



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1987 Volume II: Epic, Romance and the American Dream

Would You Like to Swing on a Vine?: The Epic Tradition and Edgar Rice Burroughs

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Edgar Rice Burroughs remains one of the most commercially successful writers of the adventure-romance story in twentieth century America. Burroughs wrote some seventy books whose sales now total over one hundred million copies—no small achievement in literary history. Burroughs' talent in creating such memorable characters as Tarzan and John Carter has created a legacy of adventure fiction that has remained long after his death, and readers of the twenty-first century and beyond will doubtless marvel at these same characters. Aside from these memorable characterizations, Burroughs possessed a remarkable genius in creating totally imaginable environments and societies that included the dark jungles of Africa, the Martian landscape, and a point somewhere beneath the Earth's crust.

Burroughs' successful commercialization, his seemingly timeless appeal to an excitement-oriented reading public, and his adroitness in creating memorable characters should come as no surprise to fans and foes alike, since the author really just follows a formula that has its roots in the epic tradition. ERB, as his legions of admirers refer to him, merely creates a hero, plunges this hero into a conflict of unknown proportions with antagonists of strange and unworldly description, and adds a love interest for his hero to further substantiate the notion of quest which is so prevalent and central to the epic tradition. It is a formula that has worked for nearly two thousand years and ERB merely repeated it over and over again, thereby distinguishing his career as a master storyteller with a collection of novels that highlighted the same heroes in a number of stories.

The purpose of this unit will be to explore the worlds of Edgar Rice Burroughs through several of his works while paying particular attention to the genius of his imagination and his ability to relate a highly charged tale of adventure that includes multidimensional levels of quest—the same quests which formulate the epic tradition. Burroughs' superhero protagonists constantly face challenges from other beings and the environment, and even second-guess themselves. It is a further intention of this unit that after having read and discussed a sampling of Burroughs' work my students will be encouraged to explore some of their own quests, both present and future, with the hope that they will be better able to assess their strengths and weaknesses in the realization of their goals.

The selection of readings I have chosen as primary sources for discussion in the unit include *At the Earth's Core*, *Tarzan of the Apes*, and *The Land That Time Forgot*. I chose these selections from among the many volumes Burroughs authored for a variety of reasons; I trust that you who read this unit will concur with them, and be encouraged to implement it in some fashion in your own curriculum. First, all three selections are

novels of quest that place their heroes in conflict with their environments, other beings, and themselves. All the selections are of the high interest level of reading while not being too difficult to read for the average seventh or eighth grader. Each novel takes place on Earth (or, at least, within Earth) so as to have some geographical relevance for my students. All the novels have had film adaptations, thereby allowing anyone using the unit to incorporate the films also, should they desire to expand the scope of the unit with a discussion of the connection between literature and film or merely to just entertain students as a follow-up activity. Finally, the selections are all the first segments of their respective series, which hopefully can direct the interested student to read further and follow the adventures of his particularly favorite hero or storyline to fruition.

At the Earth's Core, a narrative flashback by its central character, David Innes, will be the highlighted work of the unit. This novel set in the subterranean depths of Earth, Pellucidar, is a classic example of an adventure story in the epic tradition. Moreover, it is as fine an example of quest literature as has been written in the twentieth century, and would probably make even Homer smile. The tale begins with David Innes, our young, handsome hero climbing aboard the Iron Mole with its inventor, Dr. Abner Perry. The Iron Mole is an invention which is in itself a symbol of man's quest into the unknown, for it was invented to bore through the Earth's crust in an attempt to discover just exactly what did exist within the confines of the planet. David and Perry attempt to perform a test bore; however, the experiment goes awry and the two plummet deep beneath the Earth's crust where they discover another world—a world known as Pellucidar. Shortly afterward the two men are taken prisoner by strange creatures of this inner world. It is then that David meets the beautiful Dian—a very human vision of loveliness of this inner world who is also a prisoner.

Thus we see the notion of quest on two additional levels. David and Perry want desperately to escape from their captors—gorilla-like men known as Sagoths. In addition, David wants very much to win the heart of Dian, the most beautiful female upon whom he has ever gazed. These two quests are central to the remainder of the novel and are complicated further by the existence of a race of beings known as the Mahars—the telepathic masters of the entire inner world of Pellucidar. The Mahars provide the fodder for the fourth major quest in the novel as Burroughs instills in his young, willing, and noble hero the task of liberating all of Pellucidar from the tyrannical rule of the Mahars.

