

tarzan of the apes edgar rice burroughs

The Enduring Legacy of Tarzan of the Apes by Edgar Rice Burroughs

Tarzan of the Apes Edgar Rice Burroughs ignited the imagination of millions, birthing a legend that continues to captivate audiences over a century later. This seminal work introduced the world to John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, a feral child raised by apes in the heart of the African jungle. Edgar Rice Burroughs' masterful storytelling weaves a tale of primal instincts, societal clashes, and the enduring power of nature. This article delves deep into the genesis of Tarzan, his iconic jungle world, the profound themes explored in the novel, and why the story of Tarzan of the Apes remains an indelible part of literary and pop culture history. We will examine Burroughs' creative process, the novel's initial reception, and its lasting impact across various media.

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The Genesis of a Jungle Icon: Edgar Rice Burroughs and His Vision

Edgar Rice Burroughs, a prolific American author, found immense inspiration for *Tarzan of the Apes* in his own life experiences and the popular adventure fiction of his era. Born in Chicago in 1875, Burroughs had a varied career

before achieving literary fame, including time in the U.S. Cavalry and working in various business ventures. It was during a period of unemployment and creative yearning that the idea for Tarzan began to take shape. He reportedly conceived the character of Tarzan while working as a pencil sharpener salesman, a testament to the boundless power of human imagination. Burroughs was fascinated by the concept of a noble savage, a theme prevalent in earlier literature, and sought to create a unique and compelling character embodying these traits.

Burroughs' Early Life and Influences

Edgar Rice Burroughs' upbringing exposed him to a wide range of literary genres, from classic adventure tales to the burgeoning pulp fiction magazines. His father, George Tyler Burroughs, was a Civil War veteran and businessman, instilling in his son a sense of discipline and a thirst for exploration. Burroughs attended prestigious schools, though his academic career was marked by a restless spirit. His early experiences, including a brief stint in the 7th U.S. Cavalry, provided him with insights into wilderness survival and the dynamics of human interaction in challenging environments, which would later inform his detailed descriptions of jungle life.

The Spark of Inspiration for Tarzan

The specific inspiration for Tarzan of the Apes is often attributed to a combination of factors. Burroughs was undoubtedly influenced by Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book," but he sought to elevate the concept with a more romantic and dramatic narrative. The idea of a human child raised by wild animals, a trope explored in various myths and legends, resonated with him. He meticulously researched primate behavior and African flora and fauna, aiming to create a plausible if fantastical, scenario for Tarzan's survival and growth. The name "Tarzan" itself is believed to be derived from a combination of proto-Indo-European roots, meaning "man-ape," underscoring the character's dual nature.

Unveiling the World of Tarzan: The Lush African Jungle

The setting of *Tarzan of the Apes* is as much a character as Tarzan himself. Edgar Rice Burroughs painted a vivid and immersive picture of the untamed African jungle, a world teeming with both breathtaking beauty and lethal danger. This wild expanse serves as Tarzan's cradle, school, and kingdom, shaping his physical prowess, his instincts, and his unique perspective on life. Burroughs' detailed descriptions bring this exotic locale to life, immersing the reader in its sights, sounds, and smells.

The Biodiversity of Burroughs' Jungle

Burroughs populated his African jungle with a rich tapestry of wildlife. From the majestic lions and powerful gorillas to the cunning leopards and venomous snakes, the animal kingdom plays a crucial role in Tarzan's development and the novel's plot. He described the dense foliage, the towering trees, the winding rivers, and the hidden clearings with a palpable sense of realism, even if some aspects were embellished for dramatic effect. The jungle is a place of constant struggle for survival, where only the fittest can thrive, and Tarzan, by necessity and by nature, becomes the apex predator.

The Majestic Ape Family: The Kala Clan

Central to Tarzan's upbringing is his adopted ape family, the Kala clan. These anthropoid apes, a species of great apes that Burroughs depicted as intelligent and capable of complex social structures, become his sole protectors and instructors. His mother, Kala, a gentle and nurturing figure, instills in him a sense of belonging and love, despite his human origins. The ape community teaches Tarzan their language, their customs, and their survival techniques, effectively bridging the gap between his human heritage and his wild existence. This bond with his ape family is fundamental to Tarzan's identity.

