

TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND THE AMERICAN WAY:
WHAT SUPERMAN TEACHES US ABOUT THE AMERICAN DREAM
AND CHANGING VALUES WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

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This thesis is a study of the changes in the cultural definition of the American Dream. I have chosen to use *Superman* comics, from 1938 to the present day, as litmus tests for how we have societally interpreted our ideas of “success” and the “American Way.” This work is primarily a study in culture and social changes, using close reading of comic books to supply evidence. I argue that we can find three distinct periods where the definition of the American Dream has changed significantly—and the identity of Superman with it. I also hypothesize that we are entering an era with an entirely new definition of the American Dream, and thus Superman must similarly change to meet this new definition.

Truth, Justice, and the American Way: What Superman Teaches Us about the
American Dream and Changing Values within the United States

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Lauren N. Karp, Author

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Introduction

“Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound... it’s Superman, strange visitor from another planet who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman... who fights a never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way!”

— The Adventures of Superman, 1952

“America is far more than a place, it is an idea”

– President Bill Clinton, State of the Union address, 1997

In 2006, fans of the iconic comic-book hero Superman were shocked to discover that in the newest Hollywood film, *Superman Returns* (dir. Bryan Singer), the title character was described as standing simply for “truth, justice, all that stuff.” Notably missing was the final descriptor that had been a part of Superman’s tag-line since 1952: “the American Way.” Many commentators assumed that the line was changed to appeal to a more international audience. Others presumed that the change was implemented by screenplay writers Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris because of the wildly unpopular Patriot Act and the overall tension between Hollywood liberals and the Republican administration (Sheffield). When Dan Harris was questioned on the subject, he said that the main reason for the shift was that the values that make up the current conception of the American Way “are not the same anymore” (qtd. Sheffield). What “the American Way” meant in 1952, when the phrase was first used to describe the comic superhero, has shifted so much, he insisted, that a contemporary definition no longer resembles “what the line actually means (in Superman lore).”

In many ways, Dan Harris understood something about both America and the character of Superman that many critics of the omitted phrase overlooked: America is

not the same country today that it was in the 1950s, nor was it the same country in the '50s that it was in the late-1930s, the era of Superman's creation. As the core values and perceptions of the American people change, based on both national and world events, that elusive definition of "the American Way" changes as well.

However, one thing that Harris does not mention in his response is that the image of Superman has also changed during over the years. Just as the values that he stood for have shifted over time, so has his character. The reason for this is clear: because Superman is so inexorably tied to America's identity as a nation, broad shifts in national values require accompanying shifts in Superman's character, especially if he is to stay relevant for the American readers who identify him as a "legendary" American figure, much like Davy Crockett, Paul Bunyan, or Pecos Bill (Engle 80). As Danny Fingeroth asserts in *Superman on the Couch*, "the superhero—more than even the ordinary fictional hero—has to represent the values of the society that produces him. That means that what... Superman symbolizes changes over time" (17).

This assertion is the backbone of my thesis project. Because Superman has been published in monthly comic book serials nearly consistently since 1938, it is possible to use his character as a "litmus test" for the changes in mass American values by examining the significant changes in his character, actions, storylines, and personal values. In this thesis, I specifically plan on using Superman to look at the significant changes in the symbolic concept of "the American Dream."

What is 'the American Dream'?

The term "American Dream" was not commonly used in academic or popular

discourse until the Depression era; however, the values that it is predicated on go back to the country's founding. Even before the American colonies declared independence from Britain, William Penn described America as "a good poor man's country," for the reason that even without any prior fortune at all, one could build a rich and comfortable life in the "New World" (qtd Jillson 5). Benjamin Franklin stated in a similar vein to a group of new immigrants that even if many arrived at America as "servants or Journeymen... if they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they will soon become masters, establish themselves in Business, marry, raise families, and become a respectable citizen" (qtd. Jillson 5). Franklin himself was perhaps the first author to popularize what would be called the American Dream; his literary stories featuring Poor Richard and Father Abraham stressed the opportunity for personal and financial achievement in America (5).

America's possibilities for success were coupled with the new values of the "American Creed." The core of the American Creed follows Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, which insists that "all men are created equal" and entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." As Seymour Martin Lipset stated in *American Exceptionalism*, "the American Creed can be described in five terms: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire" (qtd. Jillson 3-4). This sense of equality and new opportunity led to the first, early conceptions of the American Dream—that by pulling themselves "up by their bootstraps," anyone could succeed in America's free society.

The specific term "American Dream" is most commonly linked to James Truslow Adams's classic *Epic of America*, published in 1931. While Hector St.

Joh Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782 and Henry Adams's *History of the United States During the Administration of Thomas Jefferson* in 1889 both described the opportunities for freedom and achievement in America as a "dream," it was not until *Epic of America* that the idea of "the Dream" as a defining, powerful, and weighty idea was popularized (Jillson 6). For Adams, "the American dream" describes "the dream of a land in which life should be fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (qtd. Jillson 6).

It seems no coincidence that this definition was formed just two years after the Black Thursday stock market crash, as the Great Depression stretched across America. Before Adams's formal definition, the idea of success in America was depicted as wholly personal. However, as *Epic of America* became one of the most widely read books of the 1930s, the definition of "success" began to change as Americans began to rely on their communal strength in order to survive the Depression (Ekirch 10). Moreover, it was during this important defining and shifting of the American Dream that the character of Superman was first imagined.

