard's Kane saga can come anywhere close to laying to rest the issues concerning race in Howard's body of work, but I offer this article as evidence that Howard's fantasies of immediately motivated action, of which the Solomon Kane saga is a prime example, are a good place to begin.

As for why I intend to focus on conscience, this has to do with Howard's typical mode of characterization. Howard's actors, from Kane to Kull to Conan, are creatures whose motive is their conscience, or the self-determining judge of the rightness or wrongness of action. In her brief discussion of Howard's writing (which focuses on Howard's Conan stories and not Solomon Kane), in her book *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn discusses the ways in which Howard's narration emphasizes the action or actions undertaken by the characters:

Howard's Conan is interesting because Howard focuses the reader's attention on the action. Whereas in Tolkien, the emphasis drives the reader through the action, Howard is interested in the action itself. [...] For Howard, the action itself is the point; the finding of the object sought after, or the completion of the task is almost irrelevant. Accompanying this style of writing is the sense that action is about what is felt. It is important that Conan reacts by instinct, and that when Murilo, Conan's employer, is frightened, we feel "his blood congeal in his veins." We are reading here to feel this emotions, to thrill with the hero, to fear with the onlooker. (37)

This emphasis on action is nonetheless true of the Solomon Kane stories as the Conan stories. Though I think Mendlesohn's characterization of Howard's writing a little reductive, I propose that it is in fact this very emphasis on action for its own felt enjoyment that makes Howard and his creation Kane well-fitted for an exploration of how conscience may be construed as motive.

Moreover, Solomon Kane experiences his conscience and its motive urges as a mystery, as numinous and indecipherable and inexorable—at least at

first. The moral and ethical choices that Kane makes are not dispersed across a moral world. They are instead utterly self-derived and arise from and rest in conscience, and the central conception that informs and drives Kane's conscience is forged at the nexus of Kane's drive to avenge the innocent victims of a racialized cosmos and Kane's growing self-awareness of an atheistic and almost Miltonic resentment against the order of the cosmos. This, for me, is a wonderful source of rhetorical fascination and a simple but striking aesthetic choice that elevates Kane's character above a mere paragon of virtue or the adolescent ego-fantasy that Howard's heroes are often said to be. The links between conscience, resentment, motive, and action are presented in the Kane stories with an idealized, rhetorical clarity that allows us to anatomize them, hopefully with an eye toward how, in other discursive and rhetorical contexts, we might perform analogous operations.

Conscience is furthermore the clearest principle around which the Solomon Kane saga can be construed not only as a unified character arc but as a unified *fantasy*. In *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, Brian Attebery proposes that, "The movement in most fantasies is toward understanding or revelation of the ruling principles in the fantasy world, the alignment of positive and negative values that are its motive powers" (40). Solomon Kane's journey through a fantastical Africa, which culminates in a revelation of cosmological principles in the story "Wings in the Night," is ultimately spurred by Kane's troubled conscience. It is this general thrust of the saga toward an existential anagnorisis driven entirely by Kane's conscience that lets us take the stories as fantasy and not simply as adventure stories with fantastical elements.

THE SHAPE OF THE SAGA

To begin making friends with Solomon Kane, let us lay out the outline of Kane's adventures in the assumed order of composition. After a few preliminary stories spent wandering through the haunted moors of England ("Skulls in the Stars," "The Right Hand of Doom,") Kane, in his first published appearance "Red Shadows," encounters a dying young woman, the victim of a savage murder and an implied rape. Kane vows to avenge the unknown woman, and chases the culprit Le Loup all the way to the western jungles of a fantastical Africa. He catches up to Le Loup in a village where the villain has displaced the native shaman N'Longa as the spiritual advisor to the tribal chief. With the aid of N'Longa's magic, Kane is able to kill Le Loup, reinstate N'Longa, escape from several other antagonistic figures and return, presumably, to Europe.

This wild tale sets the pattern for the entire corpus of Kane writings. It also sets the racist and racialist tones of both Kane's and the narration's general attitudes about Africans and African cultures (as well as non-Anglo Europeans in the characters of Le Loup and his lackeys, but this is of less concern here). As

Howard says of a carved effigy which is taken by the narration as a metonymy for Africa itself, "There in front of him loomed a shape hideous and obscene—a black formless thing, a grotesque parody of the human. Still, brooding, blood-stained, like the formless soul of Africa, the horror, the Black God" ("Red Shadows" 46). But there is attraction mingled with the revulsion which acts, in later stories, as the impetus for Kane's extended return to Africa:

There is wisdom in the shadows (brooded the drums), wisdom and magic; go into the darkness for wisdom; ancient magic shuns the light; we remember the lost ages (whispered the drums), ere man became wise and foolish; we remember the beast gods—the serpent gods and the ape gods and the nameless, the Black Gods, they who drank blood and whose voices rose through the shadowy hills, who feasted and lusted. The secrets of life and death are theirs; we remember, we remember (sang the drums).

