

Reading *Tarzan of the Apes* with a Critical Eye

Africa

In the novel, Africa is not necessarily a real place, but an imaginary construct; “a place of origins, frozen at the moment the earliest human beings appeared on earth...a place where ‘the white man’ could prove his superior manhood by reliving the primitive, masculine life of his most distant evolutionary forefathers.” (Bederman, 220) This is why it doesn’t matter that there are no tigers or pineapples in the “real” Africa. For Burroughs, “Africa” is simply a staging ground or a laboratory in which the struggle and ultimate triumph of the primitive white man (Tarzan) occurs.

Apes vs Black tribesmen

In the novel, the apes are presented as man’s forebears. It is important to note that Burroughs portrays the apes in a more positive light than the black African tribesmen. If the apes are “primitive,” the blacks are “backward.” The apes are noble, the tribesmen are superstitious and cowardly. Unlike white men, the blacks in *Tarzan of the Apes* have not “evolved;” indeed, it appears that they are incapable of “evolving.” Throughout the novel, Burroughs emphasizes that the black tribesmen are inferior to Tarzan. Tarzan himself realizes this, though it is not necessarily clear *how* he comes to this understanding. In several passages, Tarzan demonstrates he is able to distinguish clearly between the blacks and “his own kind.”

Tarzan

The embodiment of what Burroughs considers the ideal man or “perfect masculinity” – primal yet highly evolved; a perfect physical specimen with the ethics, values, and sense of propriety of a noble gentleman; able to adapt easily to the most primitive conditions and to triumph over any challenge; strong and smart, but not over-refined or over-civilized. Tarzan attains “perfect masculinity” through a combination of his noble blood line and his primitive upbringing. He has inherited all the “civilized” traits of an English aristocrat but also hones all the physical capabilities he “could never have developed in civilization.” (Bederman, 222)

Jane

Jane is hardly the “primal female.” Though in the wake of Tarzan’s rescuing her from Terkoz, she lets down her guard and seems to give in to “ancient” instincts, she quickly recovers, and the “veil of civilization” drops again. Burroughs implies that like all women who exercise a “civilizing” effect on men, Jane puts Tarzan on to the path toward “civilization,” literally opening the locket that reveals Tarzan’s “civilized” origins – the pictures of his parents that he has unknowingly been carrying with him all along. At the end of the novel, she rejects Tarzan’s offer of marriage. Interestingly, she is not attracted to the “civilized” Tarzan. After he tells her that he is “still a wild beast at heart,” however, she seems to entertain second thoughts. The message: while women may succeed in taming some men, Tarzan, the perfect man, cannot be tamed. Jane can have

Tarzan, but only on *his* terms – a reassuring message for Burroughs' male readers living vicariously through Tarzan.

“Civilization”

Burroughs is ambivalent about civilization. Only the “civilized” races can display true masculinity and triumph over those who are “uncivilized” – white dominates black – but “civilization” also corrupts man, leaving him in a weakened physical state, having lost, to a degree, his “primal” energy. Tarzan reconciles this paradox. As Bederman notes, “By living fully the life of his most primal ancestors and only gradually ascending the ladder of evolution, Tarzan develops into a perfectly masculine Anglo-Saxon.” (Bederman, 222) But at the end of the novel, Burroughs seems to conclude that civilization and perfect masculinity are incompatible. Rather than submit to the requirements of “civilization,” Tarzan denies his true identity and declares what he knows is false: “I am an ape.”

“Over-civilization”

Burroughs is not ambivalent about “over-civilization” or “over-refinement.” The absurd behavior of Professor Porter and Mr. Philander demonstrate his dismissive attitude toward men who have lost their masculinity, and, as a result, have grown too distant from the primal and the primitive and have abandoned the struggle against the constraints of the highly developed industrial order (the “system”) for which Burroughs seems to harbor such contempt. These men have acquiesced to the forces that are “feminizing” society – they are more concerned with suppressing or mastering their passions than cultivating them. To emphasize this point, Burroughs has Tarzan, the novel's hero, express the same critical sentiments about these men. Tarzan's repeated rescues of them also demonstrate their haplessness.

Violence

Violence is a vital part of the process in which “perfect masculinity” develops; it is part of the primal upbringing. Still, there is a qualitative difference between the violence of the black tribesmen and the violent acts of Tarzan. Tarzan's violent behavior demonstrates that he is proceeding through the “primal” stage of his evolution. The blacks do not evolve, so their acts of violence are portrayed as cowardly, inhumane, unwarranted, and deserving of punishment (to be exacted by whites.) Tarzan comes to understand that violence is not always appropriate – he “learns” that it is not right to kill *every* black man he sees (it is only acceptable to kill some of them). Similarly, for white men of the 1910s, certain violent outbursts could be beneficial and restorative – boxing, football, hunting, etc. Coming to see violence in positive terms was part of the process in which men of this period were remaking notions of masculinity. Burroughs, too, implies that violence is a peculiarly male behavior – the female characters in *Tarzan* who must commit violent acts (if only for self-preservation) faint shortly thereafter. Tarzan, however, *enjoys* killing, although unlike the unmanly tribesmen, he does not torture his victims.

Lynching and Rape

Tarzan, as Bederman notes, is a “one man lynching party.” What does one make of this? Burroughs seems to suggest, perhaps without meaning to, that lynching could be included

in the array of “appropriate” manifestations of white male violence. More likely, he is endorsing the notion of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy that Theodore Roosevelt made popular at the time. Nonetheless, unlike Roosevelt, he still seems to endorse racial violence as part of the process through which white men assert their dominant status. Certainly those white men who did partake in lynchings during this period would have seen such behavior as a legitimate means of expressing and preserving racial dominance. There was also a sexual or gendered component to this line of reasoning. Just as it was acceptable for Tarzan to lynch the black man who killed his “mother,” Kala, and to lynch the ape who tried to rape Jane (who, conveniently enough, is identified as a pure, southern white woman), Burroughs suggests that it is “natural” for white men to lynch black men who “violate” white women. According to Bederman, Burroughs’ novel seems to convey the message that “the impulse to kill black men, like the impulse to avoid cannibalism, was a racially superior man’s inherent masculine instinct.” (Bederman, 225) Indeed, since the black tribesmen are not true men, they apparently “deserve” their fate at the hands of Tarzan, the “true man.” Tarzan’s killing the black tribesmen only emphasizes his own “manliness” in contrast to their weakness.

The appeal of Tarzan?

Throughout the novel, Burroughs conveys the message that the white man’s “potential for power and mastery was as limitless as the masculine perfection of Tarzan’s body.” (Bederman, 221) Burroughs’ male readers liked the character of Tarzan because Burroughs implied that there was a “Tarzan” in each of them. Every white male could believe he had the potential to be a Tarzan, a reassuring message at a time when white manhood seemed to be under siege from any number of different directions. Implied in this reassurance was the belief that the white male would ultimately triumph because he was both innately superior and best equipped to adapt to changing circumstances. *Tarzan* gave male readers an avenue of escape from the confines of “civilization” and a white male hero who had himself escaped those confines to achieve a “perfect masculinity.”