David manages to escape from the community of Mahars and, after a series of exciting challenges, manages to gain the love of Dian. David then sets about to form alliances between other powerful tribes of Pellucidar, including the Sarians and the Amozites, who hope to overthrow the reign of the Mahars. David and Perry realize the eventual demise of the Mahars will be a certainty if they introduce twentieth century knowledge and technology into the battle for freedom. It is decided that David will return in the Iron Mole to the outer world and obtain information and materials necessary to consummate this quest. Unfortunately, however, the invention surfaces in the Sahara desert where the flashback narrative ends. The authorial voice then promises David aid and ships him the various supplies requested. The novel ends with the storyteller returning to the area where he last saw David Innes and not knowing whether the young hero actually made good on his return to Pellucidar or whether he fell victim to the evils of the desert.

The short synopsis above should provide ample reason for why I selected *At the Earth's Core* to be the central literary work of the unit. As the reader can easily see the work is rich in the epic tradition with its many levels of quest that take the tale from one exciting passage to the next. To further heighten student interest the reader of *At the Earth's Core* will learn that David Innes was a resident of Connecticut and even attended Yale: Aside from the geographical relevancies, however, this novel is a highly charged adventure classic that is permeated with the brilliance of Burroughs' characterizations and imaginary environments. The reader can

sense the viciousness of the hairy Sagoths, the maliciousness and power of the Mahars, and the breathtaking beauty of Dian.

At the Earth's Core is a relatively short novel that will not be too overwhelming for the typical seventh or eighth grade student. The vocabulary used by Burroughs, save for some of the scientific appellations he incorporates, is easily grasped and understandable. The book has a prologue and fifteen chapter divisions which make it readily adaptable for nightly assignments should students decide to lay the book aside rather than read it to its conclusion. *At the Earth's Core* was written in 1914 and was adapted on film by American International starring actors Peter Cushing and Doug McClure.

One of the most memorable fictional characters from literature of any century that is easily recognizable by old and young alike is Tarzan, another characterization of Edgar Rice Burroughs. *Tarzan of the Apes* was written in serialization form in 1912 and was first published as a book in 1914. Its success spawned twenty-three additional Tarzan novels and countless film adaptations that are currently rerun on commercial television at least on a weekly basis. Although the character of Tarzan is readily known by students today this knowledge is based upon what the students have seen rather than by what they have read. Thus, it is necessary for *Tarzan of the Apes* to be included in this unit as a classic adventure-romance that should be read if only to pay this legendary hero his due respect.

Readers of *Tarzan of the Apes* will discover the novel to be somewhat lengthier than *At the Earth's Core* but no less entertaining or engrossing. I will not attempt to synopsise events here but rather will spend some time reasserting the prominence of the entire series. Aside from the twenty-four novels in the series there have been forty-three different film adaptations of the character to date since Elmo Lincoln starred in a silent version in 1918. Modern film aficionados should take note that *Jaws* and *Rock y* have a considerable gap to close. In addition, the character of Tarzan has been featured in newspaper comics, radio programs, and comic magazines.

Tar z an of the Apes and the entire series will forever be the jewel of Burroughs' achievement. Once again Burroughs creates an imaginary society—a society of apes that has its rules and customs. We see our hero from birth assimilated into this society—very similar and yet quite different from the tribe. We marvel at how Tarzan, the most powerful figure in the jungle, thirsts for knowledge and develops a working vocabulary through the books left in his natural parents' cabin when his mother was brutally attacked by a great ape and his father eventually succumbed to the despair of his jungle abode.

Tarzan of the Apes is indeed a novel of quest rich in the epic tradition. It is a novel of boyhood growing into manhood and a search for an identity that is not easily learned. It is certainly a novel of survival that ranges from purely savage instincts to the more intellectual survival techniques of cunning and deceit. *Tarzan of the Apes* is also a romance and follows in every way the epic tradition of a quest for love as evidenced by Tarzan's infatuation, pursuit, and winning of Jane Parker.

The Land That Time Forgot is the third book I have chosen to incorporate in this unit. It is the shortest of the three works and might more appropriately be termed a novelette as it is the primary part of a trilogy which includes *The People That Time Forgot* and *Out of Time's Abyss* . The book features Bowen Tyler who becomes shipwrecked courtesy of a German torpedo. Bowen rescues a beautiful girl, Lys, from the icy ocean waters and the two of them eventually wind up on the very same German submarine that started their troubles. Through the treachery of crew members the submarine finds itself in the strange land of Caprona that is populated by prehistoric beasts and primitive societies. Lys is captured and Bowen Tyler starts his quest to find her encountering a seemingly endless chain of evolutionary societies.