The Boy Who Became King: Tarzan's Upbringing and Development

The narrative of *Tarzan of the Apes* chronicles the extraordinary journey of John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, from abandoned infant to the undisputed king of the jungle. His transformation is a testament to his innate resilience, the nurturing influence of his ape family, and the harsh realities of his environment. Edgar Rice Burroughs meticulously details Tarzan's physical and mental development, showcasing how he masters both the natural world and his own developing human consciousness.

Early Years and Survival Instincts

Orphaned at a young age due to the tragic deaths of his parents, Tarzan is discovered and adopted by the ape Kala. His early years are a brutal education in survival. He learns to forage for food, to climb trees with incredible agility, and to defend himself against predators. His physical strength and speed are honed by the constant need to evade danger and compete for resources. Burroughs emphasizes Tarzan's raw power and his keen senses, which become paramount in his struggle for existence.

Mastery of the Jungle and its Inhabitants

As Tarzan grows, he not only survives but thrives, mastering the intricate ecosystem of the jungle. He learns the hunting grounds, the water sources, and the habits of every creature. His prowess extends to his ability to communicate with and command many of the jungle's inhabitants, a skill that solidifies his dominion. He becomes a formidable warrior, defending his ape family and his territory with ferocity. His skill with primitive weapons, fashioned from natural materials, further enhances his reputation as the jungle's champion.

The Emergence of Human Consciousness and Identity

While Tarzan is physically and behaviorally a creature of the jungle, his latent human consciousness gradually surfaces. He begins to question his origins, particularly after encountering remnants of his parents' belongings and later, the arrival of Jane Porter and her father. This awakening prompts a profound internal conflict, as he grapples with his dual identity as a wild man and a potential member of human society. The discovery of his true lineage marks a pivotal turning point in his personal evolution.

Themes That Resonate: Nature vs. Nurture and Civilization

Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* delves into profound philosophical and societal themes that continue to provoke thought and discussion. The novel serves as a powerful exploration of the age-old debate between nature and nurture, and the complex relationship between the wild and civilized worlds. These themes are woven throughout the narrative, adding depth and complexity to the adventure story.

Nature vs. Nurture: The Primal Versus the Civilized

The central thematic conflict in *Tarzan of the Apes* lies in the juxtaposition of Tarzan's primal upbringing against the encroaching influence of civilization. Raised in the jungle, Tarzan embodies the uncorrupted virtues of nature: strength, instinct, loyalty, and a deep connection to the natural world. When he encounters civilized humans, he is exposed to a different set of values, often marked by duplicity, artificiality, and societal constraints. The novel questions which environment truly fosters a better human being, suggesting that civilization can sometimes corrupt the natural goodness of an individual.

The Concept of Civilization and its Flaws

Through Tarzan's eyes, Burroughs critiques certain aspects of Western civilization. Tarzan is often bewildered by the customs, motivations, and social hierarchies of the human characters he encounters. He observes their greed, their pettiness, and their detachment from the natural world with a critical, albeit innocent, perspective. The novel implicitly argues that Tarzan, despite his feral nature, possesses a moral compass and a sense of justice that can be superior to that of many so-called civilized individuals.

The Wild Man as Noble Savage

Tarzan embodies the archetype of the "noble savage," a romanticized concept of an individual who lives in a natural state, possessing inherent goodness and wisdom untainted by the corrupting influences of society. He is portrayed as courageous, honorable, and fiercely protective of those he cares for. His strength, both physical and moral, is a direct product of his wild upbringing, suggesting that the natural world, in its unadulterated form, can be a superior teacher and shaper of character.

The Literary Impact of Tarzan of the Apes

Upon its initial publication in 1912, *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs was an instant sensation, quickly establishing itself as a groundbreaking work of adventure fiction. Its success was not merely in its sales figures but in its profound and lasting influence on literature, storytelling, and popular culture. The novel's innovative approach to character, setting, and theme set a new standard for pulp fiction and beyond.

Pioneering the Pulp Fiction Genre

Edgar Rice Burroughs is widely regarded as a foundational figure in the pulp fiction era. *Tarzan of the Apes*, with its exotic setting, heroic protagonist, and thrilling plot, perfectly encapsulated the spirit of pulp magazines. It offered readers an escape into a world of high adventure, exotic locales, and larger-than-life characters, a formula that would be emulated by countless writers and publications for decades to come. The book's serialized nature in magazines before its book release further cemented its place in the pulp tradition.