Kane heard them as he hastened on. The tale they told to the feathered black warriors farther up the river, he could not translate; but they spoke to him in their own way, and that language was deeper, more basic. ("Red Shadows" 62-63)

However stereotypical it may be, this passage plants the seeds of Kane's third visit to Africa, a journey that at first seems to be entirely unmotivated but is later revealed to be as much an imperative of Kane's conscience as Kane's initial incursion into Africa in pursuit of Le Loup. (The passage also appears to directly foreshadow Kane's encounter with the hill-dwelling vampires of "The Hills of the Dead," although this may be merely a happy coincidence.)

We next find Kane wandering aimlessly through a series of fragments set in Continental Europe ("Rattle of Bones," "The Castle of the Devil," "Death's Black Riders") before returning to Africa in "The Moon of Skulls," this time delving deeper into the unknown on a rescue mission for a kidnapped Englishwoman. Kane then returns to Europe for a poem and a story each entirely lacking in the fantastic ("The One Black Stain," and "The Blue Flame of Vengeance") before his extended return to Africa in a series of writings that constitute the core and climax of Kane's saga: "The Hills of the Dead," "Hawk of Basti," "The Return of Sir Richard Grenville," "Wings in the Night," "The Footfalls Within," and "The Children of Asshur." This entire sequence details one Weird incursion into a fantastical Africa that Kane conducts with the blessing and aid of N'Longa's magic and gift of a magical staff to compliment Kane's ringing steel.

The entire saga comes to an end with two versions of a completed poem both entitled "Solomon Kane's Homecoming." These poem(s) are of distinct significance to my argument insofar as each includes a summary by

Kane of his own life and adventures, referencing explicitly events and characters from several of the prior stories and ending deliberately, in both drafts, with a reference to “Wings in the Night.” “And I have seen a winged fiend fly, / all naked in the moon. / My feet are weary of wandering / and age comes on apace— / I fain would dwell in Devon now, / forever in my place” (“Homecoming (Variant)” 389). That Kane does not get his wish and sets out on another adventure never to be seen again is only as it should be, but what is important to note here is the climactic emphasis the events of “Wings” receive as the last adventure that leads Kane to at least pretend to seek out a return home and a final rest. In the reading of the Solomon Kane saga that I offer here, “Wings” plays an pivotal role as the denouement of Kane’s personal transformations and as the occasion in which, if for only a moment, the concealed motives that inform his conscience and determine his actions are clear to himself and the reader. I shall be more specific in my analysis of this tale later on. The take-away for now should be simply that the unity of Kane’s saga can be established on several levels prior to that of the development of conscience which I will be subsequently arguing for: a) the material unity and internal chronology of the writings, b) the micro (in individual stories) and macro (across the saga generally) pattern of abandoning Europe for an incursion into a fantastical and explicitly magical Africa, and c) the summing perspective of the poem(s) “Solomon Kane’s Homecoming.”

KANE’S CONSCIENCE

With that overview established, let us take a closer look at what I am trying to point to when I talk about conscience and motive in the Kane stories. In “Skulls in the Stars,” the first written, though not the first published, Kane story, the narrator presents Kane as defined by a tension between unconscious motives that if not necessarily selfish are certainly not altruistic and a sincere belief that he is undertaking a necessary and right course of action.

His blood quickened. Adventure! The lure of life-risk and battle! The thrill of breathtaking, touch-and-go drama! Not that Kane recognized his sensations as such. He sincerely considered that he voiced his real feeling when he said:

“These things be deeds of some power of evil. The lords of darkness have laid a curse upon the country. A strong man is needed to combat Satan and his might. Therefore I go, who have defied him many a time.” (“Skulls in the Stars” 5)

This passage’s ironic exposure of Kane’s blindness with regard to his own motives is a pattern followed by the narration throughout the saga. But what is attributed to mere adventure-seeking in “Skulls in the Stars” is deepened

and complicated in "Red Shadows" and later stories into something like what I will call conscience. When the bandit Le Loup asks once more, after Kane has followed him to Africa, "Why have you followed me like this? I do not understand," Kane answers, "Because you are a rogue whom it is my destiny to kill" ("Red Shadows" 48). But we are immediately informed that this non-answer is a sham.

He did not understand. All his life he had roamed about the world aiding the weak and fighting oppression, he neither knew nor questioned why. That was his obsession, his driving force of life. Cruelty and tyranny to the weak sent a red blaze of fury, fierce and lasting, through his soul. When the full flame of his hatred was wakened and loosed, there was no rest for him until his vengeance had been filled to the uttermost. If he thought of it at all, he considered himself a fulfiller of God's judgment, a vessel of wrath to be emptied upon the souls of the unrighteous. Yet in the full sense of the word Solomon Kane was not wholly a Puritan, though he thought himself as such. ("Red Shadows" 48)

Like the passage in "Stars," Kane's sense of himself as an instrument of divine judgment is a kind of guess on Kane's part as to his own motives, a guess revealed with narrative authority to be incorrect—or, more charitably, incomplete. Note, however, how the thrill of adventure, a kind of desire, has been replaced by an apprehension of injustice to the weak as the hidden motive of Kane's pursuit of Le Loup and all the other demons, human and un-, of his rogues gallery. And although the question of exactly how or to what degree Kane is "not wholly a Puritan" remains unanswered in "Red Shadows," the story presents, I would argue, the codified character of Solomon Kane. The description of Kane's motives in "Stars," while not precisely contradicted in the stories that followed, is superseded.

