

REVISITING CONAN THE BARBARIAN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POST-HEROIC AGE

RELECTURA DE CONAN EL BÁRBARO DESDE LAS COORDENADAS DE LA ERA POSTHEROICA

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ABSTRACT

Post-heroism in the narrative universe of Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian is analysed as a response to H. P. Lovecraft's cosmicism and the trope of the contemporary antihero. From a hermeneutic-dialectical perspective, the study examines how Howard incorporates elements of cosmic horror yet offers an alternative in the figure of Conan, who confronts chaos and cosmic forces with violence and pragmatism. Whereas Lovecraft's characters succumb to the indifference of the universe, Conan acts with existential vitality, giving meaning to life through radical freedom and individual decision-making, even within a fictional universe devoid of ultimate purpose. It is concluded that, although they share a pessimistic worldview, the narrative leitmotif differs radically: Lovecraft emphasises 'madness' and human insignificance before primordial entities, whereas Howard proposes a dark, morally grey antiheroic trope that offers resistance, resilience and brutality in the face of ineffable gods.

KEYWORDS

Conan; Howard; Lovecraft; Cosmicism; Antihero; Post-heroic Times.

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RESUMEN

Se analiza el posheroísmo en el universo narrativo de *Conan el Bárbaro* de Robert E. Howard como respuesta al cosmoicismo de H.P. Lovecraft y al tropo del antihéroe contemporáneo. Desde la hermenéutica-dialéctica, se examina cómo Howard incorpora elementos del horror cósmico, pero ofrece una alternativa en la figura de Conan, quien enfrenta el caos y las fuerzas cósmicas con violencia y pragmatismo. Mientras los personajes lovecraftianos sucumben ante la indiferencia del universo, Conan actúa con una vitalidad existencial, otorgando significado a la vida a través de la libertad radical y las decisiones del individuo, incluso en un universo ficcional carente de propósito último. Se concluye que, aunque comparten una cosmovisión pesimista, el *leitmotiv* narrativo difiere radicalmente: Lovecraft

enfatisa la ‘locura’ y la insignificancia humana frente a los primigenios, mientras Howard propone un tropo antiheroico oscuro y de moral gris que ofrece resistencia, resiliencia y brutalidad ante dioses inefables.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Conan; Howard; Lovecraft; cosmicismo; antihéroe; tiempos postheroicos.

SUMARIO

1. Introducción. 2. Metodología. 3. Estudio de caso. 4. Resultados. 5. Discusión. 6. Conclusiones. Referencias.

1. INTRODUCTION

Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) is often labelled as the father of modern fantasy (Louinet, 2011), the precursor of the sword and sorcery subgenre (Mollá Furió, 2014), the standard-bearer of pulp fiction stories (Dowd, 2016) or the driving force behind heroic fantasy (Tibbets, 2011). This last category, characterised by epic, fantastic heroism, is the focus of discussion in this article, which takes as its central axis of analysis the figure of Conan the Barbarian, the most representative, popular and important character of Howard’s short but intense literary production. Although Howard created other characters that are now classics in fantasy literature and pop culture, such as Solomon Kane, Red Sonja and Kull of Atlantis, Conan is, without doubt, the crown jewel of his entire literary output.

The discussion arises from a contemporary rereading of the character within the framework of the post-heroic era defined by Brökling (2019), a concept that describes profound changes in the way contemporary societies understand heroism, collective memory, leadership and the meaning of war. From the narrative construction of characters, this term is used to analyse how traditional heroic figures lose their centrality, giving way to new forms of leadership, identity and imaginaries (Balakleets, 2023). This contrast generates, a priori, traits that push Conan closer to the trope of the antihero and, conversely, distance him from that of the epic hero, where he has been generically categorised (Ruquet, 2013).

Conan the Barbarian appeared in a series of stories published in *Weird Tales* magazine between 1932 and 1936, set in the mythical Hyborian Age. In the transmedia narrative universe created by Robert E. Howard, the Hyborian Age (or Hyboria) is a geological interregnum situated between the fall of Atlantis and the dawn of historical civilisations. In these stories, written at the height of the pulp magazine era, Howard used a direct, undescriptive style of prose, while taking great care in his descriptions and details of the battles. However, unlike other authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, they did not provide such a detailed description of the landscapes or aspects related to the races and cultures of his universe. Howard centred his stories on themes of barbarism versus civilisation, tales of revenge, stories of witchcraft and battles with gods, all featuring a hyper-muscular nomadic warrior of superhuman physical strength, great sword skills and no fear of death or the supernatural forces of his universe. These characteristics are what largely define the sword and sorcery narrative and lay the foundations and guidelines of this literary subgenre of low fantasy, since it prioritises individual adventure over the polarised struggle between good and evil.

