

Bellarmino University

ScholarWorks@Bellarmino

Undergraduate Theses

Undergraduate Works

4-26-2020

Dissecting the Man of Steel: The Evolution of Superman as a Reflection of American Society

Marie Gould
gould_m68@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bellarmino.edu/ugrad_theses

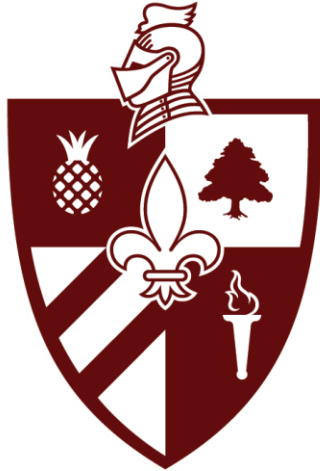


Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, Modern Literature Commons, Political History Commons, Social History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

Gould, Marie, "Dissecting the Man of Steel: The Evolution of Superman as a Reflection of American Society" (2020). *Undergraduate Theses*. 45.
https://scholarworks.bellarmino.edu/ugrad_theses/45

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Works at ScholarWorks@Bellarmino. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@Bellarmino. For more information, please contact jstemmer@bellarmino.edu, kpeers@bellarmino.edu.



BELLARMINE
UNIVERSITY
IN VERITATIS AMORE

Dissecting the Man of Steel:

The Evolution of Superman as a Reflection of American Society

by

Marie Gould

Advisor:

Dr. Aaron Hoffman

Readers:

Dr. Casey Baugher

Dr. Kathryn West

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	2
Objectives	4
Methodology	4
Chapter 1: Creation Years (1938-1939)	6
Chapter 2: World War II (1941-1945)	12
Chapter 3: The 50s and 60s (1950-1969)	17
Chapter 4: The 70s and 80s (1970-1989)	22
Chapter 5: The 90s and 2000s (1990-2010)	27
Conclusion	31
Bibliography	33

Abstract

Since his debut during the Great Depression in 1938, Superman has become an American cultural icon. His symbol is not only known throughout the nation, but the world as well. Despite this, many consider Superman to be irrelevant and unrelatable to reality because he is written as an outrageously overpowered being with “boy scout” morals. However, he has not always been written this way. This research seeks to uncover the connections between Superman’s various narratives and the changing social and political ideas of American Society throughout history. Specifically, the objective of this study is to establish whether Superman has changed and whether these changes reflect certain attitudes within a given era of American history. In order to achieve these goals, I look at patterns in Superman’s interactions with his environment in the *Action Comics* series, such as his voiced views, actions, and his relationships with friends, family, and villains. Comic issues are studied based on these five time periods: Creation Years (1938-1939), World War II (1941-1945), the 50s and 60s (1950-1969), the 70s and 80s (1970-1989), and lastly, the 90s and 2000s (1990-2010). The findings from this study concluded that Superman indeed has changed based on the time period he was written in and in a way that represented the evolving beliefs of American Society. This study serves as evidence for comic books to be legitimized as a relevant media in academic literature, as they can play the role as metaphors for real-life issues that can be taught in a creative and provoking manner.

Introduction

With the massive resurgence in the popularity of superheroes within pop culture, comic books are being slowly integrated into academic literature. Comic books in its simplest definition are a type of literature form that focuses mainly on developing its storytelling through art panels

and speech bubbles. In previous decades, the belief that they were purely for childhood enjoyment had caused them to be seriously undervalued as a medium in academic studies, to the point where they must elevate themselves to become “graphic novels” in order to be given legitimate recognition. But, as many are beginning to discover through similar research, there is much more to comics than the surface-level storyline of good versus evil. In fact, they often serve as a visual reflection of the society in which they were written. One could say that comics are today’s modern mythology, with messages and lessons about society and politics. In their book *What is a Superhero?*, clinical psychologist Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan, the founder of the Institute for Comics Studies, argued that real-life social tensions were expressed through the narrative of comics as a “metaphorical way of discussing [subjects such as] immigration, Americanization, American identity, changing concepts of race and gender, capitalism, and modernism” (Rosenberg xviii). As reflections of the concerns of their decades, comics reveal much to the reader about that society’s values and struggles, if one chooses to dive deep enough into the narrative. What one may see as an over-the-top, monologuing supervillain and a charismatic, strong-willed superhero could also be the author’s representation of challenging ideas of power and politics that were threatening at the time.

The creation of superheroes as a comic book genre began with the creation of Superman in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Since then, he has retained his title as the “champion of the oppressed” and has risen to become one of the most recognized cultural icons in the world to this day. But his popularity has slowly declined, due to readers believing that his outlandish powers and black-and-white morality make him boring and unrelatable to the conflicts and ideas of reality. However, Superman as we know him now may not always have been the same, both in his personality and in his political views. As one of the first superheroes on the comic book

scene, Superman has had the longest run in multiple comic book series. Therefore, having experienced many events in history and having been written by authors affected by these changing times, it is plausible to think that Superman's identity and narrative may have been influenced by the varying beliefs American Society went through.

Objectives

This study has been crafted to discover the answers to these two research questions:

- Does Superman's narrative in comics change based on the time period in which it was written?
- If so, do these shifts in his writing reflect the evolving attitudes and beliefs of American Society throughout history since the Great Depression?

Thus, the objective of this study is not only to determine whether Superman has changed over time, but to connect these changes to the political and social attitudes of a given era in a relevant manner. In doing so, this research will build off of any previous research that has been conducted related to this subject.

Methodology

This study will be orchestrated using the qualitative approach. Though it may be mentioned, the focus of this project is the narrative content of Superman's comics, not their overall sales. Nor are we paying attention to the details of comic book art style. Instead of movies or cartoons, the medium being studied here will only be comic books, specifically Superman's *Action Comics* run, which from 1938 to 2010 consists of over 930 issues. *Action Comics* is the series Superman made his debut in, and it releases an issue monthly, making it a

consistent and longstanding media to detect visible change in. What will be analyzed in these issues are patterns in Superman's interactions with his environment. These interactions include: what Superman explicitly says he believes in, his actions, and his relationships with other characters (friends, family, villains, love interests, etc.). Not all comics read and analyzed are used in this paper to avoid redundancy.