Creating an Enduring Archetype

Tarzan of the Apes created an archetype that has echoed through the annals of literature and media. The concept of the feral child raised in the wild, possessing extraordinary abilities and caught between two worlds, became a

recurring motif in adventure stories. Tarzan's distinctive cry, his loincloth, and his mastery of the jungle became iconic symbols, instantly recognizable and endlessly adaptable. His character offered a potent fantasy of freedom, strength, and a connection to something primal and untamed.

Burroughs' Prolific Career and Expanding Universe

The monumental success of *Tarzan of the Apes* launched Edgar Rice Burroughs into a prolific writing career. He went on to write over 20 Tarzan novels, further developing the character and his world. Beyond Tarzan, Burroughs also created other popular series, such as the Pellucidar and Mars (Barsoom) series, each with its own distinct mythology and fan base. His ability to consistently create compelling worlds and characters solidified his status as one of the most popular and influential authors of the 20th century.

Tarzan's Journey Beyond the Page: Adaptations and Cultural Footprint

The impact of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* extends far beyond the printed page. The novel's inherent visual and dramatic potential made it ripe for adaptation, leading to a vast array of interpretations across various media. These adaptations have ensured that Tarzan's story continues to reach new generations, solidifying his position as a global cultural icon.

From Silent Films to Modern Blockbusters

The earliest adaptations of *Tarzan of the Apes* appeared in the nascent film industry. Silent films brought the jungle lord to life, with actors like Elmo Lincoln and later, Johnny Weissmuller, embodying the character. Weissmuller, a former Olympic swimmer, became synonymous with the role, defining the iconic Tarzan yell and physical presence for decades. Subsequent generations have seen Tarzan portrayed in animated films, television series, and live-action blockbusters, each attempting to capture the essence of Burroughs' original creation while introducing new elements.

The Tarzan Phenomenon in Comics and Toys

The comic strip medium was a natural fit for Tarzan's adventures, and he quickly became a fixture in comic books, beginning in the 1930s. These adaptations further expanded the character's lore and introduced new villains and allies. The popularity of Tarzan also translated into a vast merchandising empire, with action figures, board games, and other toys allowing children to re-enact his jungle exploits. These tangible connections further embedded Tarzan into the collective consciousness of childhood.

Tarzan's Lasting Cultural Significance

Over a century after his creation, Tarzan of the Apes remains a potent symbol of adventure, strength, and the untamed spirit. Edgar Rice Burroughs gifted the world a character who embodies a romantic ideal of primal nobility and the enduring allure of the wild. The story of the ape-man continues to inspire new creative endeavors, proving that the legend of Tarzan, born from the imagination of Edgar Rice Burroughs, is truly timeless.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary appeal of Tarzan's origin story as presented by Edgar Rice Burroughs?

The primary appeal lies in the romanticized idea of a 'noble savage' raised by animals in the wild, who possesses both primal instincts and the potential for human intellect and nobility. It taps into fantasies of freedom, strength, and a connection to nature, contrasting with the perceived artificiality of civilization.

How does Edgar Rice Burroughs' portrayal of Tarzan challenge or reinforce Victorian era societal norms?

Burroughs both challenges and reinforces norms. He challenges the idea of inherent superiority based on birthright by showing a 'savage' who surpasses civilized men in physical prowess and moral clarity. However, he reinforces the romantic ideal of the 'civilized' gentleman who emerges from the wild, suggesting that true nobility is inherent, not learned, and that the English aristocracy, in this case, is the pinnacle of that inherent quality.

What is the significance of the name 'Tarzan' in the novel?

According to the novel, 'Tarzan' translates to 'White Skin' in the ape language. This name reflects his physical difference from the apes, foreshadowing his human heritage and setting him apart even within his adopted family.

Beyond the adventure, what are some of the underlying themes explored in 'Tarzan of the Apes'?

Key themes include the nature vs. nurture debate, the dichotomy between civilization and savagery, the concept of the 'noble savage,' identity and belonging, the corrupting influence of greed, and the exploration of instinct versus intellect.

How does Edgar Rice Burroughs' writing style contribute to the enduring popularity of Tarzan?

Burroughs' writing is characterized by its fast-paced action, vivid descriptions of exotic settings, and a sense of thrilling adventure. He employs a straightforward, accessible prose that immerses readers in Tarzan's world, making it easy to follow his exploits and identify with the hero.

What role does Jane Porter play in Tarzan's development and the narrative arc of the first novel?