From a superficial analysis, it would seem that Conan is an archetype of the triumphant barbarian warrior (García Londoño, 2009). However, among the amalgam of stories that emerged from the creative ideological melting pot of the interwar period, which stimulated the advent of modern heroes and superheroes from Marvel and DC Comics (Freire, 2022), Conan

represents a turning point, a complex character with many nuances that make him unique. Under this pretext, the hypothesis is established that he contains traces of existentialism, elements that seem to distance him from both the Campbellian narrative pattern (Hoffman, 2004) of the hero's journey and the Aristotelian virtue of the classical-traditional hero (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2002) and shift him closer to contemporary anti-heroism. It should be added that, according to Garstad (2010), the Conan stories are an allegory to historical times ranging from slavery, through miscegenation and uprisings against slave owners, to the destruction of civilisation by wars.

At the same time, his exploits show a notable influence of H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), an author with whom Howard maintained an intense correspondence and whose mythology of cosmic horror permeated much of the pulp literature of the time. This dual affiliation—physical brutality and existential questioning—seems to place Conan in an intermediate scenario, situating his unique, ambivalent character between the idealised hero and a character with grey areas, selfish motivations and pragmatic ideals. This ambiguity raises the central question of this research: Is Conan a promoter of the heroic epic genre or, on the contrary, a pioneer of the contemporary antihero?

2. METHODOLOGY

To answer this question, Howard's literary work is addressed through a hermeneutic-dialectical approach and, as mentioned above, from the perspective of the post-heroic era. This methodology is justified insofar as the character of Conan generates what Gadamer (1993) calls 'strangeness' (*átopos*), that is, something that does not correspond to how things are or are supposed to be. Gadamer states that one can only consider rejecting this 'strangeness' or seeking understanding through hermeneutics, also defined as the art of interpreting symbols, stories or cultural phenomena, especially in contexts where meaning is incomplete or open to multiple interpretations (Ruedas Marrero *et al.*, 2009). Dialectics, for its part, allows the analysis of contradictions or opposing dynamics such as subject-object, order-chaos or reason-irrationality, which lead to understanding through conflict or confrontation between opposites (Rosser, 2000).

Secondly, the combination of both methods is compared with philosophical movements contemporary to Howard's work, such as nihilism and Camusian absurdity. Approaching Conan from a philosophical perspective does not mean artificially projecting these ideas onto the texts; on the contrary, it seeks to reveal underlying connections that enrich the understanding of Howard's work, the construction of Conan and his legacy in contemporary anti-heroic characters. A rereading of Conan's adventures is thus carried out in light of Sartre's notions of existence and essence (1996), the absurd according to Camus (1953) and post-Nietzschean nihilism, articulating an analytical discourse that transcends the plot synopsis to place Conan in a broad theoretical horizon that corresponds to ideologies that evolved in the same context as his (mis)adventures.

Regarding the selected corpus, the analysis is limited to the five most representative stories of Conan's adventures written by Howard and not to the rest of the transmedia narrative universe that has been created in its almost 100-year history. The five selected stories span different creative periods of Howard's career and showcase archetypal situations in which the barbarian's implicit philosophy is particularly evident. The first of these is *The Tower of the Elephant* (1933), which introduces a young Conan already aware of the world's harshness, confronted with cosmic mysteries and acts of mercy and violence that reveal the moral

complexity of his character. *Queen of the Black Coast* (1934), one of the most celebrated stories, depicts Conan in his role as a pirate in love with Bêlit and his reflections on life and death. Meanwhile, *Beyond the Black River* (1935) and *Red Nails* (1936) belong to Howard's creative maturity and explore scenarios of frontier life and civilisational decline. The fifth and last is *The Hour of the Dragon* (1935), the only Conan novel written by Howard, which provides a broader panorama for exploring the psychology of the character who has already been crowned king but who is now deposed and nomadic. This work also allows us to examine in greater detail how, even in the face of extreme adversity and the threat of death, Conan clings to a kind of existential ethos of action and individual freedom.