The research conducted in this study will use the work of comic book enthusiast and WWII historian Jeffery K. Johnson's exploration of superheroes and society *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society* as a framework. By utilizing his timeline and the connections uncovered in his research, I will build off his work in order to draw similar conclusions as they apply to Superman. The difference between the analysis made in his book and this study is that Johnson briefly studies the influence of American society shown in the comic book narratives of multiple superheroes both Marvel and DC, while I will focus on the representation of Superman specifically. Johnson also chooses to analyze the popular storylines of comic book culture, such as *Identity Crisis* or *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. Instead, this study will analyze the subtlety of the more run-of-the-mill Superman comics.

In chapter by chapter structure, the timelines in which Superman's comics will be studied are as follows:

1. Creation Years (1938-1939)
2. World War II (1941-1945)
3. The 50s and 60s (1950-1969)*
4. The 70s and 80s (1970-1989)*
5. The 90s and 2000s (1990-2010)*

*The grouping of these three periods will be explained within their respective chapters.

Chapter One

Creation Years (1938-1939): Superman, Hero of the Great Depression

The History

In the year of Superman's creation, the Great Depression was in full swing. Millions were left poor and disadvantaged from unemployment and blows to their businesses. Many were losing faith in the government as time and time again attempts to remedy this economic disaster failed. It was a time of great helplessness for Americans, where they were in desperate need for someone, *anyone*, to pull them through. This was the world that Superman creators Jerry Sieglar and Joe Shuster lived in, and this was the world that Superman would be birthed into. That said, readers of Superman's modern version might be surprised to see that early villains and problems as well as Superman's behavior is vastly different from what they see today. As the dubbed "champion of the oppressed", Superman in his initial years focused on domestic issues that plagued the underprivileged citizens of Metropolis as a result. These troubles ranged from reckless drivers to the vicious dealings of corrupt politicians and companies. At the time, these types of wrongdoings were what most American citizens were concerned about in the 1930s. In 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt's second presidential campaign centered on taxing and regulating the wealthy and big business, who had been profiting from the little protections their workers had at the time before the New Deal (Encyclopaedia Britannica). This anti-big business theme and support for "the little man" became popular for the time as unions and the disadvantaged rallied behind the idea. Superman embodied these sentiments as what Jeffrey K. Johnson calls the "New Deal Avenger" in his creation years by taking multiple stands against corrupt businesses and wrongdoing hoodlums.

The Comics

Superman's movement against big business began with *Action Comics #3*, which was published in August of 1938. The issue opens with Superman intervening on a catastrophe: a mine collapse, with a miner trapped underneath. The rescue crew had been sent in, but had not been heard from. Superman discovers that they had all passed out from poisonous gas. Superman is able to rescue everyone, but the miner is crippled for life. When interviewed by Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, the miner reveals that miners have been working in unsafe conditions of the mine for months. The boss of the mining company had disregarded their complaints for better safety, taking advantage of their need for money to pay bills and feed their families in exchange for their life and labor. When Kent visits the boss, he claims it was the miner's own fault that he found himself in the collapse and will pay off some of his bills to keep him quiet. When asked about mine repairs, he replies with "there are no safety hazards in my mine...But if there were, what of it? I'm a businessman, not a humanitarian" (*Action Comics #3*, 5). This mentality experienced by the boss is similar to that of many rich business owners at the time. The value of money and power is put above the safety of human lives when it comes to the growth of business, which is a seemingly recurring theme of these first few issues. This continues to put big businesses and businessmen in a crooked light, reinforcing the idea that the rise of big businesses and monopolies are to be avoided. Later that night, the boss throws a party and takes his rich and high-end partygoers to the mines. Amongst them, Superman decides to show the boss just how dangerous the conditions in the mines are for his workers, and causes another collapse on top of them. They experience the uncertainty of whether they will be found and make it out alive, what the miner and the rescue crew had been through just pages earlier. The desperation to survive makes the boss realize just how dangerous it is in his mines when he discovers that all the safety

devices were malfunctioning. As he and his partygoers attempt to dig themselves out, the boss breaks down, stating that he had no idea this was what it was actually like for his workers. After his exclamation that if he lives, he will do better for them, Superman steps in to save him after having proved his point. At the end of the issue, the owner of the mine boasts to Clark Kent that he now has the safest mine in the country and his workers are being treated a lot better. It took going through the harsh conditions they were perpetuating to make corrupt businessmen want to improve those conditions or remove them completely. These were the types of conditions the poor citizens of America were experiencing beyond the pages. They struggled to work in dangerous conditions that could potentially prove fatal just for the chance to obtain money to take care of their families. As seen in these issues, businesses were taking advantage of that desperation, and there was a need for someone to step in and do something about it. Superman was written into the narrative to fill that position.

Superman encounters his first super-villain in *Action Comics #13*. The story begins with Superman's investigation of a corrupt taxi business. The organization uses threats and thugs to victimize other small independent taxi companies who refuse to join them or stop their business altogether. To take this group down a peg, Superman saves an independent company owner and smashes the taxis belonging to the organization. In his pursuit of the head of this organization, Superman meets Ultra-Humanite, who claims to be as strong in brains as he is in brawn. Modern readers might be surprised to see that this villain, besides being intelligent, is a normal human. He is not an extraterrestrial being, or a bearer of superpowers. He is a simple manipulator, one with corrupt and powerful friends in high places. Ultra-Humanite reveals that he is the head of a large ring of "evil enterprises" like the League and though the businessmen may seem to hold the power, they are actually his henchmen. Seeking world domination through the growth of these

enterprises, Ultra-Humanite serves as a challenge and foil to Superman's beliefs against big businesses. He represents everything that Superman is not in terms of what drives him and what he stands for, and his escape only ensures that he and Superman, as well as their ideas, will continue to come into conflict with each other. Ultra-Humanite's escape can also be theorized as a representation to how the issue of big business will never truly be solved, with the threat of businesses becoming too strong in the future always a possibility.