This is a reading of Kane's character that runs counter to how Kane has been described by critics in the past. As Hoffman and Cerasini state,

Kane's driving motivation is actually an irresistible wanderlust and desire for adventure. Yet Kane himself believes that he has become a righter of wrongs and nemesis of evil-doers the better to serve God's will. Kane is moved by urges that his religion is unable to satisfy. He does what he must both to satisfy these urges and to sublimate them into a useful end compatible with his religious fervor. (ch. 3)

Such a characterization of Kane, however, reveals the limitations of a strictly psychoanalytical account (rather than the rhetorically oriented account this essay offers) of how conscience functions as a motive and distorts the character

of Kane presented in the stories themselves. Kane does not use the excuse of divine vengeance as an occasion to indulge in a violence attractive for its own sake (although the descriptions of such adventurous violence are for the reader one of Howard's great appeals as an author). To assume so is to confuse our motives for reading with the character's motives for action.

Yet Hoffman and Cerasini are correct to point out Kane's characteristic lack of self-knowledge. The most definitive expression of Kane's character comes in "The Moon of Skulls," a story that chronicles his second incursion into a fantastical Africa. Kane is in pursuit of a kidnapped Englishwoman named Marilyn Taferal. When he finds her and she expresses astonishment that he would come so far to rescue her, Kane says,

"Your brothers would have come with me, child, but it was not sure that you lived, and I was loth that any other Taferal should die in a land far from good English soil. I rid the country of an evil Taferal—'twas but just I should restore in his place a good Taferal, if so be she still lived—I, and I alone." ("Moon of Skulls" 126)

But this explanation is immediately re-contextualized and called into question by one of the more famous passages from the Kane stories:

This explanation Kane himself believed. He never sought to analyze his motives and he never wavered, once his mind was made up. Though he always acted on impulse, he firmly believed that all his actions were governed by cold and logical reasonings. He was a man born out of his time—a strange blending of Puritan and Cavalier, with a touch of the ancient philosopher, and more than a touch of the pagan, though the last assertion would have shocked him unspeakably. An atavist of the days of blind chivalry he was, a knight errant in the somber clothes of a fanatic. A hunger in his soul drove him on and on, an urge to right all wrongs, protect all weaker things, avenge all crimes against right and justice. Wayward and restless as the wind, he was consistent in only one respect—he was true to his ideals of justice and right. Such was Solomon Kane. ("Moon of Skulls" 127)

Although Howard has some specific and idiosyncratic understandings of words like *fanatic*, *atavist*, *Puritan*, for the most part this passage reiterates and further codifies Solomon Kane's character in clear, rhetorical terms. But note, again, that it is not principally his knightly errantry or even his hunger to avenge the innocent that defines Kane so much as the way these commitments are filtered through an ignorance of his own motives and his inability to recognize the origins of the impulses that drive his actions. It should be no surprise, then, that

in the absence of some specific impulse, some specific apprehension of injustice in need of avenging, Kane has very little character at all. Without an action to coalesce the "dour" Kane into reaction, he is self-described as "a wanderer on the face of the earth," who goes, "wherever the spirit moves me to go" ("Castle of the Devil" 87). But, as it turns out, the spirit really wants Kane to go to Africa, and it is not until Kane returns to Africa for a third time that, in "Wings in the Night," the underlying beliefs organizing his conscience—and his cosmos—are opened up for us as readers and for Kane himself.

I will return to this in a moment. But first, having established that an unexamined conscience motivates Kane throughout the *Savage Tales*, let us step back and define our terms more clearly and explore what it might mean to identify conscience as a motive of action.

CONSCIENCE AND MOTIVE

Conscience is no easy thing to identify and define. We could turn, as many have done, to the dusty, trusty OED, but I want instead to look to the more sustained exploration C.S. Lewis makes of *conscience* in his book *Studies In Words*. This is because Lewis's etymology of conscience contrasts interestingly with Hannah Arendt's discussion of motive and the passions in *On Revolution*—and it is the significance of conscience as motive, not merely a clear definition of the concept, that we are after here.

In *Studies In Words*, Lewis (writing from the persona of his day-job as Cambridge don, rather than Inkling fantasist or Christian apologist) charts the long development and many permutations of *conscience* in both meaning and etymology. The word begins as simply a term for consciousness and memory, neutral in its judgments of past actions and states of mind—a certainty in having done or experienced this or that. Conscience only later becomes what Lewis calls an inner lawgiver:

In its new sense *conscience* is the inner lawgiver: a man's judgement of good and evil. It speaks in the imperative, commanding and forbidding. But, as so often, the new sense does not replace the old. The old lives on and the new is added to it, so that *conscience* now has more than one meaning.