The corpus selected therefore fits the criteria of thematic relevance (being stories in which questions of meaning, value and morality clearly emerge) and contextual variety (covering Conan's adventurous youth to his maturity), thus ensuring a sufficient field of analysis to shed light on the question raised. It is worth remembering that Howard wrote these stories in the 1930s, in the height of European existentialist thought, without belonging to academic circles himself but, as Hoffman (2004) states, intuitively coinciding with certain concerns of his time. Indeed, Hoffman has championed the existentialist character of Howard's work, pointing out that it is a fiction rooted in the philosophical concerns of the first half of the 20th century and not simply a mythical saga taken out of context.

3. CASE STUDY: CONAN AND LOVECRAFT'S COSMICISM

According to López-Espinosa, "The unique character and depth of the world created by Howard are best understood by contrasting it with the work of another leading figure in fantasy literature: Tolkien" (2017, p. 269). For the present study, this contrast is most appropriate with H.P. Lovecraft because of his relationship as part of the Lovecraft Circle (Gurpegui, 2018). The Lovecraft Circle was a literary movement or group of authors who, mainly in the 20th century, were inspired by the work and creative vision of H.P. Lovecraft, contributing to expanding his legacy in genres such as weird fiction, horror, fantasy and science fiction. This circle included contemporary writers and friends of Lovecraft, such as Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard and August Derleth, who collaborated in the construction of shared myths, characters and fictional universes linked to the so-called Cthulhu Mythology. It is also interesting to analyse his connection with Lovecraft because of their proven friendship, since they corresponded with each other during the 1920s and 30s, debating the dialectic of barbarism and civilisation and mutually nourishing each other's fictional universes. Finally, due to mutual influences, intertextuality and parallels, comparing the two allows us to establish bridges between sword and sorcery and cosmic horror that may shed light on the question raised about Conan's supposed (anti)heroism.

What new interpretations can currently be offered regarding the convergences between two writers as studied as Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft? First, it is necessary to consider the similarities and, in particular, Lovecraft's influence on Howard's work. To do so, we need to first understand the significance of Lovecraft's work. In his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1984), Lovecraft argues that true terror arises when confronted with the unknown and immeasurable to human understanding, such as ineffable abominations or ancestral gods:

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present [...] a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the demons of unplumbed space. (Lovecraft, 1989, p. 10-11).

Conan faces ancient, cosmic creatures that inevitably recall the primordial gods of Lovecraft's novels. In *The Tower of the Elephant* (1933), Conan encounters Yag-Kosha, a cosmic creature captured by a sorcerer. This creature is beyond human understanding, reflecting the sort of entities that Lovecraft describes in his fiction, namely beings whose motivations and existences are beyond comprehension and the knowable world, belonging to unfathomable spaces. In other stories, Conan also confronts Crom, the god of the heights, an entity with similarities to Lovecraft's primordial beings such as Cthulhu, underscoring the futility of human resistance, in line with post-heroic scepticism. Another common element that brings him closer to Lovecraft than to heroic fantasy is the breaking of the idealisation of feelings. For example, in *Queen of the Black Coast* (1934), his alliance with Bêlit—pirate and priestess of dark cults—arises from a materialistic pact in which plunder and sex replace chivalric vows and idealised love.

Another point of convergence between the two authors, demonstrating that beyond their epistolary correspondence and friendship there was mutual influence, is the representation of human insignificance in relation to the cosmos. This element is crucial in cosmicism, a term used by Joshi (1990) to describe the philosophy underlying Lovecraft's works and which posits that the universe is vast, incomprehensible and profoundly indifferent to humanity. According to Joshi (1990), cosmicism is based on the idea that, faced with the vastness of the universe and cosmic forces, humanity is irrelevant, a point that is clearly reflected in stories such as *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928). In this regard, both authors share a pessimistic, post-heroic vision of humanity. For Lovecraft, the universe is indifferent and incomprehensible (Arenas, 2011), while for Howard, history is a cycle of violence and chaos (Atreyu, 2024). Similarly, they also subvert traditional epic by denying the possibility of absolute moral triumph; the protagonist of their stories no longer fights for universal ideals, but against forces that can nullify his freedom, which, in essence, reinforces the anti-heroic dimension of Conan.