In the final comic of 1939, *Action Comics #19*, a purple plague spreads throughout the city of Metropolis. The plague would suffocate its victims slowly, causing them to turn purple. Superman comes to find that Ultra-Humanite had created the plague in order to start the world over and create a new race. In the end, Superman defeats Ultra-Humanite and helps a doctor come up with the antidote, saving hundreds. However, Ultra-Humanite's idea of cleansing the city in favor of creating the perfect race is almost too familiar. Beyond the pages, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis from the end of 1939 into the year 1940 had spread concentration camps across Germany, Poland, and Austria, like Ultra-Humanite's purple plague, with the intent of "cleansing" Jews and other minority groups to promote the survival of the Aryan race, who he saw as the perfect race, what Ultra-Humanite was attempting to create.

These two issues in particular further demonstrates the dual purpose of villains within the superhero genre. Ultra-Humanite on the surface level as Superman's villain proves him to be just a "bad guy" out for world domination, but underneath, he is set up as a consistent foil to Superman's values. Ultra-Humanite advocated for pro-business measures and mimicked the forsaking of minorities in favor of the perfect race. And in contrast, Superman rallied for anti-business sentiments and the protection of all minorities and the oppressed.

The Discussion

Superman was a response to the morality and troubles of the 1930s. As the “champion of the oppressed”, Superman represented the will and voice of the American people. He was the visual manifestation of the marginalized overcoming their oppressors, and in his transformation from Clark Kent to Superman, of little guys rising to make something of themselves and create change in their society. He embodied justice for all, no matter the cost. As attitudes of the American people shifted in the 1930s towards the promotion of smaller business and the regulation of the larger ones, Superman rose to meet these issues head on. With Superman’s addition to the comic book world, DC’s *Action Comics* saw a massive increase in sales. Jeffrey K. Johnson theorizes that this was due to readers finding some connection with Superman; that he was fulfilling the desires they wanted to see in the world at the time (Johnson, 12). There is merit to this theory, as we see Superman tackling issues that his creators saw were problems that the Great Depression had created for America. Alongside other superheroes, Superman’s value at this point in time was that he seemed to provide a solution for these problems, even if he was a fictional one. In fact, Johnson theorizes that Superman and Batman’s creations both spawned out of two separate ideas to what American Society needed to overcome the Great Depression (Johnson, 24). With Superman, it was the notion that America needed something or *someone* that acted as an outside, powerful force that could help fix their problems. And with Batman, it was a more realistic approach that the rich and powerful American should step in. At this time, they were both vigilantes that could not be held back by any law or politician wishing to take advantage in this troublesome time.

In this chapter alone it is already apparent that how Superman was originally written is certainly different than how he is now. His popular slogan of “truth, justice, and the American

way” is not mentioned once in these beginning issues, nor does he claim to want anything more than to protect people in a way he sees fit. He is a vigilante in every sense: not only does he act above the law because of his distrust in the government, he actually uses aggressive means to combat the equally aggressive acts towards the poor and innocent. And unlike the current Superman, this one killed without batting an eye, from throwing goons out of third story windows onto the pavement to dropping one off his shoulder mid-flight. It may seem harsh to modern readers considering how normal these villains were. But that was the point. These villains were normal criminals that one would see in their average day to day life, and they were seen as a great threat. Furthermore, Superman also seemed to hold very isolationist views. Never during these beginning issues did he help out foreign nations or extra-terrestrial planets and beings. His focus was only on the American people and trying to prevent them from getting involved in wars and problems outside. However, this would change at the start of World War II, as Superman would alter himself to be patriotic and less radical in order to meet the new and evolving sentiments and attitudes of the people once more.

Chapter Two:

World War II (1941-1945): Superman the Patriot

The History

On December 7th 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor signified the turning point of America's place in the war. Credited by FDR as the "date which will live on in infamy", it united the people of America in their decision to join the second World War on the side of the Allies (TIME). Congress approved the declaration of war the very next day, and in the years that followed, media of all kinds became dedicated to war propaganda, including comics books. Up until then, the war had been raging in Europe for two years since the German invasion of Poland in 1939. And during those two years, while America had faith in their European allies, the war was in the back of their minds. Pearl Harbor brought the war to the forefront and became the rallying symbol of the American cause. As war propaganda, many comics promoted this mentality to encourage the loyalty and determination of the American people to their country and the war effort. As such, the superheroes of these comics were pictured going head-to-head against America's enemies, from Hitler and his Nazis, to the Japanese, and even to Joseph Stalin. Superman was no different.

The Comics

Action Comics #43 was published in the days following the attack on Pearl Harbor. While the story was typical in nature, with Superman investigating a suspicious incident regarding plane crashes, it is the first in this series to feature the purchase of defense stamps. At the end of each comic, "Superman" usually addresses a letter to his readers, the Supermen of America. In this particular letter, Superman asks his readers to buy defense stamps to help national defense

following Pearl Harbor. He encouraged both children and their parents to spend as much as twenty-five cents for the cause, stating “Let’s put our quarters and dollars to work for Uncle Sam!”. From here on out, many images and storylines of Superman showcased patriotism and acted as a spokesperson of the government to remind the American people to be obedient.

In January of 1942, *Action Comics #44* featured the first cover in the series of Superman fighting Nazis. In the past years, America was relatively neutral, so when Superman was pictured fighting soldiers, they were unidentifiable. But with America now directly involved, the soldiers displayed the red armband with the swastika. Similar to the previous letter at the end of *#43*, Superman once again encourages kids to buy war bonds. What is different in this letter is that he also addresses the “gloom” and war in Europe and uses it to tell readers to be loyal to all institutions in their country, such as school, community, and religious teachings, and do their part so America rises victorious.