The Study of Superman

When examining critical works on Superman and relevant comic scholarship, what may be most striking is the lack of material. While finding scholarly work on works of popular culture is often an uphill battle, the lack of scholarship specifically on comics and on Superman is surprising in the sense that comic books are one of the few print mediums that originated in the United States (before being exported elsewhere) and that the Man of Steel has become such an important and recognizable

national symbol (Inge xv). In fact, it was not until the popularizing of the “graphic novel” in the 1980s, with works such as Will Eisner’s *Contract with God*, Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: My Father Bleeds History*, that comic book scholarship began to really be openly pursued. Before this, examinations of comic books and superheroes date back only to a few groundbreaking attempts—such as *The Comic-Stripped American* by Arthur Asa Berger (1974), a study that carefully psychoanalyzed comic characters, including Superman, from a Freudian perspective. However, even after Berger’s book and the new attention on the “literary” comic, scholarly work on comic books appeared few and far between until rather recently.

One main form of comic book scholarship has been straightforward historiography. For example, the 1985 book *The Comic Book Heroes: From Silver Age to Present* was proclaimed as “the first history of the modern comic book” and was written by comic book authors and proclaimed comic historians Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones. The work gave a detailed account of the history of the comic book industry since 1956 and examined the changes in comic content and characters in a broad sense. Later books, like Bradford W. Wright’s *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001) still mainly took the route of straightforward history, but with an added emphasis on the social context of comic books and cultural analysis. For Wright, issues such as the “ethnic heritage of comic book makers” and current political trends during publication were just as important to examine as the characters and stories themselves (Wright 41-42). More specific histories, such as Gerard Jones’s *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth*

of the Comic Book (2004) and David Hadju's *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (2008), move away from the broad look at comic book history and instead take a more concentrated focus on a specific moment in comic publishing and cultural history. (For Jones that moment is the birth of the comic book in the Depression era and for Hadju it is mainly the 1940s through 50s and the intense social backlash against comics.)

Perhaps the most detailed account of both the history of the comic book and of the character of Superman himself is Les Daniels's 1998 book *Superman: The Complete History* (part of a three book series which also includes *Batman: The Complete History* and *Wonder Woman: The Complete History*, also by Daniels). Daniels's book contains remarkably detailed research, including direct interviews with and quotations from editors and artists who worked on *Superman* throughout the ages, as well as previously unpublished sketches and proofs from Superman's early history. It is certainly the most thorough and complete historical work, and Daniels's research and access is entirely unparalleled. However, the status of Daniels's books as unbiased and true scholarship is complicated by the fact that—like Scott Beatty's later “complete history” book *Superman: The Ultimate Guide* (2006)—*Superman: The Complete History* is published through and sponsored by DC Comics. Critics of Daniels's book have noted that the tensions between Superman's creators (Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster) and DC Comics were “minimized” and that DC's sponsorship of the book made it impossible for Daniels to truly look with a “critical eye” at the comic publisher, and thus at many of the events which influenced the comic book industry (Hill).

Because Daniels's book was published through DC Comics, it also looks physically different than most traditionally academic books from a university or independent press—the pages are glossy and full-color, with photos often displayed more prominently than Daniels's actual text. This makes the work, also like Betty's, appear more like a novelty or coffee-table book than a work of scholarship.

This is actually a common problem in academic works on or about comics—even works that in other subject areas would be deemed scholarly by their content are often disguised or hidden to appeal to a wider “pop culture” audience, as the academic audience on the subject is still quite small. This makes the evaluation of scholarly sources difficult at best. Clear examples of this “disguise” are two of the most influential essays on Superman: Gary Engle's “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” and Patrick L. Eagan's “A Flag with a Human Face.” Engle's article asserts that it is Superman's immigrant identity that is the key to his success as an American symbol, and situates the Man of Steel's “story” within the range of other classic immigrant and orphan tales. Eagan, on the other hand, asserts that the moral and social problems of the American government are also present in the character of Superman, and that we can find concerns over national safety, private property, and social order throughout *Superman* comics. Since their publication in 1987, both works have been frequently cited in contemporary analyses of Superman, superheroes, and popular culture—including Matthew McAllister and Ian Gordon's *Comics and Ideology* (2001), Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and our Society* (2004), Wiley L. Umphlett's *The Visual Focus of American Media Culture in the 20th Century* (2004), and even the

“bible” of fantasy and science fiction criticism, *Anatomy of Wonder: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction* (2004) edited by Neil Barron.

Eagan’s and Engle’s essays mark a significant shift in the approach to comic scholarship; they focus on analyzing cultural and situational context rather than a linear report of history, and bring in parallel scholarship on earlier American frontier myths and U.S. foreign policy doctrines (Engle 80; Eagan 94). The articles in question also present the information gathered in an undoubtedly scholarly way, unsurprising since both Eagan and Engle were scholars in alternative subjects; Eagan was a professor of political science and a Grauel fellow at John Carroll University and Engle was a professor of English at Cleveland State University at the time of the articles’ publications. However, what is significant is that both essays were published in a book titled *Superman at Fifty*, a work which advertises itself on its bright pink and orange cover as “a cotton candy dose of Superman lore.” Similar problems occur even with more recent scholarship; for example, the cover of Danny Fingeroth’s well researched *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* announces proudly through reader blurbs the book’s pleasure and “readability.”

There are a few notable exceptions where this line is not blurred—Mila Bongco’s *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* and Martin Barker’s *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* both come to mind—but for the most part, comic book studies is still a new field and the analysis especially of popular stories and characters, such as superheroes, is still emerging.

The Scholarly Situation of the Comic Book

Because it is comparatively such a new field, comic analysis and study still lacks a critical vocabulary and, as M. Thomas Inge states in his introduction to *Comics as Culture*, has “only begun to define the structural and stylistic principles” in scholarly work (Inge xviii). Thus, scholars who work with comics “tend to rely on terms borrowed from other areas of creative expression” such as traditional fiction analysis and film studies (xviii). As Joseph Witek writes in *Comic Books as History*, “A critical and scholarly language for the analysis of comic books has not yet been developed. Those technical terms which do exist generally reflect the ad hoc usage of fan writers and the comic-book creators themselves” (1).