However, even while sharing cosmological and anthropological visions and post-heroic elements, Conan emerges as the distinguishing feature between the two authors. Ray and Gupta (2025) describe cosmic insignificance and meaninglessness as a dark epiphany, a moment when Conan understands human insignificance and the lack of purpose in the face of an overwhelming cosmos. If Lovecraft's primordial gods embody the dark epiphany and horror in the face of the immeasurable, Howard's barbarian personifies the practical response to that void by embodying the imposition of the strongest, the pragmatism of the survivor and the exaltation of the rebel warrior as a tool for violence and resistance to supernatural power. Furthermore, unlike Lovecraft's characters, Conan does not succumb to madness (this being understood in the context of Lovecraft's work and not as a pejorative way of referring to mental disorders or mental health problems or fear of the incomprehensible). In works such as *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) or *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), events are narrated in which the revelation of these cosmic abysses generates astonishment, awe and finally madness in the characters. Nevertheless, Conan confronts chaos with the intention of overcoming it, unafraid of despair. He also differs from the Greek hero, who seeks *kleos* (eternal glory), by acting for survival, not transcendence, thereby foreshadowing the death of the heroic ideal in postmodernity.

Therefore, intertextual dialogue coexists with antagonistic responses to a shared epistemological crisis: the confrontation of human beings with a cosmos radically alien to their moral and cognitive categories, since the stories of Conan the Barbarian incorporate elements of cosmic horror and subvert them through an ode to the will to power that challenges the precepts of Lovecraftian anthropological pessimism. Conan shares the rebellion against

gods like the classical hero Perseus (García-Gual, 2017) and the human insignificance before unfathomable forces of cosmic horror, but emphasises pragmatism and the breaking of the ideals of post-heroism. This approach challenges Lovecraft's premise of human insignificance in that, by defeating cosmic entities through physical force, Howard does not deny the indifference of the universe or the existence of such supernatural creatures but does reject their discursive hegemony.

4. RESULTS: CONAN AND HIS REBELLION AGAINST NIHILISM AND ABSURDISM

Conan does not act as if invested by divine mandate or protected by an inevitable design; according to López-Espinosa (2017), his power lacks pre-existing ideological legitimation and is bound to a nature that dismantles the fictions of civilisation. This absence of transcendent teleology frames him within the existential condition in that he must define himself through his choices and assume responsibility for his freedom in a hostile environment. Howard's Hyboria is a world in which the gods, such as Crom, remain silent and indifferent, and where there is no inherent sense of good or human purpose. To paraphrase Conan himself in his adventures, what good is it to invoke Crom? For he cares little whether men live or die.

At the same time, it should be noted that Howard conceives of the Hyborian Age from a radical scepticism about the durability of order and the objective value of civilisation. So much so that, in *Beyond the Black River* (1935), this thought is explicitly formulated: "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilisation is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph" (Howard, 2012).

This worldview is manifested in the stories through violence, the precariousness of life and the absence of absolute morality. Similarly, Conan's phrase summarises the underlying nihilistic attitude, since according to the interpretation of the stories, no cultural or moral progress lasts, all civilisation is ephemeral and will eventually collapse under its own artificiality. Howard's view of the historical cycle is intrinsically pessimistic—ultimately, nothing built by mankind survives the test of time—and is related to the nihilism that was also emerging in his time. This absence of absolute values or a divine plan permeates the stories, giving them a tone of disenchantment that overlaps with the post-heroic era.

Conan himself, far from clinging to religious beliefs or transcendent moral codes, adopts a disenchanted, pragmatic stance towards reality. In *The Tower of the Elephant* (1933), for example, Conan is astonished at the cruelty of the villagers and shows compassion for a tortured cosmic creature, guided by a personal ethical instinct rather than by principles instilled by any culture. Conan's barbaric ethics, instinctive yet resolute, implies a denial of the concept of universal human nature or of a given absolute morality and advocates for one in which each man must define his own code in a violent, absurd world. However—and here lies one of the key points of the research hypothesis—Conan does not succumb to nihilistic despair; on the contrary, he transcends it through an affirmative attitude reminiscent of Camusian absurdity.

Therefore, although Howard's work exudes nihilism, his stories do not fall into the cycle of Schopenhauerian anthropological pessimism. On the contrary, Conan appears endowed with a vital impetus and an affirmative will that refer to what Camus (1953) called the absurdist or rebellious attitude towards a meaningless world. Similarly, Conan implicitly acknowledges the lack of ultimate meaning but finds value in rebelling against that emptiness by staunchly defending his resistance to succumbing to it. He lives, fights, loves and conquers according to

his own code. This response aligns with Camus' approach, which champions conscious rebellion and a passion for life as the best response to the absurd. Camus argued that, having discovered the absurdity of existence—that conflict between the human search for meaning and the indifferent silence of the universe—, man is left with three possible responses: suicide, a leap of faith (clinging to a transcendent illusion), or conscious rebellion, which consists of accepting the absurdity of the human condition but asserting oneself in life despite everything. Conan clearly embodies this third way, that of the warrior who reaffirms himself and rebels against life even while believing that no eternal value sustains it.

