

Conan The Barbarian

1. What do you see as the person's self concept? (In other words what does the protagonist's behavior and words say about the question, "Who am I?")

Conan was certainly a man of that age between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the rise of the Sons of Aryas. His self concept and identity can only be understood within that context.

First and foremost, Conan would say he is a Cimmerian, the sole surviving member of his tribe that was wiped out or enslaved when he was a boy. In the Hyborian Age, in which he lives, he perceives himself an outsider, an outsider who has learned how to live and function in a land very different from the one of his childhood. He has been forced to adapt to a new culture, and this adaptation can be viewed as an example of the Acculturation Model, given that it was forced upon him and he still stands out as a Cimmerian. Despite the years of backbreaking labor at the Wheel of Pain and years as a "pit fighter" he is still his father's son. His father appears to have given young Conan considerable unconditional positive regard which, according to Carl Rogers, is essential in childhood for a person to develop a self concept that is congruent with his self experience. There is a firmness to Conan's sense of self worth that years of abuse after his family and tribe were murdered could not erase.

William James' definition of the self as known (the empirical ego) provides a nice way to summarize other aspects to Conan's self concept: In terms of the material me, there is only two things that he has. These are his body, which is strong and a source of pride reflecting self-

complacency, and his sword—a king’s mighty steel blade which he especially treasures, coming as he does from a family of sword smiths. The spiritual me includes his knowledge and mastery of combat, especially with that sword. Here too there is complacency. He has also retained the culture of his tribe of Cimmerians, which has instilled his sense of loyalty, his superstitions, and a deep desire for revenge. (I’ll say more about the social me when I answer question 3.)

2. Explore the major choices he makes in the film. What do these say about the person's identity and sense of self?

The first significant choice Conan made was to be a compliant slave, either turning a mill wheel or fighting to the death in the combat pits. His compliance reflected the role that was imposed on him. Erving Goffman described man as an actor, and for Conan, the props, setting and script that he found himself with defined who he was. For these years of slavery, he behaved in a way consistent with this role as “slave.” (George Herbert Mead would say something different; that this self concept of slave reflected the attitudes of others who saw him as nothing more than a slave.) After Conan is set free, he makes his most salient decision which is to find the killers of his family and to inflict revenge. This quest which has the quality of an obsession, likely reflects his strong sense of family and commitment to a code his father taught him to crush his adversaries. This is a very male mind set reflecting what Karen Horney proposed is the influence of one’s culture and the roles and attitudes related to one’s gender identity that are a product of that culture.

This determination to find those who slaughtered his people is so strong that Conan chooses to abandon his friends and pursue his quest alone. His is a hard choice, especially given his love for the woman Valeria. But he is likely experiencing cognitive dissonance, a conflict between his belief that it is his duty to have revenge and awareness that he is holding back by

following his friends. Consonance is achieved by leaving them in the middle of the night to trek after Thulsa Doom, who Conan had learned led the party that annihilated his family.

3 Given his self concept, explore the relationships with other key characters, especially the antagonist.

Both William James and George Herbert Mead proposed a person's relationship with others influences the person's self concept. James noted that the person has as many social "selves [mes] as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind." Mead, who define self concept more restrictively than James being in its totality a social construct, proposed that each "me" reflects what a person experiences as the attitude of another toward him. Depending upon the person or persons with who he is interacting at the moment, Conan is a slave, thief, trouble maker, lover, friend, enemy, combatant, comrade or hell raiser. For example, to the evil sorcerer Thulsa Doom, Conan is a musclebound, not-so-bright, pugilist lout. In the sorcerer's presence Conan behaves and speaks in a way that is consistent with this perception revealing that indeed there is a part of this to his self concept. To Valeria, a female thief and former pit fighter, he reveals a more tender side, a side that may have been fostered as a child by his mother. Conan and Valeria are lovers who each have had experiences that makes it possible for them to understand the pains and sorrows that the other knows.

There are other important relationships that are revealing of Conan's self concept.. After years of fighting in the pits, Conan is abruptly set free one night by his owner. He soon discovers that the Hyborian world is confusing and dangerous, however strong and aggressive he might be. After a rather nasty encounter with a witch, he frees Subotai, a thief who had been ensnared and chained by her. Although their cultural backgrounds are quite different, they become comrades. Conan has strength and courage. Subotai has a wily knowledge of the world

and is a guide through corrupt cities and traitorous back allies. To Subotai, Conan is loyal and honorable, reflective of Conan's sense of self as a friend.

This loyalty and comradeship are certainly important aspects of Conan's identity. In addition to Subotai and Valeria, Conan bonds with the Wizard who lives by the sea. The four become what John Turner defines as a social group which is made up of "... individuals who share a common social identification of themselves." Their group is very reflective of an independent culture because their group membership is defined by a common goal or quest and is made up of persons who are each independent of the others.

Conan's behavior before King Osric is revealing of both his loyalty to Subotai (by attempting to protect him) and his arrogance before the king. If nothing else, Conan appears to have genuine high self-esteem—which Schneider and Turkat define as a genuine favorable feelings of self-worth. He is not falsely boastful nor defensive about himself when things don't go his way.

4. What does the outcome (ending) says about the person's sense of self. Can you identify any changes that may have been realized in his or her identity or sense of who the person is?

By slaying Thulsa Doom and his henchmen, Conan has revenged his people's slaughter. He has done his duty as a Cimmerian. In many ways Conan has changed but he is still first and foremost a Cimmerian. His world view is still very much what he learned as a child from his father and other kinsmen. Using Gopnik's model, we can say that the theories he formed as a young person about himself, the world, and his place in the world have never been seriously modified despite the years of mistreatment and his living in a culture different from his own. His understanding of things reflect a process that Piaget defined as assimilation whereby Conan's

observations of events were filtered or modified so that they would align with what he already held in his mind.

One aspect of his earlier identity had been abandoned: i.e., his identity as a slave—a piece of property to be used or sold or tormented (or slaughtered in the fighting pits by an opponent he is forced to combat). He has become a free man, a man who can choose whatever high adventure he wishes to pursue. Thus we see at the end Conan the wanderer, a man with no roots. This is a man probably very different from the one he would have been had his family not been slaughtered and he taken away in chains.