Even the conversations of what terminology to borrow from other established academic fields varies and there is some debate over whether comic books should be categorized either as works of visual art or as literature. Douglas Wolk emphasizes in *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* that comic books cannot be strictly viewed as a traditional “literary form” (14). Instead, he insists that “[c]omics are not prose... They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they’re not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovation” (14). How, then, can we talk about graphic novels and comic books using traditional literary analysis terms? Paul Gravette has stressed that in comics, “[i]mages and text arrive together, work together, and should be read together... in some combination you read words and pictures in tandem and in cross-reference, one informing the other” (11). Thus, it does

not make sense to read comic books either as language text or visual art alone, but instead as a whole separate medium, with its own terminology and rules which are yet to be fully established.

There is also no official form of citation in comic book scholarship. The Modern Language Association offers an official citation style for comic strips found in a daily newspaper or monthly magazine, but does not allow for comic works published in either a monthly or a compiled book format. For the sake of my project, I will be following the scholarly citation guide for comic art developed by Allen Ellis and the Comic Art & Comics Area of the Popular Culture Association, which allows credit for the comic's author, penciler, and primary inker. In-text citations will refer primarily to the credited author's name and page number, following traditional MLA format.

However, while examination of characters, plots, and art within comic book stories will be necessary—and thus must follow the aforementioned format and accept the same concerns over how to talk about the medium—the comic books in my analysis will mainly serve the purpose of historical documents for the purpose of mapping the changes in popular American values. Although scholar Joseph Witek insists that popular comic books, and especially pre-1985 superhero stories, often “eschewed history in favor of fantasy, adventure, and horror” and that “comic-book fantasy” and “actual history” are inherently polarized (4; 13), I argue that if we look at each Superman story for a sense of historical values as opposed to “facts,” then they do serve a unique and helpful purpose in recording the tone of the American populace. In fact, since the serialized comic book is published on a monthly basis—and

Superman specifically has had a consistent publication for over 60 years—it emerges as a unique tool to allow us to examine the close relationship between the pressures of distinctive historical eras and one particular symbolic character.

As M. Thomas Inge states in *Comics and Culture*, comic books play “heavily on the sensibility of the American populace [and thus] deserve... study purely for sociological reasons if for no other. The comics serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and more” (xi). This is the primary purpose of the study of *Superman* comics in this project—not to analyze each comic in and of itself, but instead to show how each is situated in the dialogue of a shifting sense of the American Dream. This thesis is therefore divided into four sections, each marking major shifts in both the American Dream and in Superman’s character. The first chapter focuses on his creation in the 1930s and his transformation into an American icon during World War II, an era that most comic collectors and scholars refer to as the comic book “Golden Age.” The second chapter maps the post-World War II emphasis on American Suburbia and the new “Silver Age” version of Superman, who bears little resemblance to the character from the Golden Age. The third chapter focuses on America’s Vietnam era and beyond, where a new post-Civil Rights nation requires a new set of values and a new type of American “hero.” However, this does not end the journey. In this post-George W. Bush era, the American Dream (and similarly Superman) is newly evolving. In my conclusion, therefore, I will examine the newest series in the Superman saga—*Superman: New Krypton*—in order to hypothesize how we may continue to embody that elusive concept of “the American Way” in the equally elusive, but equally enduring, figure of Superman.

Chapter One
 Helper of the Helpless: Superman, the Great Depression, and World War II

In his *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams illustrated what he believed would happen to the fate of the newly defined American Dream in the current economically troubled time. He insisted that the Dream would only return to Americans as a graspable reality if:

those on top, financially, intellectually, or otherwise... devote themselves to the 'Great Society,' and those who are below in the scale... rise, not merely economically, but culturally. We cannot become a great democracy by giving ourselves up as individuals to selfishness, physical comfort, and cheap amusement. The very foundation of the American dream of a better and richer life... is that all, in varying degrees, shall be capable of wanting to share in it. (qtd Ekirch 10)

This is the definition of the American Dream that dominated the 1930s—the shift from a wholly personal, individualized idea of success in the roaring twenties to one that included the whole national community. There was an increased understanding that the 1920s definition of success as individual wealth no longer applied; new definitions of success therefore began to form. The Depression era caused many Americans to start to see the “dream” as a quest for security over a quest for wealth (Hearn 161).

This new definition of “success” was especially emphasized in the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt over Herbert Hoover in 1932. Roosevelt ran on a platform of the hopes and dreams of the *hoi polloi* as a whole and often emphasized that Americans needed to change their ideas of individual wealth being synonymous with the achievement of the American Dream (Ekirch 73). In 1933, Roosevelt gave his first inaugural address and laid out his image of the struggle ahead, and how it could be met with American unity:

[W]e now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we can not merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline... We are, I know, ready and willing to submit our lives and property to such discipline, because it makes possible a leadership which aims at a larger good. This I propose to offer, pledging that the larger purposes will bind upon us all as a sacred obligation with a unity of duty hitherto evoked only in time of armed strife. (Roosevelt para 17)

In Roosevelt's new image of the Dream, this "sacred obligation" connected Americans, thus promoting mutual success over of individual gain. Americans across the country resonated with Roosevelt's image of American citizens rallying together as part of a "loyal army," and a growing distrust emerged in the Depression for those who were gaining success without offering aid and support for their neighbors. The goal no longer was simply to pull one's self up by the bootstraps, but to make sure that the entire American community could get up together and begin to stumble forward.

With this political and social climate in the air, perhaps it is no surprise that this address was given in the same year that two high school students in Columbus, Ohio dreamed up a man who could lighten the burden of the Great Depression and symbolize the unity and purpose that Roosevelt described.

