

# SUPERMAN: WHAT MAKES HIM SO ICONIC?

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### **Introduction**

“Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s Superman! “  
(Daniels, 1998, p. 1-7).

Some people might not recognize the reference to early radio shows and cartoons, but most people will recognize the name Superman. Superman has become such an amazing cultural icon, that almost everyone knows his name, and often his weakness, his powers, the colors of his suit and the name of his arch nemesis. It’s part of common knowledge and everyone has been exposed to him at some time or another.

Since the creation of Superman in 1938, comic book research and literary studies have come along way. These allows us to more deeply analyze and understand, as well as unravel the deeper signified meanings associated with the iconic Superman (Wandtke, 2007, p. 25). He is seen as a superhero, but also upholds “truth, justice and the American way” (Watt-Evans, 2006, p. 1). Some see him as Christ-like or Jewish, and even as a fascist. He fulfills some of our needs from the Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and also expresses different messages depending on the medium in which he is portrayed. There is no end to the Superman merchandise, but Superman as an icon, can change a person.

### **The Semiotics of Superman**

In analyzing the semiotics of Superman, we must first start by describing the signifier, or the form in which he takes. The signifier is a male, with short black hair, strongly built, and tall. He wears a red, yellow and blue outfit, with a red S on his chest and more specifically red boots

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and a cape. If you see a combination of these forms, almost all North Americans will know that this is Superman.

Now we can delve into the signified, meaning the concept that Superman represents. Superman's first level of the signified is being a superhero, and he is the first superhero at that (Daniels, 1998, p. 37). A superhero, as per dictionary.com, is "a figure, especially in a comic strip or cartoon, endowed with superhuman powers and usually portrayed as fighting evil or crime" (superhero, n.d.) and that is exactly what Superman does in the multitude of media in which he is portrayed. He is an alien from another planet, the yellow sun of our solar system giving him his unique powers of super-strength, flight and heat-vision, and he uses them to fight crime. However, others like Paul Lytle (2006) believe that it is his image, his golden shield on his chest that makes superman powerful (p. 137). His powers would be useless if he could not uphold "truth, justice, and the American way" (Watt-Evans, 2006, p. 1).

That well-known Superman motto leads us to the next level of the signified. "Truth" is all that is true and honest, actual and right (truth, n.d.), while "justice" is being righteous, lawful, and moral (justice, n.d.). As almost all fans of Superman know, these distinct qualities have been ingrained in Superman since childhood by his adoptive parents, who taught him to follow the values of integrity and to respect the law (Watt-Evans, 2006, p. 1). Even if Superman is almost indestructible, it is the upholding of these values, by restraining his powers and only using them for those purposes, that allows him to become and spread "truth" and "justice" (Hopkins, 2006, p. 19).

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Another thing that Superman's parents taught him (and also as a result of having landed in the United States), is how to be American and follow the American way, the third element of his motto. This stands true since his first inception in 1938; Superman is one of the most well-known and accessible American icons of the twentieth century (Engle, 1987). But exactly makes Superman symbolic of the American way? This leads to the deeper levels of the signified concepts surrounding the Man of Steel.

Superman is an alien. He comes from another planet, crashing onto ours, and living his life among us. This is synonymous to all other immigrants that have created and support America. However, even his powers, and otherness, show his true nature as an American. According to Gary Engle (1987),

Superman's powers — strength, mobility, x-ray vision and the like — are the comic book equivalents of ethnic characteristics, and they protect and preserve the vitality of the foster community in which he lives in the same way that immigrant ethnicity has sustained American culture linguistically, artistically, economically, politically, and spiritually. The myth of Superman asserts with total confidence and a childlike innocence the value of the immigrant in American culture.

Engle (1987) continues by stating that Superman's dislocation, just like with the general immigrant American, creates a sense of physical movement, where one searching for something or never feels rooted. Thus, for Engle (1987), it comes as no surprise that Superman should be able to fly:

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[...] let Superman fly unencumbered when and wherever he will, and the meaning of mobility in the American consciousness begins to reveal itself. Superman's incredible speed allows him to be as close to everywhere at once as it is physically possible to be. Displacement is, therefore, impossible. His sense of self is not dispersed by his life's migration but rather enhanced by all the universe that he is able to occupy. What American, whether an immigrant in spirit or in fact, could resist the appeal of one with such an ironclad immunity to the anxiety of dislocation? (Engle, 1987).

