

SUPERMAN: THE HERO IN ALL OF US

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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. No, it's SUPERMAN! Since his debut in June 1938, Action Comics #1 (Shuster & Siegel, 1938), Superman is one of the world's most recognizable and iconic figures of all time. Playing the role as a mild-mannered reporter, but when trouble arises, emerging as the hero no one would expect and soaring to the rescue. Even for those who have never read a comic book know who Superman is and what he stands for. He has been considered as humanity's greatest hero, but also as its greatest threat. A figure used to represent hope, truth, and justice, but also used as a marketing brand. He is the world's ultimate immigrant who embodies the "American Dream". Overall, what Superman truly represents is the person we aspire to become, the proof that no matter how big the problem is, one person can make a difference. We are all a 'Clark Kent,' with a Superman waiting to emerge from within each of us.

Origin of a Hero

The origin of Superman, an adaptation of the Bible's story of Moses (Jacobson, 2005), has been repeatedly retold over his decades in the comics. He was born Kal-El, son of Jor-El, sent to Earth as an infant from the doomed planet of Krypton. He was found and raised by Jonathon and Martha Clark Kent, and adopted as Clark Joseph Kent (Greenberger & Pasko, 2010). Influenced by the moral values and virtues they taught him, he became the hero and savior known throughout the world as Superman.

In reality, he was born in the imaginations of two Jewish immigrants, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, whose original concept for the character was not the hero we know today. He was originally written as a bald madman who tries to conquer the world using his telepathic abilities, in their short story titled, *The Reign of the Super-Man*. Siegel rethought the concept of the character a few months after the story's publication, modeling Superman as a force for good instead of evil, whose power came from his

physical strength rather than telepathic powers, like the men both Siegel and Shuster tried to emulate (Look, 2006).

The Semiotics of Superman

In analyzing the semiotics of Superman, we must first start by describing the signifier, describing what is seen at our first glance of this icon. The signifier is a man who stands 6'4" tall, weighing 225 pounds (Superman, 1978), with a strong posture that shows he is a figure of authority, but with caring blue eyes and a smile that illuminates a warmth that says, "I'm a friend and I'm here to help." His short black hair is slicked back, except for the distinctive curl, which forms an "S" falling perfectly above his forehead. He wears a blue unitard that stretches over his physique, with red boots, trunks, and a long red cape flowing behind him. A yellow belt is wrapped around his waist, with an all yellow "S" shield adorned on his cape. Finally a red and yellow "S" shield stretches across his chest, which not only represents his name, but also "became a symbol for justice throughout the known universe" (Greenberger & Pasko, 2010).

Now that the first level of semiotics, the signifier, has been identified, we can explore deeper into the meaning and concepts this icon represents. The second level of semiotics is the name given to this icon. "Superman" the name of the iconic figure, has for decades headlined the front page of The Daily Planet for saving the day. The name was given to him by Daily Planet top reporter Lois Lane, his news partner and love interest, after their first interview together (Superman, 1978).

The third level of semiotics refers to the function of the icon. Superman is an officer of the law, a crime fighter, but above all he is a superhero, not only to his home of Metropolis, but also to the world. A superhero as defined in 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.) which is how Superman has been portrayed to us over the decades. He obtains his strength from our yellow sun, giving him his powers of invulnerability, super-strength and speed, the ability to fly. We consider him these things because he is, as expressed by Jack Larson; former cast member of the

Adventures of Superman television series, “an alien from outer space who comes to save us, instead of to terrorize and defeat us” (Look, 2006), which is why we look up to him.

The fourth level of semiotics is the meaning of the icon and it is deciphered in his well-known motto that he is here to “fight for truth, justice, and the American way” (Watt-Evans, 2006, p. 1). “Truth” is all that is true and honest, actual and right (truth, n.d.), and “justice” is being righteous, lawful, and moral (justice, n.d.). These distinct qualities have been the basis of Superman’s moral being since they were bestowed in childhood upon him by his adopted 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, and one of the strongest beings ever made, he always upholds his values, restraining his powers and using them only for a purpose (Hopkins, 2006, p. 19). He is the symbol of hope we look up to.

The fifth and final level of semiotics is a deeper meaning of the icon. The first part of this is represented as Superman being an embodiment of the American Dream. He is the ultimate immigrant, coming to us not from another country, but from another world. Found and raised as a farmer, growing up to gain success as a hero, the same ‘something from nothing’ dreams many of us try to achieve (Engle, 1987). The second meaning of the icon is how we see him in ourselves. Superman is the aspiration of a person we want to be in life. He represents a hero we can become, but in order to get there, we must first look at the issues that are on the path right in front of us and put forth great efforts if we ever want to be on that path.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

We view Superman as a hero for the ages. We see him as a self-actualized being, living his life to fight for truth, justice and the American Way. Relating to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs model, Superman is the tip of the pyramid, which we are all trying to achieve, the moral role model whom we admire and wish to become.