The Creators and Creation of Superman

The crumbling of the old ideas of the American Dream was especially difficult for American immigrants and their children. In the roaring twenties, many immigrants benefited from the promising economy and had a wide range of business success. The creators of Superman, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, both came from Jewish immigrant families. Their relatives, like many others, "expected that America would continue to

offer their families opportunities for advancement and security” as it had done for them in the previous decades. Thus, they often raised their children with such hopes and admiration for their nation (Wenger 1-2). According to Beth Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, when the stock market crashed, many Jewish families felt betrayed and began to “reevaluate the promise of America,” especially as “[y]oung Depression-era Jews, raised to believe in the promise of America, encountered a shrinking pool of jobs and opportunities and the rise in employment discrimination and university quotas” (2).

Siegel and Shuster had just barely started high school when the economic bubble burst, and they were certainly old enough to absorb the changes in the world around them. Both boys soon had to take on after school jobs to help their families get by; Shuster, for example, worked as a delivery boy for four dollars a week in order to help support his family (Daniels, *Superman* 11). However, art and writing—and especially science-fiction (which Danny Fingeroth insists “appealed especially to Jewish kids” during the Depression era)—were certainly the boys’ first loves (Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent* 37).

Siegel and Shuster often worked together to create comic strips for the school paper, with Siegel writing the scripts and Shuster penning the art. Copies of these early works show that the Great Depression influenced Siegel and Shuster’s work considerably. In 1931, Siegel and Shuster created an illustrated science-fiction story about a man with psychic powers titled “The Reign of the Superman” (Daniels, *Superman* 14). While this is the first instance of Siegel and Shuster using the term “Superman,” it has no direct relation to their later, and far more famous, creation

except an obvious attraction to the term. Siegel's dramatic prose not only spelled out a definitive historic moment, but described a very specific upper-class attitude at the time:

The bread-line! Its row of downcast, disillusioned men; unlucky creatures who have found [that] their life holds nothing but bitterness for them. The bread-line! The last resort... Professor Smalley watched the wretched unfortunates file past him. To him, who had come of rich parents and had never been forced to face the rigors of life, the miserableness of the men seemed deserved. It appeared to him that if they had the slightest ambition at all they could lift themselves from the terrible rut. (qtd Jones 82)

This classist perspective was commonly expressed in Depression-era tales about figures that were not badly hurt economically by the Depression, and such an expression would soon become standard in early Superman villains (82). Herbert Hoover himself stressed that the economic downturn was a temporary problem that could be overcome by an individual's hard work (Hearn 25). However Adams, and later Roosevelt, rallied against this perspective and Siegel and Shuster constantly showed their disgust with the idea that any citizen "deserved" such poverty throughout their works together.

While in high school, Siegel and Shuster continued to write more social and political comic strips, and Siegel also tried his hand at short stories. The two boys started their own small science fiction magazine and persisted in their work on the school paper (Daniels, *Superman* 16). In their senior year, Siegel and Shuster started to design the great hero that would make them famous: the Man of Tomorrow, Superman. However, in this early incarnation, Superman was not "super" human at all, but instead an ordinary man during the Depression who fought crime without any help of superpowers (17). However, this ordinary man with an extraordinary heart did

not resonate with printers, and after numerous rejections Shuster reportedly threw this early Superman story into the fireplace in frustration—only the cover survived, saved by Siegel at the last moment (17).

The next time Siegel and Shuster created a character named “Superman” it was four years later and he was an entirely different figure. Instead of being strong specifically in his mind or his heart, this Superman “was the ultimate acrobat and strongman. He was in the tradition of the mighty heroes who are legendary in any culture, from Samson to Hercules to Beowulf” (18). His character was still a vigilante, like the previous Superman incarnation, but this one fit more into the archetype of a frontier hero—like Daniel Boone or Wyatt Earp—but within a post-industrial, urban setting (Wright 10). He was “a tough and cynical wise guy... [who] took to crime-fighting with an adolescent glee” and whose self-described goal was to help the downtrodden and the helpless (9-11).

However, this larger-than-life hero also had an alternate side of his identity: his “secret identity” in the form of the sheepish newspaper reporter, Clark Kent. Comic book scholar Les Daniels notes that, if Superman was a figure of ideals and wishful thinking, Siegel and Shuster clearly “patterned [Clark Kent] after themselves, almost masochistically making him timid, myopic, working class, and socially maladroit” (*Superman* 19). Masochistic or not, the story of a mild-mannered common man in the Depression truly being a figure of extraordinary powers and an agent of justice in disguise was just the story that the era needed.

Siegel and Shuster signed a contract with a comic company that would soon be known as DC Comics and thus Superman made his first appearance in *Action Comics*

#1 in 1939. All of the early stories “spoke directly to survivors of the Depression” and dealt with everyday problems in extraordinary ways (Hajdu 30). For example, in the 1940 first issue of *Superman* #1, Superman “casually dropped in on a wife beater and taught him the error of his ways” (Daniels, *DC Comics* 22). Other stories in the first issues of *Superman* “found him [stopping] crooked labor unions, drunk drivers, and gamblers” (23). In an interview, Siegel mentioned that he and Shuster channeled their experiences of the Depression years into their comic stories: “if we wanted to see a movie we had to sell milk bottles, so we sort of had the feeling that we were right there at the bottom and we could empathize with people. Superman grew out of our feelings about life” (qtd Daniels, *Superman* 35). Superman became a nearly instant success and, in the beginning, entirely without marketing aid; Siegel described that, “[t]he publishers themselves didn’t quite realize the power of Superman until they learned that people were asking not for *Action Comics*, but for that magazine with Superman in it” (qtd 35).

The “Super” in Superman

Siegel and Shuster had created a character that children of the Depression could look toward as a sort of savior, a fictional messiah who understood the problems of the world and could solve them in just a few colorful pages. No problem seemed to be too big or too small, from warring factions in a South American country (*Superman* #2) to a copyright violation on a dress pattern (*Superman* #4) or a false accusation of drunk driving (*Superman* #7); Superman soon showed that he embodied the Rooseveltian values and could right any wrong.