With his powers, demonstrating his ethnicity and otherness, but also allowing him to overcome it, Superman protects and saves Americans from crimes and evil. His alter ego Clark Kent allows him to live the American life, and this is what motivates him, as Superman, to continue being a superhero for the very people with whom he lives with (Engle, 1987).

Engle (1987) also states that the outward secular nature of Superman allows him to be generalized enough to encompass the various religions present in America, thus allowing for all types of American to project their religious sentiments on him so that they may feel that he belongs to them. Thus, Superman also represents deeper religious concepts as the signified, and he often has many parallels between his story and that of religious leaders. Some folk believe that Superman is Jewish, while others believe he is Christian. Let's start with the Jewish viewpoint.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two young Jewish Americans, created Superman. These two boys did not have in mind creating a religious symbol, but it can be said, according to Howard Jacobson (2005), that their Jewish background did have a number of influences on Superman:

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“He is born Kal-El, son of Jor-El. In Hebrew, El — originally meaning “might, strength, power” — is the name for God, appearing in such composite forms as El Emet, the God of Truth, and El Olam, God Everlasting.” And as stated before, Superman arrives on earth after being sent from his home planet, and adopted and raised by the Kent’s on Earth. This is very similar to the story of Moses, where he is left by his mother and raised by adopted parents, to grow up great and powerful, just like Superman (Jacobson, 2005). In a 1940 comic strip, Superman even confronts Hitler, the most widely recognized repressor of Jews (Tapper, 2006). According to Jacobson (2005), what makes Superman truly Jewish is his sadness. This is due to his home planet being destroyed right after he left, and kryptonite, small remnants of his home planet Krypton, his weakness that takes away his Superman powers and name, reverts him to Kal-El, a simple Jew.

Unlike the previous Jewish views, Lou Anders (2006) believes that Superman has always been inherently Christ-like from the very start. Superman’s father sends his only son to earth from space, to live a life of righteousness and serve as an example of good. This, in its simplest elements, Superman’s origin story parallels the story of Christ. In the 1978 *Superman* movie, there are references to the bible in many of the lines Superman’s father tells his son (p. 74):

Even though you're being raised as a human being, you are not one of them. They can be a great people, Kal-El. They wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason, above all — their capacity for growth — I have sent them you: my only son (Tapper, 2006).

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This quote is again used in the 2006 movie *Superman Returns*, as the director, Brian Singer, decided to interpret Superman as a Christ figure. In this movie, Superman is described as a savior, and Superman discusses himself the role he needs to play as savior with Lois. When he fights Lex Luthor, he falls to the earth in a crucified position, and seems to “die”, only to come back to save his son and the world (Wandtke, 2007, p. 24).

In the graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, Superman is indirectly compared to a God by the president, and his death after a nuclear blast, and resurrection thereafter, establishes Superman as the Son of God (Anders, 2006, p. 75).

Furthermore, in the more recent television series *Smallville*, which depicts the life of Superman before he becomes the legendary hero, the show has many symbolic Christian references. Many effects and elements of the story ad Christian symbolism: Clark is hung on a crucifix in the first episode, he is often surrounded by bright light, sometimes framed by wings, and many episodes deal with biblical references (Peebles, 2006, p. 77-78).

The last of the deeper levels of the signified that Superman relates to are politics. Superman, living for the American way, embodies the politics and ideals of the American. In the Nazi's rebuttal to the 1940 issue of Superman punishing Hitler, they said that: “Superman was ‘lacking all strategic sense and tactical ability,’ and accused the costumed hero of sowing ‘hate, suspicion, evil, laziness, and criminality’ in the ‘young hearts’ of American children” (Tapper, 2006). This would be the general view of the direct opposite of an American towards Superman, at the time. But surprisingly, most of the superheroes during this era did not differ much from the Fascist ideal. David Hopkins (2006), states that the use of power and strength, to be more powerful than others and dominate over them are the essence of fascism, even if they did fight

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against the fascist leaders. Superman's heritage from a dominant super-race also alludes to this fascist tendency, but what critics forget is that Superman uses restraint and compassion to save the world (p. 11).