The Land That Time Forgot is included in this unit for a variety of reasons. First, it is clearly the best written of the three works and many critics feel it is the best writing Burroughs ever achieved.

Secondly, since it is so short and concise, it provides no substantial barrier to the less avid reader in his quest to read literature written in epic tradition. Lastly, the series which *The Land That Time Forgot* begins is a shorter series than the Pellucidar or Tarzan novels and may be read in its entirety quite easily by students who desire to learn what eventually happens on Caprona.

Edgar Rice Burroughs was born in Chicago in 1875. He was a signal failure at a variety of careers until he sold his first novel, *A Princess of Mars* to *All Story Magazine* in 1912. *All-Story Magazine* was one of many “pulp” that entertained readers from the early 1900’s through World War II. These publications featured fantastic escapist literature written in serialized form on very inexpensive paper. Their success was immediate as their acceptance by a young nation of readers not overly interested in great literature attests. Burroughs used the pulps as his literary outlet and became an overwhelming success. Avid readers of the pulps enjoyed his stories beginning with the “Barsoom” series that featured tales which took place on the Martian landscape. He later followed *A Princess of Mars* with *Tarzan of the Apes* and the rest is history.

Burroughs’ success rests in the fact that he was a formula writer who took the same attributes of the epic tradition—violence, quest, and romance—and popularized them in fantastic stories written to entertain a reading public. Burroughs incorporated hideous creatures into his stories which were set in strange locations. His literary talent is that he could paint a fanciful landscape and populate it with an entirely imaginary species of beings as background for his storyline which was a hero faced with a multitude of challenges.

Edgar Rice Burroughs found commercial success as a writer of amazing stories because he could tell a story in an entertaining fashion. Critics agree he was not a great writer by any stretch of the imagination. He was a writer who was—and still is—read by countless millions of readers. Therein lies the success story of Edgar Rice Burroughs. I firmly believe Burroughs belongs in the classroom. He may not be the center of curricular activity, but he certainly can awaken the average reader and entertain if only for a while. My advice to any potential user of this unit is to give ERB a chance—swing on a vine and see where he takes you!

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The adventure-romance stories created by Edgar Rice Burroughs and dispensed to the reading public by the pulps offered many readers an opportunity to forget their personal problems and those of the world. The success of any adventure-romance depends upon how thoroughly the reader is able to escape from his present woes or forget, for a moment, the regularity of everyday routines and immerse himself in another’s adventure albeit imaginary. Devotees of Burroughs have escaped to the jungles of Africa, the depths of Pellucidar, and the prehistoric realm of Caprona over the last seventy years and have returned from these vacations renewed and refreshed and more able to deal with the realistic concerns of their everyday existence.

An important aspect of adventure-romance fiction is the notion of conflict. Conflict generally thrusts the hero of an adventure-romance in a challenge against an antagonist that is either another being, the environment, or the psyche of the hero himself. These challenges, which are often coupled with one another within the tale, create the excitement that is the adventure. Conflict can hardly be seen more clearly than in Burroughs’ works, which offer new challenges to his heroes with the turning of each page.

Today’s middle and high school students are faced with challenges that often become seemingly

insurmountable because of their lack of experience in dealing with them. Oftentimes, a student will ignore a challenge and remain with the uneasy feeling that if ignored the challenge will seemingly disappear. Unfortunately, the challenges of life do not dissipate so readily, and the failure to meet a challenge often spells doom for one who basks in the comfortable, but tenuous refuge that the challenge does not really exist or that it will go away.

One particular important challenge for students to confront is a true assessment of each one's role in society which is often compounded and muddled by the pressures of a peer group. Peer group pressure often inhibits some students in the attainment of goals. As a result a student finds it increasingly difficult to carve out a niche for himself in society where he can flourish and realize his true potential. It is true that many students can and do realize their potential and become contributors to society in meaningful ways. Some students are goal-oriented from a rather early age; others become socially conscious only after a period of extreme disappointment and anti-social behavior. Still others never do reach their potential and speak forlornly about "should haves" and "could haves". In an urban school system these are the students at risk, and their numbers are certainly staggering to a society that is becoming older and in need of new, young, and vibrant contributors.