To those who find it hard to fit in society, Superman represents the self-esteem level. Superman has hidden his “true identity” behind the glasses of Clark Kent, which can be interpreted to some as one hiding in one’s shell. By looking up to heroes like this, one can build the self-esteem needed until one is ready to come out and show what he/she has been keeping from the world.

Superman is a hero who once made us feel the comfort of the safety level, but Aaron Pevey does not believe this is the case in our society anymore. Due to the changing times, an invulnerable hero does not relate well to the youth of today. They tend to seek for someone imperfect—the way they feel (Pevey, 2007).

Marshall McLuhan Theories

Superman debuted as a comic, then adapted to the radio, and finally adapted to the screen. With the presence of an actual person such as Superman, fans were given a model of themselves as useful contributors to a polite and peaceful society (Secret, 2010). To this day, we are given a physical person portraying the role of someone we should model ourselves after. But why is it necessary to have him present? *Smallville* creator, Alfred Gough, explains this: “There is something about Superman that permeates the American psyche. Perhaps it is because he symbolizes the best of what we want to be” (McManus & Waitman, 2007, p. 176). 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 him or her as a moral ideal. Hence Superman, to make sure we stay on the right track as we look to him for inspiration (Loeb & Morris, 2005, p. 16).

The Perceptions of a Hero

In our society, no matter what one does, there will always be a double standard about persons and their actions, and Superman himself faces this in both reality and within the comics. This icon has been both loved and praised as a hero to idolize, but also he has been hated and considered as a threat.

First, we view how the hero perceives himself. Though he is not a physical being that can tell us personally, Superman has many adaptations of his character in the media who have suggested many ideas. Though we see Superman as a brave strong hero who seems fearless, that is not always the case. As stated before, he is the ultimate immigrant saving us from our sufferings, but who is there to save him from his? One might ask, from what do you save a man who can deflect bullets? Yes, Superman is virtually invulnerable, physically, but he is tortured on an emotional level. Some say Superman's heart is his true greatest weakness. He considers himself different and an outcast to society. This is portrayed in the graphic novel *Superman/Batman: Supergirl*, written by Geoff Loeb, as Superman thinks to himself, "I am alone... I know that I have a wife, my parents, even friends... but I am alone. What's happened... the meteor shower is a stinging reminder that I was not born on this Earth. I'm the last son of Krypton. An alien... I am alone" (Loeb, 2005). Besides the feeling of being alone, Superman is assumed to be in complete control over everything he does. In the series finale of *Justice League Unlimited*, as Superman faces one of his greatest enemies Darkseid, he says, "...I feel like I live in a world made of... cardboard, always taking constant care not to break something, to break someone. Never allowing myself to lose control even for a moment, or someone could die..." ("Destroyer"). He is always seeing himself as a danger if he is not able to sustain himself. He is a misunderstood character, someone we think has nothing that can bring him down, which isn't entirely true. The song *Superman (it's not easy)* by Five For Fighting gives us Superman's perspective on his life and he says, "I'm more than a bird, I'm more than a train, more than some pretty face beside a train, It's not easy to be me" (Five, 2000).

Superman has not always been praised. He has been considered too powerful, or too corrupt, among many other negative things. Fredric Wertham, M.D. in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, takes a stab at all comics, blaming them as the cause of juvenile delinquents, and Superman is unable to escape this backlash. Wertham lashes out at the hero, calling him a "Fashist" and "un-American" (Secret, 2010). With the presence

of a character like Superman, we tend to seek for a higher power to solve all our problems for us, when we could fix them ourselves.

An example of this is demonstrated in the Superman #705. The issue deals with a man who is abusive to both his wife and son. The boy believes when Superman passes by their city, both he and his mother will be saved. The story concludes with the police saying this issue needed Superman for it to be solved as the man is handed over to them. Superman disagrees and says, “No, it didn’t. All it needed... all it really needed was someone, anyone, with a pair of eyes, a voice, a phone and ten cents’ worth of compassion.” (Straczynski, 2010)

Furthermore, upon America’s entry into WWII, Superman was one of the characters used only to promote rather than to fight in the comics, as the stories reflected the war, due to the fact there was no Superman in reality to end the war in seconds (Secret, 2010). Though always a representation of a force for good, the question has popped up if Superman would go to extremes to uphold that good. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Superman, the big blue boy scout, is simply a pawn of the U.S. government and even though he detests having to be used as a weapon, he sees it as the only way to do good (Miller, 1986). Another example of Superman going to extremes to uphold what he believes is good is in the graphic novel *Red Son*. In this story, we are given an incarnation of the character who lands in Russia rather than America. Following his Communist beliefs, he seizes control of the planet to run it accordingly to what he believes is best (Miller, 2003). The best negative perception of the character is given by his archenemies Lex Luthor in the graphic novel *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* as he stares out the window, staring directly into the eyes of Superman himself, calling him out as a god among men...