Theologians and scholars are aware of this and draw the necessary distinctions. Aquinas, who claims to be conforming to the 'common use of language', says that *conscientia* is an application of our knowledge to our own acts, and that this application occurs in three ways. (1) We judge that we have done this or that. (2) We judge that something ought, or ought not to be done. (3) We judge that our past act was good or bad. The first is *conscire* in the classical sense. The second, which really includes the third (*synteresis* or *synderesis*) is something quite different; something

which will be named, according to the system we employ, practical reason, moral sense, reflection, the Categorical Imperative, or the super-ego. *Conscientia* in this second sense can be said to 'bind' and 'impel' (*instigare*), and can of course be obeyed or disobeyed. (194)

It is Kane's conscience in this second sense that we are after (although, as we will see in a moment, such a clear division between these senses is a bit misleading). In Howard's depiction, Kane is a man who, paradoxically, acts entirely without deviation from the dictates of his conscience at the same time that he is ignorant of his conscience's specific determinations or laws. Kane's Puritanism, his religion, is the excuse that Kane makes in order to justify following, not, as Hoffman and Cerasini suppose, some sublimated or lascivious impulse, but the right and just commands of his conscience. But how is such a portrayal of conscience possible? Or, better phrased, what is Solomon Kane's conscience such that it can operate in this way? Lewis divides conscience along the line between indicative and imperative moods: "But for the most part the imperatives of the lawgiving synteresis are conditioned by the indicatives of each man's belief or 'convictions'. The two together make up what would now perhaps be called an 'ideology'" (201). To dissect Kane along these lines: Kane is aware of his conscience's imperatives, but confused as to the indicatives of his beliefs. It is in this that Kane's predicament becomes a rhetorically resonant example and, in my estimation, speaks to a truly human problem complicating social discourse and ethical deliberation.

How the indicatives of belief may be translated into action without the actor becoming fully aware of them is a question of motives and one of the domains of rhetoric. Nevertheless, determining how conscience can serve as motive in this way is a difficult rhetorical operation. As Lewis explains, appeals to conscience necessarily involve a reductive simplicity: "The oversimplification lies in the attempt to isolate the inner lawgiver from the intellectual context in which he speaks. No lawgiver, inner or outer, gives laws in a vacuum; he always has real or supposed facts in his mind, an idea of what is, which influences his rulings about what ought to be" (201). To take as motive a conscience unaware of its own indicatives is, in this sense, more a way of avoiding, rather than diving into, the murky waters of trying to establish a more specific motive—but this is not necessarily a bad thing!

As Hannah Arendt states in her book *On Revolution*,

Whatever the passions and emotions may be, and whatever their true connection with thought and reason, they certainly are located in the human heart. And not only is the human heart a place of darkness which, with certainty, no human eye can penetrate; the qualities of the heart need darkness and protection against the light of the public to grow and

to remain what they are meant to be, innermost motives which are not for public display. (95-96)

In other words, motivation is an abyss—out of whose profundity emerges the full range of rhetoric's contingency, from Burke's ever shifting "Pentad" of motives to Derrida's hermeneutic proliferations. To attempt to pin motivation down with certainty is to perpetrate a vain violence against the human heart. And, combining Arendt's definition of motive with Lewis's definition of conscience, we can say that confusion about the indicatives of belief is shown to be a problem without a clear solution outside of the slow process of coming to self-awareness—and even this, according to Arendt, is no simple thing:

When we say that nobody but God can see (and, perhaps, can bear to see) the nakedness of a human heart, 'nobody' includes one's own self—if only because our sense of unequivocal reality is so bound up with the presence of others that we can never be sure of anything that only we ourselves know and no one else. The consequence of this hiddenness is that our entire psychological life, the process of moods in our souls, is cursed with a suspicion we constantly feel we must raise against ourselves, against our innermost motives. (96-97)

There is thus an honesty in Kane's self-deceptive rationalizations about what truly informs and organizes his conscience. Moreover, conscience becomes in such a context as Arendt proposes a safeguard of motive's inescapable indeterminacy—one whose inviolable privilege as "divine lawgiver" protects against the tyrannical terror into which any attempt to subject motive to rational determination devolves. As Arendt puts it,

However deeply heartfelt a motive may be, once it is brought out and exposed for public inspection it becomes an object of suspicion rather than insight; when the light of the public falls upon it, it appears and even shines, but, unlike deeds and words which are meant to appear, whose very existence hinges on appearance, the motives behind such deeds and words are destroyed in their essence through appearance; when they appear they become 'mere appearances' behind which again other, ulterior motives may lurk, such as hypocrisy and deceit. (96)

The linchpin of Kane's character stems not merely from acting in complete accord with the imperatives of his conscience, but in doing so without certainty or even real understanding of the indicatives of his belief. Kane tolerates his possible hypocrisy, unlike Arendt's figure of Robespierre whose "war upon hypocrisy transformed [his] dictatorship into the Reign of Terror" (99) since his "insane lack of trust in others, even his close friends, sprang ultimately from his

not so insane but quite normal suspicion of himself" (97). Indeed, if we recall Farah Mendlesohn's description of the dynamic of action/feeling/reaction in Howard's writing we can see that Howard's heroes are uniquely free of such introspective paralysis. Kane is able to act in complete conviction of the justice of his actions precisely because he does not question the origin of the impulsive judgments of his conscience. As we are told in "Red Shadows,"

"Nom d'un nom!" swore the bandit. "What sort of man are you, Monsieur, who takes up a feud of this sort merely to avenge a wench unknown to you?"