Action Comics #47’s section dedicated to these Supermen of America was a perfect example of the type of wartime propaganda comics were providing at the time. Out of all the letters thus far, this one was the most persuasive. It encouraged young people to volunteer for the Red Cross or as Junior Air Raid Wardens by convincing them that they could be a real service to the country. Not only did it tell them to be proud to be an American, it warned them not to listen to anyone who voiced any doubts about America’s place in the war and to keep information about the war that they found out to themselves, fearful that hidden enemies would hear. It reminded them to remember Pearl Harbor, and to embody the motto: “strength, courage, and justice.” This encompassed the sentimentalities of American society during World War II. WWII propaganda conditioned Americans to subject those who did not favor the war with a critical and suspicious eye, as well as be alert for enemies who could bring down their nation, all under the

guise that they were acting in the best way for the success of America. To further inspire young people to take up the cause, comic mini-stories of real-life soldiers began to appear after the Superman comic storyline, under the title “Supermen of the U.S. Army”. They told the experiences of soldiers who had died protecting the country as well as those still fighting who pulled off fantastic feats. This persuaded readers to not let these soldiers die in vain, and continue to support the war effort. It also implied that they could become like Superman by becoming a soldier who, like Superman, could save their country and the world.

Not all of Superman’s stories could be about the doom and gloom of war, as readers still wanted to enjoy an experience that took them away from that, but patriotic images of Superman continued to appear. Even if the story was of something as silly as Superman in fairytales, the covers depicted Superman performing heroic acts: fighting soldiers with flamethrowers, ripping apart Nazi U-boats and tanks, and delivering aid to allied soldiers. Some stories held references to issues being fought overseas, such as in *Action Comics #52*, where Superman overcomes a villain named the Emperor of America, who attempts to turn America into a dictatorship. It represented the fear of the American people of the era of tyranny that could happen if the war was lost. However, Superman was also known to take on Nazis directly, whether it be a hypothetical occurrence of defeating Hitler himself or taking on an army of tanks and soldiers in the name of democracy.

In *Action Comics #62*, Superman finds himself face to face with a Nazi who has taken a fishing crew (as well as Lois Lane) captive after they had unknowingly saved the Nazi from a lifeboat. The Nazi character here is written quite dramatically, like a caricature, with an over-the-top accent and eccentric personality. He states to Lois and the crew that because of their caring nature, that democracies have weak sentimentalities and that America will all be working under

Hitler once the war is won, to which Lois responds that as Americans, they would rather die than betray their country. This issue villainized Nazis in this way to show the American people just what type of people they are fighting against. Through Lois' response, they are also promoting the idea that dying for your country is more valuable than betraying it and saving your life. When Superman comes to save them, he handles the Nazi and his goons with disgust. He subtly references his own non-human origin and his Jewish creators by calling himself non-Aryan and questioning how they would know what a real human is. This shows Superman not only positioning himself as against these villains of humanity, who reference themselves as the real supermen, but as a defender and member of the oppressed that he is said to be. The ending scene of this issue soothes the fear of the American people that there may come a day where no one will be able to fight for them. The declaration that "as long as evil is not dead, but only sleeping, there'll always be Superman" indicates that no matter what the country faces, there will always be heroes looking out for them, whether it be their own soldiers, or Superman himself (*Action Comics #62*, 12).

The Discussion

In order to combat the growing fears that followed the second World War, Superman became more aligned with the American cause. Like Superman, other "superheroes with powerful social voices silenced themselves for the greater good" (Johnson, 47). Compared to his original version, WWII Superman was much less violent. He focused more on investigation and interrogation and less on brute force alone to save the day. A possible reason for this is because the world itself was becoming more violent because of the war, the writers decided to offset the brutal images and stories of war that many Americans were seeing. The result of these

circumstances led to Superman becoming what Jeffrey K. Johnson called a “Super-Patriot”. Using his position as a beloved superhero, Superman serves as a propaganda tool for the American government and the war effort. He preached undying nationalism and loyalty to the war cause, with no excuse for doubt and negative stances. This was also an interesting time where we see comics influencing the real world rather than the other way around. With the introduction of war bonds, comics assisted in the cause by putting stamps on their covers. Children and teenagers would see this stamp and encourage their parents to purchase war bonds so that they could fight for the cause alongside their favorite superhero.

Chapter Three

The 50s and 60s: Superman and the Domestic Life

The History

After World War II had ended, there was an American desire for life to return to normal, without the threat of bombs and death. Thus, a culture of conformity and structure was born. The average 50s American's life mostly revolved around two things: the nuclear family and work. There was also an emphasis on obeying the law and social norms. Alternatively, because of the creation of the atomic bomb and the start of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, this era saw paranoia like no other under the constant threat of nuclear warfare and Russian spies. This rivalry between the two nations allowed for not only for American nationalism, but this push for conformity and obedience to continue to seep through the media, with comics once again not an exception. In the comics scene, these sentimentalities manifested in the Comics Code Authority (CCA). Born out of a Senate hearing that was investigating how comics could affect an adolescent's behavior, the Code was established to set rules for comic book writers and artists to follow (Johnson, 80). Some of these guidelines prohibited the use of gore and bloodshed as well as profanity, forbid scenes concerning vampires and zombies, but also enforced required punishments for all villains and evildoers (meaning they could never get away with a crime), respect for parents, and that "the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage". (Johnson, 81). This Code was put in place so that readers would not be influenced to break the social norms.

But as time proved, that did not stop the rise of the counterculture of the 1960s. With the assassination of President Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights Movement, the 60s presented a time of great tension in America that would shake cultural foundations. The

conformity and aesthetic of the 1950s served almost as a security blanket for the WWII generation, allowing them to raise their children without the fear they had faced (Johnson, 87). Thus, a disconnect between the generations formed. Unlike their parents, Baby Boomers focused on individual needs and rights rather than conformity and stability. It was an end of conservatism and repression as the counterculture promoted drugs, peace, and love. However, these sentiments would not find their way into Superman's narratives.