In the first issue of *Superman*, one especially notable story deals with corrupt businessmen and working conditions in a mine. In this story, Superman saves a man from a mine cave-in and discovers in doing so that his safety equipment and alarm signal were both broken down. Superman decides to disguise himself as a mine worker and bring the wealthy man who owns the mine to justice. The scene then jumps to a party that the mine owner is throwing for his wealthy friends; he suggests that they “see how the other side lives” and take their party down to the mine (Siegel, *Superman #1* 42). Once there, the aristocrats twirl their pearl necklaces and top-hats and marvel that “people actually work down here” and at how “filthy” the tunnels are (43). Using his superhuman strength, Superman secretly pulls down several of the mine’s support beams, causing a cave-in and trapping the socialites inside. After the mine owner discovers that the alarm does not work, and he thus cannot call for help, Superman suggests that the men and women attempt to dig their way out of the mine before they run out of air. Thus, “[k]nee deep in stagnant water, struggling with unwieldy tools, slipping, frequently falling, the entrapped pleasure-seekers seek desperately... to batter down the huge barrier of coal” (47). Before long, the mine owner is falling over from exhaustion as one of his fellows reminds him to “[t]hink of the miners! They have to do this 14 long hours a day!” (47). The mine owner begins to cry and says that he “never knew—really knew—what the men down here have to face!” (47). Hearing this, Superman admits that he only wanted the rich man to realize this, and the super-strong man clears the coal and beams away. The mine owner is so changed that he promises that his mine will now be “the safest in the country, and the workers the best treated!” (48).

The theme of Superman “saving,” in some form or another, vulnerable or oppressed Depression-era laborers occurs frequently throughout the early Superman stories. In *Superman #4*, for example, Superman stops a “notorious racketeer” from infiltrating and sabotaging a truck driver’s union (52-57). In *Superman #5*, Superman puts an end to a stock trading conspiracy that had managed to cause “an unexpected wave of unemployment... [and] millions suffer[ing] from hunger” throughout the country (33). In many ways, Superman became a character symbolic of Roosevelt’s New Deal. The New Deal was a symbol and act of the end of laissez-faire individualism, and the rise of a social democracy, where poverty and unemployment were no longer acceptable consequences of a successful business and “no longer was competition considered superior to cooperation” (Ekirch 107-8). In a post-New Deal America, the responsible American business was supposed to be one which embraced mutuality and collectivism as opposed to solely striving for a private monetary success (108). Superman similarly fought for these ideas, praising in each action-packed story those who helped their neighbors and (sometimes violently) confronting those who acted only out of selfish motivation. In this way, Superman “embodied the Roosevelt-era ideal of power employed for the public good” and helped “emphasize the importance not so much of individual freedom but of economic equality and social security for the nation as a whole” (Hadju 30; Pells 79).

What might be most fascinating about the success of Superman’s character as the Depression era “savior” is that it was nowhere else to be found in 1930s literature. According to Charles Hearn’s research in *The American Dream in the Great Depression*, two common forms of popular literature emerged after the stock market

crash. The first was essentially a retooling of the traditional American Dream narrative to fit the current economy. In this type of story, a protagonist would often lose all of his or her monetary assets and be forced into a state of “rags.” However, characters would soon find a state of grace as they would either regain their fortune through hard work, or discover a moral or social wealth which they did not have when they were wealthy (118-19). As Hearn describes, it is important to note that often these stories represent social hardships and economic failures as “‘success’... in the broadest sense of the term” (119). Across the board, these Depression-era American Dream stories “required a happy ending, [and] the stories usually progress[ed] toward some kind of accomplishment or reward for the hero” (119).

The other popular narrative was the “Little Man as victim-hero” narrative, a category which includes such works as John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* and Hans Fallada’s *Little Man, What Now?*. These stories covered the “dark and difficult emotional experience” of the Great Depression, but without the more hopeful tone of rags-to-riches tales (Ekirch 120). Stories in this category often took the reader through “a highly detailed day-to-day account of the downhill battle... of low wages, scarce and expensive housing, high taxes, unemployment, and stifling bureaucracy” (120). What is most notable about this genre is the tendency for the protagonists to be infantilized or identified as “little”—the characters are depicted as small in comparison to the considerable forces controlling their lives. Thus the tone of these stories requires a reader response of “tender sympathy” for the helpless protagonist, as he or she has no life-choices which can lead to a sense of success (120).

These “Little Man” works are often acknowledged as the great works of

literature from the 1930s, as they so tenderly and accurately depict how helpless and small individuals felt against such large social and economic obstacles. However, what the colorful pages of Superman offered was an alternative, essentially a fairy-tale world where citizens were still in many respects helpless, but with the added aid of a savior to protect and help save them from their largest challenges. As Bradford Wright reflects, “the common man could not expect to prevail on his own in this America, and neither could the progressive reformers who tried to fight for justice within the system,” but Superman could be the common man’s champion and fulfill those dreams for only 10 cents a comic (13). In a press release in 1975, Siegel admitted that the inspiration for the specific creation of Superman came both out of “listening to President Roosevelt’s ‘fireside chats’” as well as a near-paralyzing sense of fear

[over] being unemployed and worried during the depression... Hearing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany... I had the great urge to help... How could I help [anyone] when I could barely help myself? Superman was the answer. (qtd Fingerth, *Disguised as Clark Kent* 41)

This chorus of hope coming out of fear resonated with a broad spectrum of American readers and, as a result, Superman was soon the most popular comic book character on the market. At a time when most comic book titles sold approximately 200,000 to 400,000 copies monthly, *Action Comics*—the comic in which Superman made his first appearance and which continued to publish one Superman story a month—regularly sold 900,000 copies per month. Even more astoundingly, the *Superman* title comic sold an average of 1,300,000 copies per issue (Wright 13).