"That, sir, is my own affair; it is sufficient that I do so."

Kane could not have explained, even to himself, nor did he ever seek an explanation within himself. A true fanatic, his promptings were reasons enough for his actions. (40)

His self-ignorance of the indicatives of his conscience frees him from a crippling self-incrimination.

In this, under Arendt's account, Kane (although narratively English) becomes a properly American figure of unquestioned motive, exemplifying the productive superficiality that defines the American revolutionary spirit: "It is as though the American Revolution was achieved in a kind of ivory tower [...]. [T]he men of the American Revolution remained men of action from beginning to end, from the Declaration of Independence to the framing of the Constitution" (Arendt 95).

Kane's unexamined zealotry taken by itself would naturally be ambivalent and dangerous, especially since Kane is shown to hold racist beliefs about Africans: "In his heart, Kane railed that he should be forced to use such unsavory diplomacy with a black savage" ("Moon of Skulls" 105). But, interestingly enough, it is precisely with regard to his beliefs about race and in his relationships to some of the African characters in the stories that Kane undergoes dramatic and sustained change leading to a certain self-awareness.

RACE AND CONSCIENCE

There is, according to my reading, something furthermore reflected in Kane's changing attitudes about race—something that I, who am not a biographer of Howard nor attempting a psychological reading of his Kane stories, can only hit upon obliquely if I wish, as I do, to keep my speculations within the rhetorical and aesthetic spheres of my expertise. But this *something*, if you will, is Howard's own confused and, I would argue, developing ideas about race reflected in the particular determinations of narrative and style that make up Kane's saga. Already in "The Moon of Skulls," the second Kane story set in Africa, Howard complicates his own racialized depictions of African

civilizations and cultures and the fantastical history against which the reader is led to judge them.

"The Moon of Skulls" is a complex and fascinating tale, with far more material of interest than I can touch on in this article. Howard portrays in it a decayed and stereotypically savage African society inhabiting an enormous city in an inaccessible valley. Howard has Kane assume that the black Africans living there could not have actually built the city. "Still the thought hovered in Kane's mind as he watched—who built this place, and why were negroes evidently in possession? He knew this was the work of a higher race" ("Moon of Skulls" 118). Kane is correct in this assumption, and so far we have little to make us think that there is more at work in Howard's depiction than derogatory stereotype. But Kane later encounters the last of the race of the city's builders, lost and dying in a forgotten prison. "A man; at first Kane thought him to be a negro but a second glance made him doubt. The hair was too straight, the features too regular. Negroid, yes, but some alien blood in his veins had sharpened those features [...]. The skin was dark, but not black" ("Moon of Skulls" 142). Yet Kane's assumption that the prisoner is of mixed race turns out to be the inverse of the truth. The prisoner finds Kane's whiteness disconcerting: "You whose skin is so strangely white!" ("Moon of Skulls" 143), and then reveals to Kane the history of the city, Negari, built by Atlanteans, the brown-skinned progenitors of all human civilization. A key component of this history, which surprises Kane, is that the Atlanteans held white Europeans to be just as savage and degenerate as Africans and Native Americans. "Our cities banded the world; we sent out colonies to all lands to subdue all savages, red, white or black, and enslave them. [...] All over the world the brown people of Atlantis reigned supreme" ("Moon of Skulls" 144). This empire came to an end with the sinking of Atlantis and the joint rebellion of black and white savages: "The black savages and the white savages rose and burned and destroyed until in all the world only the colony city of Negari remained as a symbol of the lost empire" ("Moon of Skulls" 145). The Atlantean then punctures Kane's assumptions about white superiority somewhat:

—but you are a white savage, as Nakari's race are black savages—eons ago when your ancestors were defending their caves against the tiger and the mammoth, with crude spears of flint, the gold spires of my people split the stars! They are gone and forgotten, and the world is a waste of barbarians, white and black. ("Moon of Skulls" 153)

Now, as far as mythologies of race and history, the one presented in the story is fairly simplistic, and it does not absolve the narration of the sensationalism with which it treats the current dwellers in the Atlantean city. My principle point here is that what is played out in "The Moon of Skulls" is not a straightforward

racialized fantasy with an unquestioned association of whiteness with civilized heroism and blackness with uncivilized barbarity. Whiteness and blackness are thus contrasted not as a strict binary but as contrary extremes of a brown median.