A more recent take on Superman, in the graphic novel *Red Son*, he is completely stripped of his American values by interpreting his story as if he had landed in Ukraine instead of America. This Superman grows up with completely different ideological ideals, where he must save everyone because he has the power, and could ultimately sacrifice himself for the ideals of the community. He must learn to manage his deeds or else become a Stalin himself. This is very unlike the original Superman, which is more free and selfish in his choice to save others (Lloyd, 2006, p. 193-195). The graphic novel showed how changing a small thing from Superman's origin changes what Superman represents today.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Superman, already being a very satisfied and self-actualized being, living his life to protect "truth, justice, and the American way" (Watt-Evans, 2006, p. 1), does not fill much of our own physiological, safety, belonging or esteem needs. What Superman does do, as a self-actualized being, is give us a moral role model for us to use to achieve our own self-actualization. Terrence R. Wandtke (2007) believes that "the superhero seems to be a transhistorical presence that serves as a consistent moral reference point for people around the world" (p. 14-15). We as individuals try to reach self-actualization with the help of Superman as our moral pillar.

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What is also important to note is that the moral obligations of Superman have constantly changed and adjusted throughout the decades according to the changing moral values of America. At the beginning, Superman was much more violent and direct with his confrontations against civil law-breakers. The sixties changed that viewpoint and Americans had a better understanding of proper justice, as well as the fallibility of law-enforcers (Lloyd, 2006, p. 181). Those changes took place in the new story line within the DC comics universe, with the creation of a second Superman from Earth 2 that embodied the newer moral and social qualities of the time (Wandtke, 2007, p. 7). More recently, he faces the challenges of working with corrupt politicians (Lloyd, 2006, p. 182).

Though Superman may represent the self-actualization much more clearly and strongly, he can also satisfy some social needs in certain cases. Alonso Duralde (2006) states that Superman, like many superheroes, can accommodate our needs if they are interpreted as gay. The fact that most superheroes need to hide their “true identity” allows those who are not out in the open yet to feel accepted by the heroes they look up to, and can even help the self-esteem of an individual as well (Duralde, 2006).

Aaron Pevey (2007) believes that Superman has also applied to the safety level of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in the past, but it is no longer the case today. Back in the 1940’s and 1950’s, the technological revolution was at its height and children were trying to deal with the dangers machinery created. An invulnerable Superman created less fear in their minds, but today, where cultural body values have changed, his invulnerability is not what they are looking for. The youth of today want someone who is imperfect, just like they feel today (Pevey, 2007, p.

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1). Once, Superman did appeal to the safety level of the hierarchy, but with the changing times, he no longer does.

### **Marshall McLuhan Theories**

Superman debuted as a comic book, but quickly got adapted to radio, television and cartoons, and later on into films (Wandtke, 2007, p. 13). The diversity of mediums with which Superman has been presented has most definitely played a part in how the medium is the message. Superman has changed greatly from his first inception in 1939. Kryptonite and Clark Kent's editor Perry White were only added to his storyline in the radio show, and Superman did not fly until 1940. Many different versions of Superman's story also exist at the same time across all mediums, interpreting Superman's story differently. These new reinterpretations throughout various mediums modifies the message that is Superman:

The superhero is an emblematic representation of conservative values of nationalism with story arcs built around the basic components of the hero monomyth; yet the superhero is reinscribed by different authors in different mediums so that the superhero becomes endlessly multiple with an identity that is quintessentially post-modern (Wandtke, 2007, p. 14-15).

This allows Superman to be changed by every new medium he is interpreted in to correspond to the times it shows itself, making him always current and up-to-date. The corporate entity that

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owns Superman does have a part in making sure that Superman fits with the times, but the authors also have the control over the revisions done of Superman (Wandtke, 2007, p. 15).

One of the most recent examples concerning Superman and McLuhan's theory is with the television show *Smallville*. Robert M. McManus, & Grace R. Waitman (2007) have analyzed how the show can teach certain things other than the main moral message that Superman promotes. They believe that

*Smallville* helps shape its audience's view of morality, cultural identity, and gender roles.

[...] Audiences may look to popular culture texts such as television shows as "equipment for living" and apply the concepts they are presented to other areas in their lives.

(McManus & Waitman, 2007, p. 175).

Both McManus & Waitman determine that the show is morally unambiguous, but does not give an authority when it comes to knowing how to achieve "good". The show also embraces the communal myth of helping each other, but not the one of urban advancement, unlike the previously described American way. Finally, it also demonstrates how the women on the show need a male counterpart to act in a prescribed way, which can have negative impacts on female viewers (McManus & Waitman, 2007, p. 189). This shows how it is important to be analytical of not just the icon, but the medium that transmits the message as well.