In this respect, the original Conan stories portray a world devoid of transcendent design in which there is no destiny or epic mission to guide him, unlike what is usual in conventional heroic fantasy. Rather, Conan forges his own path through sheer willpower and the sword, embodying Sartre's axiom (1996) that argues that existence precedes essence. Conan, unlike conventional heroes, was not born to save the world, fulfil a supernatural mandate or lead an oppressed people. When he becomes king, he does so by seizing the opportunity to proclaim himself sovereign and not because of a destiny for which he was born. This absolute self-determination ties in with the existentialist notion of the radical freedom of the individual, forced to define his own essence through his actions in a world devoid of absolute values.

Conan acts, therefore, without gods to chart his course, thrown into an existence where he must be the one to give meaning to his life through action, freedom and conquest. Howard can therefore be seen as an unconscious existentialist precisely because he strips the hero of any mythical or teleological legitimation and places him before the need to create and endure his own destiny. Therefore, following Hoffman's arguments (2004), this characteristic distinguishes Conan from heroism and links him to free existentialism that rebels against any given essence and assumes the burden of its own freedom.

It should be added that, like the dark detectives of noir fiction (Sosa-Rubio, 2015), Conan is a disillusioned character who does not believe in the hypocritical rationalisations of civilised societies, as demonstrated by his disdain for kings, pagan priests and pseudo-philosophers, whom he considers deceivers or covert despots. Howard, like his character, views civilisation with scepticism, often presenting it as a mask of refinement that conceals the same violence and unbridled ambition found in barbarism. In this respect, in *Queen of the Black Coast*, Bêlit questions Conan about his beliefs, asking him if he believes in life after death. Conan's answer is revealing:

Let the teachers, priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content.

This statement encapsulates his stance on the absurd, since, although he considers that life may lack ultimate reality or purpose, he lives it to the full and feels it to be authentic, filled with the intensity of his experiences: "I burn with life, I love, I slay", and that is enough for him. Conan does not evade the question of meaning; rather, he considers it pointless: "Let the philosophers debate it" and chooses to live. He thus devotes himself to immediate existence, his passionate love for Bêlit and to battle with a kind of cheerful fatalism. This answer finds parallels in Camus' philosophy as expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1953, p. 61). Camus argues that, even while recognising the ultimate futility of the task (Sisyphus condemned to push the rock for eternity), human beings can find fulfilment in the effort itself, in the struggle without hope of ultimate victory.

In a way, Conan embodies Sisyphus, for in a cycle of violence and chaos there are always new kingdoms to conquer, new enemies to defeat, and although no victory is permanent because in the end barbarism or chaos triumphs and every empire falls, the struggle itself constitutes the meaning of his life. This is evident in *The Hour of the Dragon* (1936) when he regains the throne of Aquilonia after overcoming countless trials and dangers. His triumph involves no Aristotelian *deus ex machina*; it is his indomitable will that leads him back to power. Conan never contemplates surrendering to adverse fate. Even in extreme situations, he refuses to succumb: he endures agony with iron determination, defying death itself. This resilience so characteristic of the antihero (Freire, 2022) and his ferocity to survive—to remain in the world at any cost, even when the world seems absurd or cruel—reflects absurdist rebellion: a refusal to resign, either physically or spiritually. Conan rebels against annihilation, against hopelessness, without needing to resort to transcendent beliefs. In his universe, he even goes so far as to say that if the gods will not help, it is better not to bother them; Crom grants men strength at birth and nothing more, and Conan rarely prays to him because he knows no god will come to his aid.

Clearly, although Howard should not be considered to have written with the deliberate intention of expounding philosophical theories—he described himself as an unsophisticated man—and other authors have highlighted how small his world was (Dowd, 2016), it is remarkable how his narrative creation reflects concerns typical of the 20th century. After all, Conan was created in 1932, in the interwar period in a world shaken by the feeling of meaninglessness after the Great War and in the midst of intellectual movements that questioned Victorian absolutes and the rise of totalitarianism. Without explicitly mentioning it, Howard participates in these ideological movements. Cosmic loneliness, the absence of providence, the authenticity of the individual faced with a void of values—all of this pulsates beneath Conan's adventures. And, like Camus in his work (1953), Howard finds in intense experience and personal rebellion an aesthetic, ethical response to this void. Conan lives and acts with a savage fullness, refusing to capitulate to enemies or bow to the despair and chaos that surrounds him.

