Tarzan of the Apes

Edgar Rice Burroughs · *1912 · original English text*

Lord and Lady Greystoke are marooned on the West African coast, and their infant son is raised by a she-ape, Kala. Tarzan grows up to be the strongest of the apes, teaches himself to read from his dead father's books, and later meets the first white woman he has seen, Jane Porter. Burroughs's novel asks whether blood or training makes a man. It is also a product of 1912 and carries its racial assumptions, which a reader should name.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What makes a person: the blood he is born with or the world that raises him?

The book's answer is a muddle that makes it interesting. Tarzan's 'noble' blood is supposed to show in his character, yet the real shaping comes from the apes, the jungle, and his own self-teaching. Burroughs praises the civilized virtues of honor and chivalry, but he also admires the primitive fitness of Tarzan. The weakness of the book is its racial hierarchy, which treats the African characters as villains or background.

KEY CHARACTERS

Tarzan
The son of Lord Greystoke, raised by apes.

Kala
The she-ape who adopts him.

Jane Porter
An American woman, Tarzan's first love.

William Cecil Clayton
The English cousin and heir to the title.

Paul D'Arnot
A French officer, saved by Tarzan and a friend.

Kerchak
The bull ape and Tarzan's enemy.

Grades 8–12

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01

Shipwreck and Orphan

CHAPTERS I–III

A mutiny strands Lord and Lady Greystoke on a jungle shore. They build a cabin, and a son is born. Lady Alice dies, and then John, leaving the infant to the apes.

- The ship's mutiny is the novel's first violence.
- The cabin is a scrap of civilization at the jungle's edge.
- Kala's grief for her dead baby leads her to take the human child.

02

Growing Up Ape

CHAPTERS IV–VIII

The boy grows among the apes, called Tarzan (white skin). He is clever, weak, and lonely, and he discovers his father's books and teaches himself to read the pictures and later the letters.

- Kerchak, the bull ape, hates the odd child.
- The knife is the first use of a tool.
- The cabin and books are a self-taught education.

03

King of the Apes

CHAPTERS IX–XII

Tarzan kills a man for the first time and then kills Kerchak in a fight. He becomes king, and he learns to think more than the apes.

- The killing of Kulonga is a turning point in his understanding.
- The rope is another invention.
- He learns to plan as well as to fight.

04

The White Strangers

CHAPTERS XIII–XIX

A party of Europeans lands, including Professor Porter, Jane, and her suitor Clayton. Tarzan watches from the trees, protects them, and falls in love with Jane.

- Tarzan sees white people for the first time.
- His rescue of Jane in the forest is a classic scene.
- The notes he leaves are a first communication.

05

Rescue and Return

CHAPTERS XX–XXV

Tarzan rescues the party and a French officer, D'Arnot. D'Arnot teaches Tarzan French and takes him to civilization.

- D'Arnot's kindness is Tarzan's first friendship with a man.
- Learning language is a second birth.
- Tarzan decides to follow Jane to America.

06

Civilization and Choice

CHAPTERS XXVI–XXVIII

Tarzan travels to America and reaches Jane. He proves his claim to the Greystoke title but gives it up so Clayton and Jane can be married.

- Tarzan sees the world of the cities.
- His discovery of his parentage is done with fingerprints.
- The ending shows him giving up what he wants for what he thinks right.

Nature and Nurture | Civilization | Love | Honor

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 8–12

1. Notice how often the book says that blood tells. Does the story prove it?
2. The African characters are drawn as villains and stereotypes. Read these passages critically.
3. Tarzan teaches himself language. Ask what the book thinks language does for him.
4. Compare Tarzan's choice at the end with the usual hero's reward.

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