The Comics

During the 1950s, comic storylines shifted to focus primarily on the domestic life of the superheroes, such as their background stories and their relationships with family and friends. For example, *Action Comics #143* "Bride of Superman", released in April of 1950, starts off with calling Superman the "most eligible bachelor" in the beginning introduction. In this story, Lois Lane is stunned and distraught to find that Superman is engaged to a mysterious woman in a veiled hat named Nikki Larue. In a fit of jealousy, Lois makes attempts to get Superman to deny his engagement to Nikki and say that he loves her instead, even going so far as to deliberately get herself kidnapped and held hostage. Little does she know, Nikki and Superman are actually partners in scientific research. As Nikki is experimenting with a nuclear device called cyclotron, something goes wrong. Distressed, Nikki claims that if it explodes it will wipe out the entire world. Luckily, Superman is there to snuff out the atomic explosion. It is a moment that makes apparent the great fear in the 50s of a nuclear attack. Eventually, a brokenhearted Lois Lane eventually finds them, having been given a tip from two "foreigners" (who are revealed earlier in the story to be the villains). Lois ends up leading the villains straight to them, where it is further discovered that Nikki is actually a world-famous atomic scientist hired by the American government to perform atomic experiments. Superman was helping her by showcasing himself

as her sweetheart in order to guard her from spies. If it were not for Superman's thwarting the villains, Lois' jealousy would have ruined everything. In stories to follow, this is a recurring theme as multiple women in Superman's life attempt to scheme him into marriage.

In "The Courtship on Krypton" story of *Action Comics #149*, Lois Lane finds a meteor containing films of Superman's parents' relationship, such as first dates and, most importantly to this story, how Superman's mother got his father to marry her. Lois thinks that if she does what his mother did, then Superman would want to marry her too (which ends up not being the case). However, what is striking about this particular issue is what it shows Superman's mother doing. In order to win her future husband's heart, Superman's mother cooks and cleans for him. For the 1950s, this was typical domestic womanly duties at the time, and these images of Lois and the mother, as well as Superman and his father always leaving for "work", subtly enforce the separate domestic and political spheres of men and women that were still prevalent at this time. This focus on home and family, key values of the 1950s, would continue as comic stories would tell about how Clark Kent became a reporter, his relationship with his Aunt Minerva, his attempt to move to a house in the suburbs, and his role as surrogate father with the expansion of his "Super-Family" as Supergirl, Super-Baby, and Superman, Jr. (and even Super-pets!) made their appearances. Supergirl, also known as Superman's cousin Kara Zor-El is the only character that not only is directly related to Superman but also ends up being a recurring character in the continuity. However, Super-Baby and Superman, Jr. come from stories in this period where young boys somehow gain powers similar to Superman and he assumes the role as their guardian. These scenarios are temporary however, as they eventually lose their powers and go back to their real families, ultimately signifying themselves as mirrors into what it would be like if Superman was a father and lived the domestic life.

Reflecting the fears of 1950s society, *Action Comics #188* story “Spectral Superman” has our superhero become contaminated with radioactive nuclear energy in a nuclear project gone wrong. While he finds a way to countershock this reaction, the visible terror and hysteria that people of the 50s harbored are expressed as they force him into exile. Another real-life reference in this story is the siren that the citizens of Metropolis hear, alerting them to the danger of radioactive danger. In the 1950s, the government designated sirens that would tell American citizens to either evacuate or take shelter from air raids and nuclear bombs. While the 1950s hailed as a time of peace and stability, there was still deep-seated paranoia that it would not last for long.

Superman’s stories in the 1960s would continue to follow the same formula as the 1950s comics with their emphasis on conservative ideas. This era saw the introduction of sillier, “what-if” narratives that promoted family friendly expectations of both the Comics Code and the previous decade. The downfall of this trend was that these stories failed to resonate with the counterculture youth of the 60s, forcing DC and Superman’s sales to plummet and Marvel to rise with their new heroes, such as Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four, who were more relatable (Johnson, 89). Unlike in the past decades, Superman no longer came to reflect cutting edge culture, and seemed to be stuck in place in terms of where his story was going.

The Discussion

As American society recovered from World War II, so did their superheroes in order to provide the comfort and conformity they needed. Once again sacrificing his social voice, Superman became a model citizen, encouraging readers to respect authority and family values while also maintaining the role and expectations of manhood. Superman in this manner became “boring” as society also became boring. There was no need for the social change that he had

been fighting for in the past, and now that he was so powerful, even able to counteract the effects of Kryptonite, he became less astounding. There was less focus on engaging internal and external conflict and more on his domestic life with his family, friends, and romantic interests. What is notable in these narratives, as Johnson also notes, is the dynamic of the nuclear family and the power balance of Superman's relationships, specifically the behavior of Lois Lane. In comparison to her 1938 counterpart, she transformed from independent reporter to Superman's lovelorn, and almost borderline obsessive, "girlfriend". Girlfriend is in quotes here because despite all her efforts, Superman never makes the relationship official, though it is clear that something is there. In this relationship, Lois is pushed into the submissive, homebody type seen in the 1950s. And every time she goes outside of that domain in order to pursue Superman, she ends up getting everyone involved in trouble and put in danger. Overall, Superman's relationship with the women in his life and his family demonstrate the 1950s dynamic. This persisting emphasis on these conservative values did not sit well with the counterculture in the 1960s. As Johnson contends, the difference between the types of stories Marvel and DC were putting out at the time in a way represented the tension within the generation gap. DC's heroes, like Superman, reflected the perfect, blindly obedient citizen, something they were fighting against. However, Marvel's characters became trendier and were more in touch with the counterculture. Unlike the decades leading up to this point, the 60s are significant in that Superman's square personality and stale narrative prove that he did not change to reflect American Society.

Chapter Four **The 70s and 80s: The Conservative Superman**

The History

The 1970s saw American society reeling from the effects of the 60s counterculture. It was an almost transitional period where many citizens were rethinking their beliefs and morals. With shifts and changes in comic book writers and values, it was becoming more apparent that the Comics Code was outdated in an almost ridiculous way. For the first time since its creation in 1954, the Code was revised in 1971 to be morally flexible, allowing for drug and alcohol use as well as the portrayal of politicians as corrupt or evil (Johnson, 111). Tensions with the government still remained from the previous decade as the 70s experienced Nixon's Watergate scandal, the tail end of the Vietnam War, and the Kent State shootings. Johnson describes this period as a "malaise", a term coined by President Jimmy Carter that according to the Oxford Dictionary, means a "general feeling of discomfort, illness, or uneasiness whose exact cause is difficult to identify". It was a tough time for Americans, who were not only experiencing internal conflict concerning their values, but also external with the increasingly poor economic conditions beginning to plague them into the 1980s.