This is an usual symbolic coding of whiteness and whiteness, both for Howard and for the American tradition of fantastical stories of exploration and encounter from Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* to H.P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*. Instead, "The Moon of Skulls" stands, in true R.E.H. fashion, as a nihilistic indictment of both civilization and barbarity, disassociating both from a clear correspondence to race—for the brown-skinned Atlantean slavers are presented as equally evil in their decadence as the descendants of their slaves are in their degeneracy. Says the Atlantean prisoner, describing the religious rites of Negari, "At the full of each moon, which we name the Moon of Skulls, a virgin dies on the Black Altar before the Tower of Death, where centuries ago, virgins died in honor of Golgor, the god of Atlantis" ("Moon of Skulls" 151-152). Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

Kane, it must be said, is not particularly impressed by this history—he uses the information the dying Atlantean gives him to save the kidnapped girl and escape with a maximum of bloodshed, and in response to the Atlantean's revelations, Kane exclaims "A fair day for this world when this Atlantis sank, for most certainly it bred a race of strange and unknown evil" ("Moon of Skulls" 151). By the end of the story Kane's nominal faith is reinforced, if only by the fact that God allows civilizations to destroy themselves: "Evil flourishes and rules in the cities of men and the waste places of the world, but anon the great giant that is God rises and smites for the righteous, and they lay faith on him" ("Moon of Skulls" 168-169). But, though he sails away horrified by his encounters in the story, Kane's adventures in Africa are far from over.

Kane's third journey across Africa is undertaken without provocation and for reasons Kane himself does not understand. As Kane says to his friend, the shaman N'Longa,

Once I dared the jungle—once she nearly claimed my bones. Something entered my blood, something stole into my soul like a whisper of unnamed sin. The jungle! Dark and brooding—over leagues of the blue salt sea she has drawn me and with the dawn I go to seek the heart of her. Mayhap I shall find curious adventure—mayhap my doom awaits me. But better death than the ceaseless and everlasting urge, the fire that has burned my veins with bitter longing. ("Moon of Skulls" 225-226)

The underlying knot of projected, racialized fantasy stereotypes is naturally subject to various post-colonial modes of critique. But what we are after here is how these perceptions of Africa interact with Kane's conscience and function

within the narrative: After hearing numinous messages in the drums of "Red Shadows" bespeaking a kinship between Kane and this fantasy Africa, and after the Atlantean revelations of the barbarity of both black and white races in "The Moon of Skulls," Kane has returned to wrestle with pure, unconscious motive and with an underlying impasse in the judgments of his conscience that, in the end, has nothing other than the significance of human being in a racialized cosmos as its subject, and which is now driving Kane toward something like crisis.

So, granting that the Africa portrayed in the stories is as racialized as it is fantastical, how does the Africa portrayed in the Kane saga function? What kind of imaginary place is it, and how do his initial experiences of this place engage Kane's conscience and therefore motivate him to make his third and only not-immediately prompted journey there?

A short answer to this question is that Africa is presented as a fantasy world in the sense that Brian Attebery outlines in *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*.

The magical world of fantasy is a world of meaning, where everything interacts with everything else in coherent patterns [...]. The movement in most fantasies is toward understanding or revelation of the ruling principles in the fantasy world, the alignment of positive and negative values that are its motive powers. (40)

This is eminently true of Africa in the Kane saga. Furthermore, in the revelation of Kane's world's ruling principles we are also shown the injustice that has spurred the conscience of Solomon Kane back toward Africa where, in "Wings in the Night," the narration asks,

Was he [Kane] not a symbol of Man, staggering among the tooth-marked bones and severed grinning heads of humans, brandishing a futile ax, and screaming incoherent hate at the grisly, winged shapes of Night that make him their prey, chuckling in demonic triumph above him and dripping into his mad eyes the pitiful blood of their human victims? (312)

To which, I assume, we are supposed to answer, "Yes?" But even more than this, for the first time in the Kane saga, we are given a glimpse of the murky forms that organize Kane's conscience—the indicatives of his beliefs that so stridently compel him to act as agent of retributive justice.

And he lifted his clenched fists above his head, and with glaring eyes raised and writhing lips flecked with froth, he cursed the sky and the earth and the spheres above and below. He cursed the cold stars, the

blazing sun, the mocking moon and the whisper of the wind. He cursed all fates and destinies, all that he had loved or hated, the silent cities beneath the seas, the past ages and the future eons. In one soul-shaking burst of blasphemy he cursed the gods and devils who make mankind their sport, and he cursed Man who lives blindly on and blindly offers his back to the iron-hoofed feet of his gods. ("Wings in the Night" 313-5)

This blasphemy has been a long time coming, and it reveals to the reader the paganism of Kane that Howard has hinted at before. It is, in fact, not true paganism but atheistic rage and Dostoevskyan revolt at a Deus Absconditus in a world of monsters. But Kane's disgust at this orderless, cruel, and uncaring universe is informed also by the tribesmen, killed by the flying monsters of "Wings In the Night," who took Kane for a god or demi-god of sorts. Kane's conscience is disgusted both with himself *and* with God for being divine failures.

Kane almost immediately backs away from this full revelation, proving true the narrative assertion that Kane's own true indicatives of belief "would have shocked him unspeakably."

And he silently recanted his blasphemy, for if the brazen-hoofed gods made Man for their sport and plaything, they also gave him a brain that holds craft and cruelty greater than any other living thing.