5. DISCUSSION

In order to analyse Conan from the perspective of the contemporary antihero, we must first define what we mean by antihero in the current context. For a long time, the category of antihero lacked unified criteria, despite numerous theoretical attempts to define it canonically. Debate on this topic covers multiple areas: the antihero has even been studied as a cross-cutting concept in contemporary crime fiction, showing that his figure transcends genres and eras.

Studies such as that of Bröckling (2019) have refined their parameters, emphasising their opposition to traditional heroic norms and defining the antihero as that character who opposes the heroic code of conduct, embodying a deliberate rejection of the normative virtues of the classical hero. According to Brombert (1999), the antihero is characterised by a courage that reveals our own shortcomings and by a dignity that sometimes arises paradoxically from defeat or loss of hope. Conan shares some traits with this figure, as he lacks the moral purity and exemplary nobility of the archetypal hero; he is amoral in conventional terms—pirate, barbarian, mercenary and thief—and his values correspond to a pragmatic personal code rather than an altruistic ethic. Conan embodies a unique type of antihero, far removed from the decadent cynicism of other modern characters; he represents a form of heroic anti-heroism, so to speak, in which the rejection of common civilised values such as hypocrisy, cowardice or

petty self-interest is accompanied by the affirmation of primitive virtues such as courage, tribal honour or the authenticity of instincts. This approach leads us to see Conan as an implicit critic of the established culture rather than an uncultured brute. His sword functions, metaphorically, as the blade that cuts through the fictions and decadence of civilised society, exposing the naked reality of the human condition. Conan can be read as a symptom of the existential anxieties of the interwar period and as an imaginative reaction to the crisis of meaning after the First World War.

Similarly, Conan is an antihero because he does not subscribe to conventional heroic values. That does not, however, mean he lacks values; his moral compass is simply unorthodox, focused on survival and personal freedom, which paradoxically allows him to unmask the farce of the corrupt civilisation that Howard contrasts with barbarism. However, while he is not devoid of values, this does not mean he is altruistic. According to Ardanaz (1983), the concept of the antihero in literature is characterised by moral ambiguity and a rejection of traditional heroic values. In this regard, Conan, like other contemporary antiheroes, mostly acts out of self-interest rather than altruistic ideals. In *Queen of the Black Coast*, Conan does not hesitate to use violence to achieve his goals. This pragmatic behaviour reflects the antihero's ability to navigate a world without clear values, acting selfishly but consistently within his own moral code.

For Botting (1996), anti-heroism is defined by the subversion of traditional heroic ideals, emphasising individuality and pragmatism instead of sacrifice or moral heroism. Conan embodies this concept by facing horrors and supernatural forces with a determination that comes not from a belief in a higher order, but from his personal conviction to survive and prevail. Similarly, Gil and García (2016) consider that the dark hero or antihero is characterised by moral ambiguity and grey areas, a quality that is also central to Conan. This ambiguity also places him in an intermediate or liminal space between the traditional hero and the villain. Bruun Vaage (2016) complements this view by describing the antihero as a complex figure between the hero and the villain, who combines admirable traits with questionable behaviours. In other words, the antihero may possess charisma, bravery or skill—traditional heroic qualities—but employs them in morally ambiguous ways or through brutal methods, which challenges the audience to reconcile their empathy for the character with their disapproval of his methods. Indeed, contemporary serialised narratives have shown that audiences come to empathise with these morally ambiguous protagonists, accepting their reprehensible behaviour to the extent that the story manages to emotionally engage them.

From an ethical-psychological perspective, various studies have observed that antiheroes frequently exhibit traits associated with the dark triad of personality (Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy), attributes that distance them from the altruistic ideal of the traditional hero. Greenwood *et al.* (2021) consider that many anti-heroic protagonists of contemporary popular culture are described precisely with these traits, exemplifying their distance from the virtuous heroism of the classical canon. Nevertheless, these characters manage to captivate audiences, revealing a shift in cultural sensibility: the contemporary public values authenticity and moral complexity over unattainable ethical perfection.