With his "America-first" mentality and strong anti-communist rhetoric, newly elected President Ronald Reagan promised the restoration of American glory and economy under his administration. Under his presidency, American culture shifted to focus more on the best interests as individuals in a manner that Johnson says centered on "selfishness as contribution to the greater good and personal overindulgence as benefitting society" (Johnson, 125). Reagan also enacted policies that would encourage the free market. What followed was a renewal of American conservatism and nationalism as well as an intense approval of Reagan as the man that

“made America great” in a way that made him look like a real-life superhero, even within the comic book realm as superheroes like Superman began to reflect this sentiment.

The Comics

The first of the 1970s stories involves an imaginary story in *Action Comics* #396 of a Superman that has been reduced to a panhandler, or beggar. This Superman has been stripped of his powers, rendering him aged and in a wheelchair. Not only this, but the world has moved on without him. Technology has progressed in such a way that they can save themselves without the help of Superman. When the people find out that this panhandler is Superman, they harass and mock him, wondering what had happened to him. Even though he gains his powers back in the next issue, he leaves earth to find a world that needs him. This uncertainty with the possibility of no longer needing Superman (who at the time represented more traditional values) resembles the metaphorically crippling of society at the time as they struggled to resolve the moral conflicts they were experiencing.

Action Comics #398 and #419 are significant for its pop culture references. In #398, a rock band called the Astronauts is all the rage amongst the youth. The raving of the crowd and the band’s listeners resemble the effect that the Beatles had on their fans. Superman notices something suspicious as the fans act as if they are controlled. Later, it is revealed that the manager of the band was using rock music as a mind control tool for his devious scheme. Rock concerts were becoming a big thing in the 70s, to the point where conservative Americans say them as dangerous and even satanic, and this comic references the craze in a creative manner. #419 starts with Clark Kent reporting from a NASA space shuttle. He is witnessing the positioning of the Large Space Telescope (LST) into orbit over Metropolis. This Telescope serves as the focus of the story as Superman discovers that the Telescope collected cosmic dust

that reflected onto the Earth around Metropolis, causing the ground to erupt in white bubbles. This is representative of the U.S.'s continued fascination in space missions in the 70s.

Despite the social malaise, the fear of communist infiltration is still present as shown in *Action Comics #446*'s "Clark Kent Calling Superman...Clark Kent Calling Superman!". In this story, communist spies are trying to find out how Clark Kent is able to summon and communicate with Superman, seeking to have that power so they can control him. Clark continues to foil their communist plans, as well as fooling Lois Lane. However, it is later implied that one of their closest associates, Lola Barnett, who works for a broadcasting agency, is secretly working with the other Russian agents. As with other media, this comic book demonstrates the extent of the paranoia that Americans had during the Cold War. These spies could be easily identifiable, or one of your closest friends that you have known for years.

Though it is not a part of the Superman *Action Comics* series, it is hard to talk about Superman in the 1980s without mentioning his role in Frank Miller's 1986 *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Superman in this comic is vastly different from his previous versions. This Superman answers blindly to the authority of Ronald Reagan and the American government. By being a tool of the state, he believes he is still able to save lives, though it becomes clear that the actions that the government asks of him do have harmful side effects. He is even willing to bring in Batman, his long-time friend and crime partner, as a criminal and traitor to the government for opposing their operations. In a way, this story shows a possibility for how superheroes would be treated if they existed in real life, as Superman was used as a deterrent against America's opposition and was practically a slave to his political superiors. Another interesting aspect of this comic to note is how different Superman is physically represented. His figure is large and intimidating, as his frame overtakes most of the characters he shares panels with. This plays into

his more horrifying features as the story goes on. When he diverts a Soviet missile from its intended target, he shrivels up from the radiation, temporarily making him look like a ghastly zombie. In another, as he is on another mission for the government, he is pictured as a dark silhouette with red eyes and sharp teeth. Ultimately in this story, Superman, once a force for good and the protection of the oppressed, is twisted to serve selfish and chaotic purposes.

Former president Ronald Reagan also makes an appearance in this comic. Whenever he enters a scene, he is dressed in the colors of the American flag: a blue suit with white stars and a red tie. His first scene features him giving a televised speech on the Soviet meddling on the small South American island of Corto Maltese, a situation similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis. In his speech, he frames his words to promote American nationalism and propaganda necessary for citizens to believe in the cause. He emphasizes that the American troops in combat with the Soviets are heroic ones, that they are standing up for the cause of freedom, and convinces the viewers that people of Corto Maltese want the American troops there to protect them.

The Discussion

As American Society went through changes during these decades, so did Superman as his writers tried to find where he stood culturally amongst his readers. Because he still retained some of the conservative aspects of the 60s, Superman was floundering to fit in with this new form of conservatism that was on the rise. Superman, and even his villains, in the 1980s had become more aggressive and militaristic, reflecting the sentiment of the time period that brute, military force, or the threat of it, was the best way to stop threats from America's enemies. Another interesting thing to note here that Johnson also recognizes is the absence of Superman's alien family or mention of his alien origin. The focus tends to be more on his American adoptive parents, and how he was raised to be more American than alien. This not only showcased a

strong devotion and nationalism towards the United States, but strengthened his identity as an American cultural icon.

Chapter Five

The 90s and 2000s: Superman, Fear, and the War on Terror

The History

With the Cold War finally over after so many decades and the Soviet Union dissolved, the United States was left with a single question: what now? For years, the U.S. had been measuring its accomplishments against those of the Russians, but now there was no rival to compare to. This meant the U.S. had to adjust to their new role as a global power and once again find themselves, both socially and culturally. Assuming the role of international policemen, the country saw an expansion in military power. Thus, military interventions were illustrated to promote peace and stability in European countries formerly under the USSR that had fallen into chaos after the Cold War, as well as early issues with the Middle East when Iraq invaded Kuwait (Johnson, 152). It was a time of breaking off from the past and moving forward, but moving forward came with a new set of problems.