"There shall you bide," said Solomon Kane to the head of Goru. "[...] I could not save the people of Bogonda, but by the God of my race, I can avenge them. Man is the sport and sustenance of titanic beings of Night and Horror whose giant wings hover ever above him. But even evil things may come to an end." ("Wings in the Night" 315)

Here we have the mechanism of conscious and action revealed in its dramatic dynamism: Kane in his heart (as Arendt might put it) perceives the world as godless and malevolent, but this is intolerable to Kane, who believes himself to be a Puritan Christian, and so he is spurred to action in order to avoid conscious confrontation with the blot against God's goodness and reality implicit in the world's irrational cruelty. Kane does not believe in God; he believes there *should* be a God, but he has confused these beliefs for each other. For, however consciously recanted, Kane's blasphemous beliefs about the universe are more than momentary expressions of rage. They are eruptions of an underlying Cosmicism, in the Lovecraftian sense, that is tied to Kane's anachronistic belief in a Darwinian, or perhaps Darwinian adjacent, evolutionary history of humanity:

No, these things were not men, Kane decided. They were the materialization of some ghastly jest of Nature—some travesty of the

world's infancy when Creation was an experiment. Perhaps they were the offspring of a forbidden and obscene mating of man and beast; more likely they were a freakish offshoot on the branch of evolution—for Kane had long ago dimly sensed a truth in the heretical theories of the ancient philosophers, that Man is but a higher beast. And if Nature made many strange beasts in the past ages, why should she not have experimented with monstrous forms of mankind? Surely Man as Kane knew him was not the first of his breed to walk the earth, nor yet to be the last. ("Wings in the Night" 318)

This is a fascinating passage, and it serves as one climax in the dramatic progression of Kane's understanding of the indicatives of his conscience's beliefs. Note that Kane's evolutionary theory is "blasphemous," just as his earlier complaint against the uncaring universe is "blasphemous," suggesting a more than tenuous connection. Note also that the passage contradicts itself—or maybe I should say, note the unravelling of Kane's conscious expression of belief. He begins by deciding that the winged creatures are not human, but, as the narration weighs Kane's thoughts for us, Kane speculates his way to just the opposite position that these are in fact simply another kind of human. This is yet another implicit disavowal of a Christian cosmology, eroding the *Imago Dei* of Man's privileged position with regard to creation, but it is this disavowal that drives Kane to avenge the people of Bogonda. Solomon Kane is a man driven without realizing it to avenge the innocent, not because of his belief in God, but because of his intolerable disbelief.

MAN IS LE LOUP TO MAN

This revelation of Kane's motivating set of beliefs, and their relation to the now revealed cosmological structure of the world Kane inhabits, should be understood in the context of Kane's third excursion to Africa. In the stories and fragments that make up this part of Kane's saga, the innocents that Kane is concerned with defending (or avenging) are Africans themselves, so that Africa is no longer merely a backdrop to adventure but the focus of Kane's motivating conscience directly. As David C. Smith points out in his literary biography of Howard, Kane's final African adventure in fact

undercuts the pulp-era trope of using a fictional Africa as a prop for colonial fears and anxieties, a repository for evil and decadence, by making clear that such evil and decadence are not natural to the continent. On the contrary, the evil and decadence originated in Europe and were banished to Africa—a neat commentary, whether intentional or not, on European predation of the continent. (55)

This is not to say that Howard's portrayals of African characters and communities are free of stereotype, but we are a far cry from the Africa of "Red Shadows." (It is in fact N'Longa, and not Kane, who defeats the vampires in "Hills of the Dead," the first adventure in Kane's extended sequence of African adventures.) The movement of the entire Kane corpus on both the level of Kane's character and the level of the narration has been toward a recognition of the evils that colonialism and slavery have perpetrated against countless innocent African lives. Kane being Kane, of course, is therefore driven to Africa by his conscience to observe this evil and to attempt a futile vengeance in response to it. Such is hinted at somewhat in "Wings," where the exploitation of the villagers of Bogonda by the winged monsters, in the passages quoted above, is narratively linked to the existential injustice of being human in a malevolent universe. But it is in the last fully written Kane story, "The Footfalls Within," which follows "Wings" and which serves as something of a coda to that story's monumental revelations about Kane's world, that the exploitation of Africa through slavery and colonialism is directly addressed.

The story opens like an echo of "Red Shadows." Kane stands above the body of a recently slain girl. This victim, however, is African and bears the marks of having been slain by slavers. And like "Red Shadows," Kane immediately vows to avenge her. In the immediacy of this decision we can see that though the essential pattern of Kane's adventures has not changed, the motivational mechanics Howard employs to engage Kane in this pattern have. Kane no longer requires a European victim to jumpstart his vengeance-obsessed conscience. He finds wronged innocence enough in Africa. With the same grim passion he displayed in "Red Shadows," Kane tracks the enslaved girl's killers, a band of Arabian and East African slavers. He waits for an opportunity to strike and grows more and more enraged as he watches them. "Kane followed like a brooding ghost and his rage and hatred ate into his soul like a canker. Each crack of the whips was like a blow on his shoulders" ("Footfalls Within" 327). There is more than mere empathy at work here, however. Kane himself has been similarly enslaved in the past. "Even as he watched, old scars burned in his back—scars made by Moslem whips in a Turkish galley" ("Footfalls Within" 327). This is a fascinating turn for Kane's character, and it builds on the revelations of "Wings in the Night" in interesting ways. The predators of this story are human, not outwardly monstrous, but, after the revelations of "Wings," the same existential implications about God's benevolence are raised by their being allowed to prey so easily on innocent victims.