“All men are created equal. All men. You are not a man... but they’ve made you their hero and they worship you. So tell me what redemption do you offer them? Those red eyes, I’m sure they look right through me, like I am nothing more than a nuisance. But when I see you? I see something no man can ever be. I see the end. The end of our potential. The end of our achievements. The end of our dreams. You are my nightmare.” (Azzarello, 2005)

Finally, there is the common perception of Superman everyone sees: that he is the

hero, a savior. He has been seen as a Christ-like figure, sent to earth from the heavens, to live a life of righteousness and serve as an example of good. In its simplest elements, Superman's origin story parallels the story of Christ (Nicassio, 2006). As God tells Jesus His purpose on earth, it is mirrored in the 1978 film *Superman: The Movie*, as Jor-El tells his son,

“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” (Marlon Brando as Jor-El).

In his first appearance it is established that he is the “champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need” (Siegel & Shuster, 1938). A face that symbolizes good, hope, and trust. In the graphic novel *Superman: Birthright*, Clark's mother asks him if he will wear a mask, as they create the Superman costume, but he replies, “Can't. There's the problem. If I want people to trust me, they'll have to be able to see my face” (Waid, 2004). He has nothing to hide and only wants to show he is here for us and we can believe in him. One of the best opinions made about the man of steel is from a former Superman himself, the late great Christopher Reeve, who said, “What sets Superman apart is he has the wisdom to use his powers for good. He's got that kind of maturity... he's got the innocence really, to look at the world very, very simply, and that's what makes him so different. When he says 'I'm here to fight for truth, justice, and the American way,' everyone goes (laughs underneath breath) but he's not kidding” (Secret, 2010).

It's a bird. It's a plane. No, it's a MONEYMAKER!

Superman was first presented to us as a comic book character, and seventy years after publication, his comic books are still in production. He debuted in Action Comics #1 (Siegel & Shuster, 1938), and to this date, it is considered the most rare and expensive comic selling for up to 1.5 million for an original printing. His comics deal with vast stories from the retelling of the origin story, to special crossovers and one-shot stories such as “Superman vs. the Amazing Spider-Man” (Conway, 1976) and “Superman vs.

Muhammad Ali (O'Neil, 1978), to the story of the death and return of the icon himself. Superman is a leader in the comic book world, expanding to new forms of media, from television to movies, with merchandise to match. Products range from buttons, puzzles, toys, clothing, a Monopoly set, to much more branded with the Superman name and image. All of these merchandise are very popular because the possession of these products shows the owners' idolization of the icon.

Besides Superman "the product," we are also presented with Superman "the advertiser." Dating back to WWII, Superman was used to encourage his readers to purchase war bonds, to grow victory gardens to support the war efforts (Look, 2006). Over the years, not much has changed regarding the use of Superman's popularity to promote. In recent years, an animated rendering of Superman was even teamed up with Jerry Seinfeld in two commercial webisodes to promote American Express. Another example using Superman to advertise is shown in the television show *Smallville*, which promotes the purchase of products, the promotion of artists' songs in each episode, recapped at the end of the episodes (Peebles, 2006, pg.90-91). In the eighth episode of season nine, before Clark is even able to dawn the red and blue tights, he is already exposed to the frenzy of merchandising based upon his "S" shield. Beyond *Smallville*, Superman's symbol is spread through various types of merchandise representing the hero to idolize, but also to promote what it represents.

Superman's Influence On This Fan

Personally being a Superman fan, I can admit that I have bought into the symbol of the character, but, more importantly, the morals he represents. As a child, I wrapped a towel around my neck and pretended to fly, due to the impact this icon made in my life. I have purchased the comics, figures and other novelties the icon's logo has been placed on. I have a room full of memorabilia, and am proud of it. I have read countless stories and many versions of the origin, and have been fascinated with the mythology of the character. I am willing to go out of my way to learn more. I've had an idolization of the character since my first encounter seeing him on screen, portrayed by Christopher Reeve,

who to this day still remains one of my heroes. He made the character real and brought him to life for me, portraying the morals on and off screen that made me want to grow up as a better person like him and the character he portrayed. Superman is an inspiration in my life, to be as true and honest as I can, and to be that hero to someone when it is needed.

He's a character that taught me to look deep within a person and find the best in them. Even though it may not be present all the time, it is there, and I don't need x-ray vision to find it. Overall, he has given me the strength as a person to do my best and pass that strength onto others who need a hero, and lift them to new heights that they never thought were possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Superman will always be an icon. He will always be a representation of America as long as he fights for "truth, justice and the American way" (Watt-Evans, 2006, p. 1). He will always represent the morals we hold high and represent that goal at the end when we try to reach for self-actualization by being more like him. Even though the message he portrays has been changed by the multitude of the media, director of *Superman Returns* Bryan Singer best described how much stronger than the media Superman is when he said, "Superman has had a diverse history. He has been used to market, as propaganda material. He's been in good television. He's been in bad television. He's been in good movies. He's been in bad movies. But the character of Superman has always been strong enough to survive his own history."

Superman is the hero within us, the one we aspire to be more like. Battered by changing times and changing tastes, Superman always seems to emerge stronger than ever. Strong. Powerful. Invincible. Superman is a hero worth looking up to. And to find him, we need only look up in the sky (Look, 2006).

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