Similarly, as Bonnet (2013) points out, the modern antihero does not seek an ultimate purpose; on the contrary, he defines his existence through his actions. Conan, similarly, does not have a predefined destiny, but rather forges his own path through struggle, facing the challenges that come his way. For example, in *The Hour of the Dragon*, Conan faces an invasion that uses dark magic to dethrone him, placing him in a direct confrontation with chaos. Instead of resigning himself to defeat, Conan fights with determination, reflecting what Sánchez-Escalonilla (2002) describes as the forging of the hero through action, although in this

case we are talking about an antihero who seeks to prevail in a world in which despair and chaos seem to dominate.

The antihero reflects a disenchantment with one-dimensional heroism and a preference for characters who embody the moral ambiguity of real life. An updated definition of the contemporary antihero that summarises these traits has been proposed:

A character with his own agenda, whose leitmotif is revenge or the search for identity, and who is characterised by contradiction, loneliness, internal conflict and a carefree, sceptical behaviour. In his arc of redemption, he aligns his agenda with the common good and, thanks to his strength, achieves his goals outside the established law. (Freire-Sánchez and Vidal-Mestre, 2022, p. 64).

Conan the Barbarian exemplifies many of these antihero attributes early on. Unlike the classic hero—law-abiding and defender of established values—Conan is an outlawed outsider who lives by his own barbarian code of honour. In Howard's stories, Conan is often a thief, mercenary or wandering nomad, even sharing elements of an outsider with the trope of the frontier knight (Gutiérrez Delgado, 2022) in that they are marginal figures that scarcely fit the traditional definition of a virtuous hero. In *Queen of the Black Coast* (1934), Conan joins forces with the pirate Bêlit in a life of plundering along the coasts of Kush. Conan does not stand as a defender of any kingdom or a champion of altruistic ideals; on the contrary, he is an outlaw pirate and an enemy of the established order. However, far from portraying him as a villain, Howard constructs him as an empathetic protagonist, endowed with a personal ethic and genuine authenticity that distinguish him from the true evildoers of his world. This combination of rugged virtue and pragmatic amorality places Conan in a moral limbo fertile for the antiheroic canon.

Occasionally, antiheroes are forged through revenge. Bêlit's death awakens in him a vengeful anger that, although alien to civilised law, the reader perceives as understandable and even cathartic. Conan thus embodies the paradoxical appeal of the antihero: a character who arouses public sympathy despite his violence outside the bounds of conventional morality (Freire, 2022). Another illustrative case is *Red Nails* (1936). Throughout the story, Conan fights for his own survival and that of Valeria; however, in doing so he ends up eliminating the tyranny of the city's leaders. This pattern—a violent outsider who overthrows a society more perverse than himself—is a recurring motif in pulp fiction: the barbarity that unmasks the hypocrisy of decadent civilisation. Similarly, in the novel *The Hour of the Dragon* (1935) Conan appears as a barbarian king who regains his throne through force and cunning, confirming that even in power he does not abandon his anti-heroic condition.

Conan foreshadowed many current debates surrounding the ambiguous hero: the struggle between individual justice and collective ethics, or criticism of institutional corruption, as a structural rebel who acts outside of social hierarchies, questioning heroic deeds with irony or cynicism typical of anti-heroism (Sereni, 2020). Therefore, Conan the Barbarian transcends his pulp origins to emerge as a precursor and inspiration for the contemporary antihero. His literary character—an amoral man of action with his own code, an outlaw who saves kingdoms without intending to, a barbarian who exposes the fallacies of civilisation—echoes modern theories of the antihero. It is not an anachronism, since Conan engages with modern philosophical concerns, such as the duality of barbarism/civilisation, the validity of conventional morality versus human nature and the appeal of transgression in a world disenchanted with heroic ideals. The abundance of antiheroes in fiction reflects a society disenchanted with traditional heroes, inclined to explore the grey areas of behaviour. In this

context, Conan takes on new relevance by embodying an early—almost prototypical—form of that heroic ambiguity that populates our screens. Conan engages with the present, reminding us that the rebellious, imperfect antihero has deep roots and fuels debates about heroism.

The antihero has also evolved to become a central figure in popular culture. Characters like Walter White in *Breaking Bad* or Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* share with Conan their radical individualism, their rejection of traditional values and their ability to act according to their own codes in a world in which moral rules are ambiguous. In this respect, Conan can be considered a precursor of this type of character, who acts for his own survival and autonomy.