Jane Porter represents the bridge between Tarzan's wild existence and the human world. Her arrival awakens Tarzan's romantic and protective instincts, introducing him to love and prompting his initial exploration of human society. She serves as a catalyst for his transition and the central focus of his desire for connection.

How did the 'Tarzan of the Apes' novel influence later adventure fiction and popular culture?

The novel was incredibly influential, popularizing the 'man raised by animals' trope and setting a template for countless jungle adventure stories. Tarzan's iconic image, his primal yell, and his feats of strength became cultural touchstones, inspiring films, comics, radio shows, and even influencing concepts of heroism and masculinity.

What are some common misconceptions about Edgar Rice Burroughs' portrayal of Tarzan?

A common misconception is that Tarzan's ape-like behavior is purely animalistic. In the books, he retains a keen intellect and learns quickly, adapting his human abilities to his jungle environment. Another is that he is simply a brute; Burroughs emphasizes his noble intentions and inherent moral compass.

How does the portrayal of the ape characters, like Kala, contribute to the themes of 'Tarzan of the Apes'?

Characters like Kala, Tarzan's adoptive ape mother, highlight the themes of love, nurture, and loyalty that transcend species. They demonstrate that empathy and familial bonds can exist outside of human society, reinforcing the idea that 'savagery' doesn't necessarily equate to a lack of morality or affection.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Tarzan of the Apes, along with short descriptions:

1. *Tarzan of the Apes*: This foundational novel introduces John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, who is orphaned as an infant and raised by the great apes in the African jungle. He becomes a noble, powerful, and intelligent savage, renowned for his prowess and skill. His life takes a dramatic turn when he encounters Jane Porter and his own kind for the first time, leading to a clash between his wild upbringing and his civilized heritage.
2. *The Return of Tarzan*: Picking up after the events of the first novel, Tarzan finds himself back in London and struggling to adapt to civilized society. However, a shadowy conspiracy and a quest for vengeance draw him back to Africa. There, he battles ruthless adversaries and rediscovers his true self amidst the dangers and mysteries of the jungle.
3. *The Beasts of Tarzan*: A vengeful plot by his enemies leads to the kidnapping of Tarzan's infant son, Korak. This act forces Tarzan to leave his jungle domain and pursue the kidnappers across treacherous landscapes. He faces formidable challenges and must rely on his primal instincts and his deep knowledge of the wild to rescue his child and protect his family.
4. *The Son of Tarzan*: This novel focuses on the adventures of Jack, the young son of Tarzan and Jane, who is left behind in London due to dangerous circumstances. He eventually finds his way to Africa, where he is discovered and raised by the apes, becoming a formidable warrior in his own right. His journey is one of self-discovery and fulfilling his destiny as a son of Tarzan.
5. *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar*: Tarzan returns to the lost city of Opar, a place of ancient mystery and immense wealth, to retrieve stolen treasures that are vital to his tribe. He encounters the priestesses of Opar, a dangerous and ritualistic society, and must battle both them and other predatory forces. The story highlights Tarzan's role as a protector of his jungle domain and its secrets.
6. *Tarzan and the City of Gold*: In this installment, Tarzan embarks on a quest for the legendary City of Gold, a mythical metropolis rumored to hold untold riches and ancient knowledge. He faces perilous journeys through uncharted territories and encounters various tribes, some friendly and others hostile. The story explores themes of exploration, discovery, and the allure of lost civilizations.
7. *Tarzan Lord of the Jungle*: This title, often used interchangeably with the first book or as a general descriptor, encapsulates Tarzan's supreme authority and mastery over his jungle kingdom. It signifies his unchallenged dominance as the ruler and protector of the wild. The phrase evokes his primal strength, keen intellect, and unwavering commitment to the natural world.

8. *Tarzan and the Leopard Men*: Tarzan must confront a secret and terrifying society known as the Leopard Men, who are wreaking havoc and preying on the inhabitants of the jungle. These men, disguised and operating with ruthless efficiency, pose a significant threat to the peace and order Tarzan strives to maintain. He uses his cunning and fighting skills to unmask and defeat this shadowy organization.

9. *Tarzan Triumphant*: Tarzan finds himself drawn into the affairs of the ancient kingdom of Ruva, a land steeped in religious dogma and facing internal strife. He becomes embroiled in a struggle for power and liberation, challenging the established priesthood and their oppressive rule. Tarzan's intervention leads to a dramatic upheaval and the triumph of justice within the kingdom.

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