The creator of *Smallville*, Alfred Gough: "[T]here is something about Superman that permeates the American psyche. Perhaps it is because he symbolizes the best of what we want to be." (as cited in McManus & Waitman, 2007, p. 176). Under McLuhan's extension of humanity

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theory, where we use things or technology to extend ourselves, Superman extends our moral psyche. Superman as a moral paragon has already been discussed previously, but stands true also as our own personal extension of moral values. We create our own values and morals, but to be able to cope and deal with life, we often choose someone we look up to and use them as the moral figure to make sure we stay on the right track (Loeb & Morris, 2005, p. 16). Like any other idol or icon we may look up to, Superman is a grand one to use for those purposes.

### **Superman Merchandise**

Umberto Eco was one of the first to critically analyze comic book heroes, and more specifically Superman. He debates on how Superman seems “timeless and timely at the same time” and how Superman “must remain ‘inconsumable’ and at the same time be ‘consumed’ according to the ways of everyday life” (as cited in Wandtke, 2007, p. 25). And understandably so, Superman comic books became instant hits when it was first published in 1938, and “consumed” by American boys across the country. Sales were even better when Superman was on the cover of *Action Comics*, and he never left that spot when the publishers found out (Daniels, 1998, p. 31, 35). As soon as Superman was established as the leader in the comic book world, Superman quickly spread to other media types, but also into the world of merchandise.

Robert Maxwell came to be in charge of Superman Inc, under the umbrella of DC comics, and licensed the name and image of Superman to toy manufacturers. By 1939, Superman toys were already being distributed across the country. Many things were created like a Superman button, puzzles, paint sets, paper dolls, games as well as a Krypto-Raygun. Children could also buy a variety of shirts, socks, underwear and other clothing with the Superman name

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and image. When a new media form of Superman came out, it created a surge in demand for products related to him, which was the start of what media moguls would call “synergy” (Daniels, 1998, p. 47, 50). The merchandise is so popular because the owning of it makes one seem closer to being and following the ideals of the Superman icon.

Today, nothing has changed in the merchandising scheme, and Superman is still used to sell merchandise. In the television show *Smallville*, which mostly exists to promote the purchase of products, artist songs are promoted in every show, and used for the recaps as well (Peebles, 2006, p. 90-91). Even before Superman becomes the hero he will become, he is exposed to the mass frenzy of merchandising related to himself: in episode eight of season nine, Superman is introduced to merchandise based on his shield, the only element of his true costume he is using at this point in the series. However, the shield is what is currently giving the citizens in the show the hope that things will be fine, and as a result, the symbol is spread through merchandise, but also to promote the ideal it represents.

### **Superman’s Influence on a Girl**

As a little girl, I remember watching the first Superman movies and being fascinated by Christopher Reeves portrayal of the superhero. He had so much charm and was such a good guy, I definitely felt something for the character. I adored the love story with Lois, but I also liked how Superman was true to his ideals, and even though he fought the good fight, he would still be crushed by his emotions when it came to people close to him. He was extraordinary, but at the same time very human, and that touched me even when I was little.

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I think that in a way, I could relate, and have been influenced by superman in wanting to be as true and honest as he was, and live a life that is as just as possible. I am a very honest person today, and I do take great care in trying to be morally right and follow the rules, although I do believe that my parents might have had a bit more influence on that. But if I were to choose someone to use as my moral reference point, Superman is it, if he isn't already.

As for affecting my choice in guys, maybe Superman made me look for someone honest, and someone that is just and charming. And I think I succeeded in finding that man in my life, my boyfriend Charles, who is my Superman.

### **Conclusion**

Superman has been an icon and will forever be an icon of the American culture, so long as he represents "truth, justice and the American way" (Watt-Evans, 2006, p. 1). The more Superman represents the different levels of American values, the more he will continue to signify many things to all Americans, whether it be in a religious or political way. Being such a moral figure, Superman also helps us to keep our own morals from going astray while we seek self-actualization. Even if this message is changed by the multitude of various media Superman has been in, also because of the changing times, he still remains at the core the cultural icon that he first was. The Superman merchandise has been so popular because for the fans and people, his icon is a representation of his morals and values, to which everyone aspires to, even myself.

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