However, the appeal and overall “American” quality of Superman didn’t just come from his populist values or support of Rooseveltian ideals. Siegel and Shuster

also added one very important detail to Superman's background and origin: he was the ultimate immigrant. The story told in *Action Comics #1*, and reprinted and expanded in *Superman #1*, explains that Superman is not human at all, but an alien sent to Earth from the dying planet Krypton. His father was a Kryptonian scientist who wanted to save his son from the planet's imminent destruction, and thus he sent Kal-L (the birth name of Superman) toward Earth. Given the Ohio immigrant experience that both Siegel and Shuster grew up with, it may be no surprise that Superman lands in the American Midwest, where he is discovered and later adopted by an elderly farmer and his wife who give him the name "Clark Kent." The importance of this story is two-fold. On the one hand, the fact that Superman is literally not human, and thus has alien powers, gives ample excuse for readers to feel comfortable with the idea that he can save them from situations where they cannot save themselves. On the other hand, the immigrant experience—and the desire for success in the Land of Opportunity—is in many ways the backbone of the American Dream and thus, through being the "ultimate immigrant," Superman is also, in a sense, the ultimate American. If he were able to live on his home planet, we are meant to see that Superman would be like every other Kryptonian, and thus "ordinary." However, through his immigration to America, he is able to be extraordinary and achieve success—and that personal success, once again reaching to Rooseveltian values, is found through helping others, who are less fortunate, find *their* success. Superman's immigrant status also allows children who were from immigrant families themselves to especially identify with and relate to the Man of Tomorrow. In 1940, Siegel and Shuster even blatantly identified Superman as "non-Aryan" in a special they did for *Look* magazine (Daniels, *DC*

Comics 65).

Comic book author and historicist Gerard Jones also notes in *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* that there is one other factor that may have aided Superman's initial success: he was *funny*. The Man of Tomorrow often offered puns and sharp banter as he punched thugs through brick walls and saved damsels in distress. Plus, Jones explains, the bright backgrounds and primary colored costume added to the overall silliness of the Superman comics: "The hero who dressed like a [circus] bodybuilder and bounced bullets off of his chest contained that laughter almost by nature" (145). However, Jones notes that this humorous tone did more than just offer breaks within the seriousness of the action story; it in fact added to the bittersweet sense of the social message: "The humor and excess of Superman made it possible to laugh along with the creators while still thrilling to that fantasy of power... You could want the invulnerability and the power, but you had to laugh to keep people from knowing how badly you wanted it." (145). In the end, the Depression-era Superman was the embodiment of unreachable ideals and wishful thinking—no matter how much one might want a hero to sweep down and fix the worst of one's social and economic problems, the comic book was a work of fiction. But the *Superman* comic allowed these children to escape into dreams and laughter and to hope for the future, and to imagine that someone out there might be looking out for the "Little Man."

Superman in World War II

While much of America, the comic book industry included, took a more isolationist stance in the years leading up to World War II, Siegel and Shuster

involved Superman in international politics far before America entered the war. As American Jews, Superman's creators were notably both alarmed and angry about the power of the Nazi party in Europe, and "[a]s... Hitler began his conquests of Belgium and France, there were numerous [*Superman*] stories featuring foreign spies and cruel dictators" (Harrington para 5). However, as long as America stayed out of the war, Siegel and Shuster were careful not to make their personal politics completely transparent in their comics; in stories where situations seemed to parallel the scene in Europe, "they were careful not to specifically cite Germany or Italy as the subject country. Siegel was also careful not to name the dictator by any identifiable name" (para 5). However, many stories still contained references too clear to ignore.

Six months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, for example, Siegel and Shuster wrote a story for *Superman* issue #10 which featured Clark Kent and his fellow reporter Lois Lane attending a sports event between America and the fictional country Dukalia. The reader is informed that "Dukalia is on unfriendly terms with us" and that the sports event may "get ugly" as the events begin to look "more like an anti-American demonstration than anything else" (Siegel, *Superman #10* 51). The Dukalian leader, Consul Karl Wolff then makes a speech which "holds his audience spellbound":

Present here is the flower of the Dukalian youth. You have seen them perform physical feats which no other human beings can. [This is p]roof, I tell you, that we Dukalians are superior to any other race or nation! Proof that we are entitled to be the Masters of America! (52)

This speech "was quite obviously inspired by Hitler's speeches prior to the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin, Germany where Hitler claimed that German athletes were superior to those of any other nation— *Übermensch*, or 'Super-men'" (Harrington

para 6). In a scene meant to display an ironic sense of poetic justice, Siegel and Shuster's Superman interrupts the speech and confronts one of the supposed "Übermensch," demanding: "Let's see how superior you really are!" (Siegel, *Superman #10* 52). Using his alien powers, Superman breaks all of the Dukalian's records, all while mockingly carrying the Dukalian athlete himself in his arms.

Superman and Lois Lane also prove that they have no tolerance for traitors, spies, or disgraced soldiers—and thus urge readers to view such people as unpatriotic. In one story, Superman goes as far as to refuse aid to a man who is accused of being a traitor, even though the accused man's life is in danger. Though the story unfolds to prove the man's innocence, and thus the so-called "traitor" eventually earns Superman's help, the Man of Steel's initial refusal is still portrayed by Siegel and Shuster as an "honorable" stance for the hero to take. In another story, Clark and Lois outwardly refuse to even sit on the same bench as an ex-military-captain who was discharged "for conduct unbecoming an officer" (Siegel, *Superman #10* 52). This emphasis on patriotism and country loyalty became more and more prevalent in comic books published after America entered the war, but beforehand Superman mostly stood alone in his convictions and in his concern for the integrity of the American military and government.