6. CONCLUSIONS

It is possible to accept the hypothesis that Conan is one of the first characters to trace the coordinates of the contemporary antihero. His ethics are individualistic and pragmatic, as demonstrated in stories such as *Queen of the Black Coast* or *Red Nails* (1936) in which he makes decisions based on his own survival and pleasure rather than on moral ideals. Among the parallels with Lovecraft's work, the most striking is that Conan faces Lovecraftian entities or supernatural forces that defy human reason, as in *The Tower of the Elephant* and *The Scarlet Citadel* (1933), but instead of succumbing mentally to the immeasurable, he confronts these supernatural beings with brutality and fearlessness. Although Conan is fundamentally pessimistic and nihilistic, since he does not believe in ultimate purposes, his way of facing the void is, on the contrary, to decide to accept life as it is and develop fully within it. He thus blazes as a positive counterpoint in a contemporary antihero who escapes resigned defeat and offers, in his brutal humanity, an aura of affirmation in the face of the inexplicable.

Conan embodies, therefore, as Ortiz Delgado (2017) states when comparing him to mythical figures such as Hercules and Mad Max, the vitalist affirmation and the Nietzschean spirit of the superman: a being who affirms himself and his will above chaos or the established order (Nietzsche, 2001). In *The Hour of the Dragon*, Conan fights for the reaffirmation of his power rather than for a just cause or redemption because he does not believe in predetermined destinies. Instead of accepting his fate, he always confronts circumstances, as evidenced by his rise from a barbarian warrior to becoming king. He rebels against the absurd and the cycle of chaos and violence through the satisfaction of living.

Therefore, the results allow us to reflect on a re-evaluation of the limits between genre literature and the contemporary philosophy that emerges from the work. This rereading requires us to abandon the comfortable generic categorisation—heroic fantasy or high fantasy—in order to recognise in Howard a precursor of contemporary anti-epic. Thus, and in parallel to Houellebecq's (2021) analysis of weird fiction, Howard's Hyborian landscapes are reinterpreted here as a prelude to the current post-heroic condition as societies that, unable to generate new heroes, mythologise anti-heroes whose codes of honour are reduced to pragmatic efficiency, brutality or revenge as their reason for being. In this respect, rereading Conan from the post-heroic paradigm that defines contemporary narrative allows us to update its meaning and examine it as a cultural product that continues to challenge fundamental issues of contemporary society. Therefore, by transfiguring cosmic horror and the sword and sorcery subgenre into a setting for anti-heroic action, Howard subverts the canons of weird fiction literature and introduces the demystification of the sublime and unfathomable.

Conan the Barbarian therefore does not symbolise failure of the hero; on the contrary, he is an anti-hero who is aware of his condition in an absurd, inexorable cosmos. His narrative, imbued with elements of cosmicity, reflects the postmodern disillusionment towards the great

stories (Lyotard, 1984) and the hypertrophy of storytelling (Han, 2019). By merging the most primal violence with indifferent cosmicism and absurdism, Howard introduces contemporary discourses on current post-heroism in which figures such as the dystopian anti-heroes of narco-series inherit their moral ambiguity along with society's empathy. Therefore, the figure of Conan the Barbarian, which has transcended as a rough, crude stereotype of a hypermasculine and hypermuscular warrior, can be reinterpreted as a literary symbol of the struggle for radical freedom, the power of the individual and the affirmation of life amidst the chaos in desecralised universes. His anti-initiatory, but always marginal, journey from thief to king subverts Campbell's monomyth (2020), proposing instead a materialist dialectic of myth: gods die, swords rust, only the animal instinct to exist remains.

While this analysis has explored the intersection between Conan's anti-heroism and Lovecraftian influences, as well as his struggle against nihilism, one of the main limitations of the study lies in the impossibility of exhaustively covering Howard's vast work and his multiple philosophical approaches. We therefore focused on only some of Howard's (and Conan's) original and most representative stories. The Hyborian Age, with its historical and geopolitical complexity, offers a rich variety of interpretations that have not been fully addressed. Similarly, the magical and religious aspects of Conan's universe, which can offer additional perspectives on his confrontation with cosmic forces and the inhuman, deserve a deeper analysis that exceeds the scope of this article.

Based on the results obtained, a comparative study between the figure of Conan and the tragic heroes of classical literature is suggested as a future line of research, especially in their relationship with hubris and destiny. It may also be of great interest to investigate how the figure of the antihero, as manifested in Conan, has influenced the creation of contemporary characters in fantasy literature and television fiction, exploring the parallels between Conan's anti-heroism and figures such as Geralt of Rivia from *The Witcher* universe, among others.

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Brief resumé:

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