A major emphasis of this unit will be to discuss the societal challenges highlighted by Burroughs in the primary texts read: *Tarzan of the Apes*, *At the Earth's Core*, and *The Land That Time Forgot*. Their importance in each of these tales is significant as each of the protagonists must find a successful approach in dealing with them. Tarzan faces the challenge of being raised by a society of apes. He knows he is different, and they know he is different. The result is a series of harrowing challenges that bespeak jealousy and pride. Further into the novel a similar situation arises when Tarzan encounters the visitors headed by Professor Parker and highlighted by Jane Parker. Tarzan would appear to have more in common with this societal gathering and yet the disparity between the jungle man and the exploration party conjures up memories in the reader of Tarzan's aforementioned relationship with the apes. The crisis of societal challenges reaches its apex at the conclusion of the novel when a Tarzan that is somewhat modified by society searches out and wins the target of his affection on her maliciously prescribed wedding day.

At the Earth's Core features a more imaginary society in the setting of Pellucidar for David Innes. David's entrance into this strange world is more abrupt than Tarzan's introduction to the societies in his tale. David perseveres and attempts to right the wrongs that to him are apparent in this subterranean world. Nevertheless, as strange and unnatural as the Mahars' cruel domination of Pellucidar may seem, this is a society with customs, rules, and regulations. David sets out to become a reformer in this society but, in order to do so, he must first change the way people think. His challenge is one of defeating complacency; he must combat the blind acceptance of the Mahars by the human slaves of Pellucidar.

Bowen Tyler's societal challenges in *The Land That Time Forgot* present an interesting dilemma for him. Tyler is first faced with the challenge of unifying allies and Germans for the common good on the German U-boat while at sea and later in the land of Caprona. Then Tyler faces an even greater challenge as he proceeds up a very inventive societal ladder of advancement in search of Lys. It is apparent that Burroughs is telling his readers something as Tyler keeps encountering societies that are a bit more advanced than the previous ones and, interestingly enough, that our hero can never seem to retrace his steps.

It is my hope that after in-depth discussions of the various societies presented by Burroughs in the works read, a larger discussion can develop in the classroom concerning the challenges that my students face each day. These discussions will in no way be intended to be prescriptive but will hopefully encourage students to share

various ideas regarding the solving of these problems. There are no guarantees that students will willingly participate in such discussions, as the pressure of an ever-present peer group will be in evidence, but these discussions will be of great value as starting points for students to write a number of papers. Each one of the topics for these papers will be student-centered and will touch upon the various forms of writing that are prescribed in the seventh and eighth grade language arts curriculum.

Sample Activity #1— *The Journal*

The three primary texts for this unit either make mention of or include a form of journal writing within their pages. Journal writing helps seventh and eighth grade students feel more at ease with writing. Students experiencing this unit will partake in journal writing while reading the tales and will continue this activity throughout the year. Students will be encouraged to write within journals thoughts, opinions, and feelings regarding a variety of suggested themes. Directed questions and guides for writing will be of immeasurable assistance to those students who might otherwise panic when asked to make an entry in their journals during the early stages of their compilations. As the school year progresses and students become more accustomed to their individualized writing schema, they will be afforded more opportunities to write several sentences of their own accord rather than to respond to teacher-directed suggestions and inquiries. The journals will be non-threatening in their nature with respect to grading; entries in the journals will be relevant to presence in class.

An integral importance in the students' writing their own journals will be the examination of the role that journal writing plays in Burroughs' works. Journals as a literary vehicle will be studied as a device which can greatly enhance the telling of a tale as evidenced by Burroughs' contributions with the implementation of this device.

Sample Activity #2— *Pellucidar/Caprona*

Reading Edgar Rice Burroughs is an entertaining experience in large part because the author knew how to describe an entirely imaginary locale and populate it with creatures that are so inventive that they remain memorable acquaintances long after the text is put aside. In this activity students will be charged to create their own Pellucidar or Caprona complete with inhabitants. The naming of this imaginary land, the description of its terrain and inhabitants, and the occasion of its discovery will be left entirely to the student's imagination. More advanced students may want to tell an entire tale of adventure featuring themselves as the romantic heroes who are unexpectedly thrust into this strange land of their own invention. Other students would find it sufficient to merely describe location and inhabitants paying particular attention to spatial relationships that are so essential to descriptive writing. In either instance, however, students will be encouraged to be as inventive as possible in their descriptions.

This writing activity would be best served if introduced to the students after all reading selections had been completed. Particular attention should be given to Burroughs' skill at the creation of imaginary places and people. Class discussions concerning what Burroughs accomplishes by his inclusion of a Pellucidar or a Caprona in his tale are of the utmost importance prior to the assignment of this activity.

Sample Activity #3— *The Quest*

This particular activity can be best accomplished either by classroom discussion, student writing, or a combination of the two. In essence this activity is at the heart of the unit since it highlights the quests and challenges of all Burroughs' heroes as an introduction and background to the challenges each student must face on a daily basis. This activity can actually be presented several times to students referring to a wide

variety of quests and challenges that are or should be at the forefront of each student's concern.