However, Superman's rhetoric was still carefully placed within the context and safety of America. For most Americans, the war was still far off in Europe and thus it made no sense for their "American" heroes to be too concerned with such distant issues and politics. Nevertheless, Siegel and Shuster were able to place their character more actively in the war in Europe—outside the parameter of DC Comics. In 1940,

Look magazine commissioned a two-page spread by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster titled “How Superman Would End the War” (Daniels, *DC Comics* 65). The miniature comic depicted Superman rushing around the world, “capturing Hitler and Stalin (not yet an American ally) and dragging them before an international tribunal” (65). In the fictional world of those two pages, the war swiftly and easily ended.

Superman was finally able to have official participation in the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. The bombing of American territory “galvanized American public opinion behind the U.S. declaration of war” and thus allowed comic books to deal with the subject outright (Wright 43). However, there was a clear problem with Superman joining the American forces and shipping off to Europe to fight. As was identified in Siegel and Shuster’s *Look* spread, Superman’s powers should have allowed him to single handedly end any war—but in real life, the war was certain to continue for some time. Siegel and Shuster were adamant “that Superman *should* participate in the war... but [they] did not wish to minimize the daunting task faced by the nation and its fighting forces” (Wright 43, emphasis added). Siegel and Shuster solved this dilemma by having Superman’s alter ego, Clark Kent declared 4-F. According to Siegel’s story, “in his enthusiasm to serve his country, Kent mistakenly uses his X-ray vision during the eye examination and inadvertently reads the eye chart in the next room” (43).

Siegel and Shuster also allowed Superman to make an even stronger statement on his participation in the war in *Superman #25*. In this issue, Superman travels to an army base and ends up running drills with the troops. Despite his superior, alien powers, Superman’s team ends up losing the drill exercise. Instead of being angry or

embarrassed, Superman says that the loss was “the proudest moment of my life!” (14).

He explains in a speech to the base’s troops:

I have seen proof that American soldiers cannot be defeated by Superman or anyone else—not even by Mr. Schickelgruber’s so-called master race! I hope the whole world hears... of our nation’s real secret weapon—the unflagging courage of her men, no matter what the odds, and their indomitable will to win! Against that, Hitler and Hirohito haven’t a ghost of a chance. (14)

With this message in place, neither Superman nor his alter-ego Clark Kent had much of an influence on the fictional war-front during World War II. Instead, Superman often offered support and patriotic messages to readers from home. On the covers, as well as in advertisements within the comic itself, Superman was often seen stressing the seriousness of rationing and encouraging the purchase of war bonds. In the first panel of *Superman #17*, Clark Kent apologizes to Lois that he can’t drive her home because he’s taking the subway instead since he’s “taking the tire-rationing crisis seriously.” Lois immediately responds, “Everyone should—it’s the patriotic thing to do!” (2).

In example after example, it is interesting to note that, in this new wartime era, Superman’s role shifts rather significantly. Rather than being the lone savior of the common man, Superman instead encouraged readers to believe in real heroes, in the form of the American soldiers, and to support them. This notably follows the sense of sacrifice which “decisively shaped the discourse of wartime politics” (Leff 1296). During the war, it was viewed as patriotic to “freely sacrifice[...] selfish desires” and to “do without” for the good of the country (Leff 1296). The American people followed Roosevelt’s lead and agreed to various types of sacrifices, such as “wage and price freezes, no-strike pledges, rationing, and higher taxes” (1297). And throughout

the war, Superman promoted those values.

Perhaps it was because of this unwavering support, combined with his previous association with the Depression-era worker, that *Superman* comics soon became “practically standard issue in the duffle bags of American GIs” (Dooley 33).

Superman made such a wartime impression, in fact, that he not only became a symbol of heroism for the American side of the war, but also for the “enemy” on the German side. According to Dennis Dooley’s article on early Superman history, during the war the Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels “bounded to his feet in the middle of a Reichstag meeting waving an American comic book and furiously denounc[ed] Superman as a Jew,” and therefore one of the most offensive American symbols (32).

Just like during the Depression, the war encouraged Americans to sacrifice individual pleasures and successes for the greater good. Superman acted as a symbol of both that struggle and the ultimate success, and perhaps it is therefore no wonder that Superman comic book sales have never been consistently as high as during this period of economic, social, and moral strife. In the end, World War II was considered one of the most prosperous periods for the comic book business, as it “marked a rare convergence of interests between publishers, creators, readers, and government policy” (Dooley 54). This era marks the hopefulness within the struggle, the time when Superman embodied the new American Dream and the shift in the culture’s unity and sense of values. For comic book collectors and historians, this era is referred to—with good reason—as the Golden Age; the time before the promise and hope of the comic book gave way to the rise of suburbia and the beginning of the Cold War.

Chapter Two

A Flag with a Face: The Rise of Suburbia, the Comic Code, and the 1950s

Postwar America was a drastically different nation than pre-war America. After the end of World War II, a strong economic demand, both foreign and domestic, bolstered the American economy, fueling a new age of peaceful economic prosperity (Jillson 198). The economy was in a strong upswing and “white, middle-class America” was especially successful. As the Great Depression began to fade from the collective memory, the American Dream began to shift in definition, soon being defined by “a high-consumption, leisure-oriented, and pleasure-filled private life” (203). In order to fulfill this private, leisure-based dream, more and more Americans were also moving out of the cities and into the new, safer suburbs. During the pre-war era, approximately seventeen to twenty percent of the nation’s population lived in city suburbs, but this figure ballooned to over forty percent in the 1950s (Ames 3). The traditional image of a 1950s suburb was often one of a “picturesque” middle to upper-class development (2). Yards were often spacious, unlike the mere pockets of grassy areas throughout the busier cities, skies were free of tall buildings, and roads were free of traffic jams. Many upper-class suburbs also included country clubs and golf courses (Spiegel 3). Such amenities were fulfillments of new President Eisenhower’s emphasis on prosperity and on leisure and enjoyment (Gray 2).