Among the domestic issues such as crime, poverty, and police brutality, there was also a new threat: terrorism. Before the tragedy of 9/11 in 2001, the 1990s had their fair share of attacks, one with a truck bombing at the World Trade Center in New York and another attack in Oklahoma City (Johnson, 162). This seemed to foreshadow what was to come in the future when everyday life would feel unsafe to American Society, who at first thought these attacks would never happen again. Unfortunately, they would continue on into the 2000s, which Johnson dubs the “Decade of Fear”. The worst of these occurrences was the 9/11 attacks, when terrorists had hijacked three planes and crashed them into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, resulting in the deaths of nearly 3,000 Americans (HISTORY). An attack on this scale had not been achieved in the previous years, and it completely blindsided American society. What followed were years of grief and terror, with fear and anti-Islamic rhetoric as the United States went into military

conflicts with Iraq and Afghanistan. Many superheroes in their storylines reflected this grief, some even going so far as to have reactions to the attack itself.

The Comics

The most notable and iconic Superman storyline in the 1990s is that of *The Death of Superman*. In this arc, Superman dies after a destructive standoff with the monstrous creature Doomsday. However, it is what came out of this story that applies the most to this era. With Superman gone, the people of Metropolis as well as Superman's family and superhero partners had to find a way to move on. In the follow-up arcs "Funeral for a Friend" and "Reign of the Supermen", told from *Action Comics* #685 to #691, everyone is still reeling from the loss, but with criminals and villains seeking to take advantage, it is apparent that someone has to step in and pick up where Superman left off. Thus, four new Supermen appeared: Superboy, Steel, Eradicator, and Cyborg Superman, to take up the fallen superhero's mantle. Superboy was a clone of Superman's DNA created by Lex Luthor. Steel was a normal man who fashioned a mechanical armored suit that allowed him to control powers that were once used by Superman. Originally a Kryptonian weapon, Eradicator evolved into a humanoid being that assumed Superman's genetic makeup and his powers. Lastly, Cyborg Superman is actually a supervillain who wishes to use his half-robot half-Kryptonian body to use Superman's mantle as a way to destroy Earth with his technology-based powers. They represented different paths that Superman's legacy and American Society could take. Like Superboy, would they return back to their traditional roots, or would they be like Steel, and become something new entirely? Up until Superman's resurrection late in the storyline, both readers and the comic book characters struggled to determine which one of these men would become the true Superman to carry on his legacy, just as America struggled to discover just who they would be in the world.

Action Comics #781's story "Thousand Yard Stare", is one of the many stories that shows that dark and violent turn Superman comics had begun to take after the 9/11 attack. In this narrative, the Earth is being attacked by extra-terrestrial androids named Imperiox Probes. To protect the earth from further destruction, one of the superheroes assisting Superman in this fight is Wonder Woman. Despite their efforts, it is not enough to end the war, nor is it enough to save their loved ones. Wonder Woman's mother Hippolyta as well as his wife Lois Lane's father Sam Lane sacrifice themselves for the cause. Not only does Superman feel guilt for not being able to do more for them, he grieves over the fact that his friend had lost her mother, and that he had lost his father-in-law, something that could cause him to lose Lois as well. The title of this story "Thousand Yard Stare" reflects trauma that the characters face during this war. As it was written so close to the 9/11 attack, the trauma and grief shown of losing a loved one in such a manner was familiar to that of those who had lost them beyond the pages as something they could relate to.

The stories that would follow would only continue to grow in their gloomy nature. *Action Comics #866 to #870* follows the arc "Brainiac", where one of Superman's most iconic villains makes an attack on Earth. In this arc, it is revealed that Brainiac collects the knowledge and pieces of culture from the worlds he destroys. After taking Superman and his cousin, Supergirl, he intends to destroy Earth by incinerating it using the sun. For a while Brainiac overpowers them, and Superman is helpless in his containment as havoc is wrecked upon Metropolis. Eventually, Superman and Supergirl save the day, but even then, it is not a happy ending. In the end, Superman's father, Jonathan Kent, dies of a heart attack after pulling his wife out of the way of a missile, which Supergirl later hurls out of the solar system. The story closes with Superman's family once again in mourning.

The Discussion

In the 1990s, Superman became a bit gimmicky in a similar fashion to his 70s version, but unlike in that decade, he made many changes in his life that were long-lasting (at least until present times). He told Lois his secret as Superman, and even married her later down the road. Though eventually short-lived, from *Action Comics #738* onward, he had even gained a new, slick blue look to accompany his new powers, which could manipulate energy. These decisions were made with the future in mind, of moving forward from the older versions into one that could better fit the evolving society. The 90s was a reflection of 70s issues in the sense that it was a decade where both Superman and American Society struggled to find their new identity. The 2000s showed superheroes often as powerless, as seen with the capture of Superman and Supergirl or how Superman grieved over not being able to save his loved ones. When this happened, it was likely to see real-life heroes such as police, firemen, or the military take up the mantle as hero, seen as Lois' father Sam Lane sacrificed himself to save Metropolis. In this period, multiple stories were released where the world was without Superman, as he either died or disappeared. Metropolis was often forced into chaos because of this, and other superheroes scrambled to undo the damage and fill the role in his place until he returned. As a reflection of the fear and terror happening beyond the pages, Superman comics became darker and more violent in nature, featuring death, chaos, divorce, and strained friendships and relationships. In *Action Comics #820*, readers are met with a gruesome scene at the end of Doomsday killing a child, and *Action Comics #851* saw the enslavement of Metropolis by Kryptonians. The 2000s were a rough time when it was hard to find out who to trust, but in the end, there would always be heroes, whether it be Superman or real-life heroes, putting their lives on the line and be an inspiration to American Society.