One particular quest that each student should explore in this activity is the notion of a career in future years. Career awareness is an ever increasingly important aspect of the seventh and eighth grade curriculum and should be given due consideration in any study of quests and challenges. All of Burroughs' heroes search or work for a goal within his novels. Their perseverance in the face of danger and seemingly insurmountable odds belongs to the same continuum that gives us the epic tradition in literary history. Students will be encouraged to explore career goals and explain as best they can the paths that would lead to the successful attainment of such a goal.

Other activities for class discussion and writing will include such topics as highlighting the most pressing problems the students encounter on a daily basis, detailing their views of the most successful people they have met, and explaining why they admire some people while understanding why they detest others. Hopefully, the students will be able to learn from each other during these discussions and more significantly assess their own relationship within society and their peer group.

I firmly believe that the implementation of this unit either in its entirety or in part will benefit any seventh or eighth grade language arts program. Edgar Rice Burroughs is not a particularly difficult author to read, and the tales he spins are certainly of high interest. Should the user of this unit wish to eliminate some of the reading involved any of the three suggested texts would provide ample fodder for the class discussions and the writing assignments. In any event since all three texts are the first ones in their respective series, there is little doubt that the avid reader will pursue other titles in the same series.

The length of time I plan to set aside for this unit will be from six to eight weeks. This timespan should allow for the reading of all three novels and for the writing assignments with the exception, of course, of the journals. Nightly reading assignments will guide the students and keep the unit on schedule. Class discussions should commence only after a considerable amount of the reading has been accomplished.

SOME VINES TO SWING ON . . .

Tarzan Stories

Tarzan of the Apes

The Return of Tarzan

The Beasts of Tarzan

The Son of Tarzan

Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar

Jungle Tales of Tarzan

Tarzan the Untamed

Tarzan the Terrible

Tarzan and the Golden Lion

Tarzan and the Ant Men

Tarzan Lord of the Jungle

Tarzan and the Lost Empire

Tarzan at the Earth's Core

Tarzan the Invincible

Tarzan Triumphant

Tarzan and the City of Gold

Tarzan and the Lion Man

Tarzan and the Leopard Men

Tarzan's Quest

Tarzan and the Forbidden City

Tarzan the Magnificent

Tarzan and the Foreign Legion

Tarzan and the Madman

Tarzan and the Castaways

Pellucidar Stories

At the Earth's Core

Pellucidar

Tanar of Pellucidar

Back to the Stone Age Land of Terror

Savage Pellucidar

Caprona Stories

The Land That Time Forgot

The People That Time Forgot

Out of Time's Abyss

ADDITIONAL VINES . . .

Mars Stories

A Princess of Mars

The Gods of Mars

The Warlord of Mars

Thuvia , Maid of Mars

The Chessmen of Mars

The Mastermind of Mars

A Fighting Man of Mars

Swords of Mars

Synthetic Men of Mars

Llana of Gathol

John Carter of Mars

Venus Stories

Pirates of Venus

Lost on Venus

Carson of Venus

Escape on Venus

The Wizard of Venus

Miscellaneous Stories

Apache Devil

Beyond the Farthest Star

I Am a Barbarian

Pirate Blood

The Bandit of Hell's Bend

The Cave Girl

The Deputy Sheriff of Commanche County

The Efficiency Expert

The Eternal Lover

The Girl from Farris's

The Girl from Hollywood

The Jungle Girl

The Lad and the Lion

The Mad King

The Monster Men

The Moon Maid

The Moon Men

The Mucker

The Oakdale Affair and the Rider

The Outlaw of Torn

The Red Hawk

The Resurrection of Jimber-Jaw

The War Chief

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An interesting account that brings Lord Greystoke to life.

Holtsmark, Erling B. *Edgar Rice Burroughs* . Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Current and extensive research dealing with Burroughs.

Porges, Irwin. *Edgar Rice Burroughs : The Man Who Created Tarzan* . Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975.

A very comprehensive view of Burroughs.

Reynolds, William J. "Tarzan, Lord Greystoke." *TWA Ambassador* 17, no. 4 (April, 1984): 61-67.

The impetus for this unit that made entertaining reading at 40,000 feet. Article highlights the film adaptations of Tarzan. Light and interesting article.

Scholes, Robert and Rabkin, Eric S. *Science Fiction : History , Science , Vision* . New York: Oxford University

Press, 1977.

Good background reading on the genre that made Burroughs a success.

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