There is much more to the story than I will investigate here: Kane is captured when he attempts to save an enslaved girl from being raped by the slavers; a Lovecraftian monstrosity is encountered in a mausoleum in the jungle that gives Kane and the enslaved Africans a chance to escape; Kane's staff is

revealed to be of extra-terrestrial origin and to have been wielded in the past by Moses, Aaron, Jason (of Golden Fleece fame), King Solomon, and so on. What is key to my argument is that in this direct confrontation with colonialism and slavery, we have something to suggest why it is to Africa that Howard sends Kane to confront the motive urges of Kane's conscience. It is the viciousness of human beings themselves, more than alien monsters, that troubles Kane's tenuously Puritan self-image as a servant of God, and the history of slavery and the colonial exploitation of Africa is a natural metonymy for such inhumanity. But here we also touch on the limits of Howard's art's ability to confront its own assumptions. The slavers of "Footfalls" are all dark-skinned. No mention of the European or American slave trades is made. The existential calumny against God's dispensation of justice raised by the inhumanity of humankind is projected onto other non-white peoples.

Or perhaps I am being too hard on Howard. There is an interesting line in each of the versions of "Solomon Kane's Homecoming" that references the horrors of the barracoon. The first reads, "And I have seen heads fall like fruit / in the slaver's barracoon" (383). The variant reads, "And I have heard the death-chant rise / in the slaver's barracoon" (389). While something might perhaps be made of the difference between the two lines, what I think is more significant is that we have, as part of Kane's summing retrospective on his own life, a recognition, however oblique, of the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade. All of which suggests, to my mind at least, that following Kane's conscience in all its self-ignorance and elisions was as beneficial, if incomplete, an exercise for Kane the character as it was for Howard the artist.

CONCLUSION: BY CROM!

By way of conclusion, I would like to look briefly at how this investigation into the conscience and character of Solomon Kane might affect approaches toward understanding Howard's more famous fantasies of Conan the Cimmerian. Kull of Atlantis is often taken as Conan's direct forebear in Howard's imagination, and this is correct, but Conan's character owes a great deal to Solomon Kane, although in rather oblique ways.

Deke Parsons suggests that Howard's mythopoeic invention of the Hyborean Age provided an escape from Howard's racialized view of history, which contributed no small amount to the magnificent, imaginative flowering of the Conan tales: "The Hyborian Age of the Conan stories, in particular, is a fantasy world largely free of the corrosive racism of Howard and his environment. One of his greatest achievements is his transmutation of the anxieties and resentments of his life, including his racism, into a fantasy world that transcends them" (89-90). I entirely agree, and would add that I hope I have demonstrated in this essay how this process was at least beginning, if not

already begun, in the Solomon Kane stories but that (and here is the principle point of this essay) it is necessary to take a unitive view of the Kane saga in order to perceive this process at work.

I would also propose that Conan's vitality as a character is in part dependent on the relationship of his god Crom to the world, as well as on the existential freedom that Conan's easy acceptance of this relationship grants him. As Conan describes Crom in "The Tower of the Elephant,"

His gods were simple and understandable; Crom was their chief, and he lived on a great mountain, whence he sent forth dooms and death. It was useless to call on Crom, because he was a gloomy, savage god, and he hated weaklings. But he gave a man courage at birth, and the will and might to kill his enemies, which, in the Cimmerian's mind, was all any god should be expected to do. (64-65)

Compare this to Kane's realization in "Wings," where he reminds himself that, "if the brazen-hoofed gods made Man for their sport and plaything, they also gave him a brain that holds craft and cruelty greater than any other living thing" (315). While the gifts of Kane's God (or gods) are different from Conan's—craft and cruelty rather than courage, will, and might (bespeaking, perhaps, Kane's civilized and Conan's barbaric origins in Howard's imagination)—the existential stance is essentially the same. But what is a driving obsession for Kane's conscience is a simple fact of life for Conan. This, I believe, allows Conan to act with that complex variety of motives that makes him such a fun and surprising character, and allows us to appreciate his character in contradistinction to Kane's narrowly defined motives and conscience.

While it may be possible to draw a biographical conclusion from this shift of theistic to agnostic emphasis in Howard's characters, that is not what I intend to immediately suggest. I hope instead that this investigation into the conscience of Solomon Kane has provided some insight into the ways in which Howard's art developed across characters, eons, worlds. I also hope that it has provided some account of the ways in which Howard's art transcends and yet fails to fully transcend; challenges and yet fails to fully overcome the nihilistically race-conscious ideology that partially informed this tragic and complicated, but no doubt unique, genius of American mythopoesis.

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