Conclusion

As the popularity of the superhero genre continues to increase, the academic realm has slowly been integrating comics into the classrooms with the idea that there is something that we can learn from them beyond the surface level theme of good versus evil. In this study, I attempted to build off the work of Jeffrey K. Johnson's *Super-History* in order to determine whether Superman's evolution across comic continuity reflects the evolution of American Society throughout history since the Great Depression. After the analysis of over 930 Superman comic books under the *Action Comics* title, it was found that Superman's evolution does indeed mirror these evolving social, cultural, and political changes. At his debut in 1938, Superman embodied New Deal sentiments promoted by FDR and took his stance against big businesses that terrorized the poor and oppressed during the Great Depression. He then took on the role of patriotic and nationalist propagandist as World War II raged on until 1945. After the war had ceased, his focus on family and domestic life gave readers a taste of the comfort and security that the people of the 50s sought after. However, he did not change in the 60s, and his continued promotion of 50s values represented a stagnation that the counterculture youth fought back against. In the 70s and 80s, Superman transformed from a superhero with an unknown path into a conservative powerhouse. And in the last period studied, the fear that plagued the 90s and mostly the 2000s bled into the pages of Superman's narratives as he was forced to take on more violent measures against his even more violent villains. There is still more to discover about Superman and his connections with shifting attitudes of society. This study only focused on the *Action Comics* run, while there are other comic book titles such as *Superman* and the *Adventures of Superman* to study that may either back up what was found in this thesis or bring something new to the table.

The study is important overall in legitimizing comic books as a relevant media in academic literature. While not every comic could be considered so, as some I had encountered were purely for entertainment, much of what could be discovered in these comics can be tied to a better understanding of the social and political climate of the era in which they were written. As Johnson attests in his conclusion: “because they are generally published monthly, superhero stories can capture the nation’s changing zeitgeist in ways novels, films, and other storytelling forms cannot” (Johnson, 189). And not just in the way they were written, but also in the way they were drawn. While this research did not focus on the artwork of these comics, it would be something interesting to delve into for future projects. Not only can you see the evolution of comic book art, which could be another aspect to study, but you can also see, based on the way characters are dressed and what technology they used, the physical representation of the era’s culture and trends. Overall, comic books superheroes like Superman are more than just a part of our childhoods, they are a part of our culture. They are a part that we can learn from if we look past our prejudices on comics and dive deep into underlying social and political narratives hidden behind the age-old tale of good versus evil.

Bibliography

Austen, Chuck. "Wail of the Banshee!". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 820, DC Comics, 2004.

Bates, Cary. "The Most Dangerous Man on Earth!". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 419, DC Comics, 1972.

Bates, Cary. "Clark Kent Calling Superman...Clark Kent Calling Superman!". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 446, DC Comics, 1975.

Cameron, Don. "There'll Always Be a Superman". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 62, DC Comics, 1943.

Chan, Melissa. "'A Date Which Will Live In Infamy.' Read President Roosevelt's Pearl Harbor Address". *Time*, 7 Dec. 2016, time.com/4593483/pearl-harbor-franklin-roosevelt-infamy-speech-attack/. Accessed 20 Apr. 2020.

Dorfman, Leo. "The Super-Panhandler of Metropolis". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 396, DC Comics, 1971.

Dorfman, Leo. "The Pied-Piper of Steel". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 398, DC Comics, 1971.

Immonen, Stuart. "Straight on Till Morning". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 738, DC Comics, 1997.

Johns, Geoff. "Brainiac, Part I: First Contact". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 866, DC Comics, 2008.

Johns, Geoff. "Brainiac, Part II: Hide and Seek". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 867, DC Comics, 2008.

Johns, Geoff. "Brainiac, Part III: Greetings". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 868, DC Comics, 2008.

Johns, Geoff. "Brainiac, Part IV: Mind Over Matter". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 869, DC Comics, 2008.

- Johns, Geoff. "Brainiac, Part V: Finale". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 870, DC Comics, 2008.
- Johns, Geoff, and Richard Donner. "Last Son (Part Four)". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 851, DC Comics, 2007.
- Johnson, Jeffery K. *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012.
- Jurgens, Dan. *The Death of Superman*. DC Comics, Inc., 1992.
- Kelly, Joe. "Thousand Yard Stare". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 781, DC Comics, 2001.
- Levy, Michael. "United States Presidential Election of 1936". *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 27 Oct. 2019, www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1936. Accessed 20 Apr. 2020.
- Miller, Frank. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. DC Comics, Inc., 1986.
- "September 11 Attacks". *HISTORY*, 17 Feb. 2010, www.history.com/topics/21st-century/9-11-attacks. Accessed 26 Apr. 2020.
- Siegel, Jerry, and Joe Shuster. "Superman Battles Death Underground". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 3, DC Comics, 1938.
- Siegel, Jerry, and Joe Shuster. "Superman vs. the Cab Protective League". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 13, DC Comics, 1939.
- Siegel, Jerry, and Joe Shuster. "...and the Purple Plague". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 19, DC Comics, 1939.
- Siegel, Jerry. "The Pilot's Revenge". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 43, DC Comics, 1941.
- Siegel, Jerry. "The Caveman Criminal". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 44, DC Comics, 1942.
- Siegel, Jerry. "Powerstone". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 47, DC Comics, 1942.
- Siegel, Jerry. "The Emperor of America". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 52, DC Comics, 1942.
- Stern, Roger. "Re:Actions". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 685, DC Comics, 1993.

Stern, Roger. "Who's Buried in Superman's Tomb?". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 686, DC Comics, 1993.

Stern, Roger. "Born Again". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 687, DC Comics, 1993.

Stern, Roger. "An Eye for an Eye". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 688, DC Comics, 1993.

Stern, Roger. "Who is the Hero True?". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 689, DC Comics, 1993.

Stern, Roger. "Lies & Revelations". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 690, DC Comics, 1993.

Stern, Roger. "Secret Weapon". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 691, DC Comics, 1993.

"The Courtship on Krypton". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 149, DC Comics, 1950.

"The Spectral Superman". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 188, DC Comics, 1954.

Woolfolk, William. "The Bride of Superman". *Action Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 143, DC Comics, 1950.