America emerged as “a leading player in the international arena” and rebounded from the Depression with one of the strongest international postwar economies (Caputi 11). The success in the war had not just fueled Americans’ sense of economic and military power, but their sense of moral power and ideological certainty

as well. When Eisenhower became president in 1953, American citizens felt like they had “a clear sense of what it means to be an American” and morality was a strong part of that identity (18).

In his 1953 inaugural address, President Eisenhower reminded Americans that the nation needed to be “true to its own best values” in order to take a leadership position on the world stage (Jillson 205). He affirmed that morals, patriotism, and national strength were all inherently connected: “Moral stamina means more energy and more productivity, on the farm and in the factory. Love of liberty means the guarding of every resource that makes freedom possible—from the sanctity of our families and the wealth of our soil to the genius of our scientists” (Eisenhower). This statement—with its special emphasis on productivity, love of one’s country, and the sanctity of family—describes exactly how the American Dream would be viewed and idealized in the Fifties. As an embodiment America’s values and dreams in the previous era, Superman would have to take on these new values in order to stay relevant. However, in order to make this seemingly incongruous shift from Depression-era values to identification with the new leisure-culture, significant changes would have to be made to the *Superman* comic and character.

The Decline of the Social Superhero

As this sense of security and nationalism grew, readers presumably felt less need to be “saved.” As a result, superhero comic sales dropped considerably in the post-war years, with many superhero titles (including Captain America, the Human Torch, and the Submariner from Atlas Comics) cancelled or phased out because of

low sales (Courtial 2). While other more “mature” themed comic books—such as horror and romance comics—kept their appeal and grew in readership, “Superman (along with many other superheroes closely associated with the war effort) had gone into temporary decline” (Daniels, *Superman* 70). Superman’s publisher, DC Comics, created several new strategies and titles to try to connect to the new postwar readership, especially spotlighting stories that focused on humor and science-fiction. The demands of the era, after all, were quite different from when the comic book industry was in its infancy; America had now built and used the world’s first atomic bomb and the public did not especially feel like they needed to be saved. Of the Superhero comics, Superman remained the genre’s top seller, but he had ample competition from these new comic forms.

One of the new titles that DC launched was *Superboy*, a comic which featured stories about Superman as a child. Immediately, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster objected to this new comic, which they had no authorship or editorial control over. The two men felt that the writers of *Superboy* not only undercut their own work on *Superman*, but that the very concept of *Superboy* allowed DC Comics to gain more money from their character without sharing the profits. When DC refused to pull the title, “Siegel and Shuster sued DC [comics], hoping to win \$5 million and regain the rights to Superman” (Daniels, *Superman* 70). However, Siegel and Shuster’s contract mirrored most Depression-era comic contracts, and thus stipulated that the creators themselves did not own their character; instead that character became a workable property of the company itself, in this case DC comics. Therefore, in May 1948, the court “decreed... that Siegel and Shuster ‘had no property rights in Superman’ since they had assigned

all rights to the publisher” (73). A settlement was signed and Siegel and Shuster found themselves and their byline removed from all Superman comics. From then on, creative control of *Superman* was no longer in the hands of either Siegel or Shuster. Siegel still worked as a writer for Superman occasionally, but he had no overall control of the *Superman* storylines and his stories were always listed—like many other comic writers of this new era— “without credit” (107).

With Siegel and Shuster out of the picture, Superman’s image and storylines both began to change significantly. Mort Weisinger was hired as the main DC Comics *Superman* editor from 1948 through the 1960s, and he initiated a significant philosophical change within the Superman mythos. The first noticeable change that Weisinger made to Superman was physical. Shuster’s iconic drawings of Superman pictured him at “six heads high, a bit shorter than normal” for a drawing of an adult male (74). Thus, the superhuman alien was often pictured a head or two shorter than the villains that he fought, an image notably fitting for a champion of the “little” people who were hurt most by the Great Depression. Weisinger hired comic artist Wayne Boring to give the Man of Steel a whole new look which was “more detailed” as well as bigger and stronger (74). The new Superman stood “nine heads high—but kept his massive chest” (75). Thus, in the new postwar age, when America seemed at the height of international and economic power, Superman now stood taller than his fictional opponents and appeared, for all intents and purposes, larger than life.

Weisinger also had the difficult task of keeping Superman relevant during a time when people were turning away from stories about superheroes. During the Depression, Superman tackled real situations in a fantastical way—labor and union

issues, domestic violence, and international politics were all easily solved with Superman hoisting the corrupt oppressors into the air and threatening to use his super-strength to give the villains “what they deserve” (Siegel, *Superman #2* 40). However, the main readership for Superman were Caucasian middle-class boys, whose families were economically and socially sound. While historian Mary Caputi is quick to note in *Kinder, Gentler America: Melancholia and the Mythical 1950s* that the standard of living was not any better postwar for “a person of color or the poor,” for most of Superman’s readership, the Depression seemed a thing of the distant past (Caputi 17). Thus, Weisinger had to attempt to keep young readers interested with other strategies. According to Weisinger’s story-plan, the new *Superman* needed to be fast-paced and “bring out a new element every six months” (Daniels, *Superman* 103). This included an arsenal of new superpowers, characters, and weaknesses for the Man of Steel.

New powers for Superman weren’t entirely unprecedented; when Siegel and Shuster controlled Superman, he gained a small number of additional powers such as super speed, the ability to fly instead of just “leap tall buildings,” and the use of X-Ray vision. Under Weisinger’s control, however, Superman’s abilities ballooned to “godlike dimensions” (Wright 60). As Bradford Wright, author of *Comic Book Nation*, describes the phenomena: “Superman’s comic books developed into a fantastic mythos that owed less and less to any standard of reality... Weisinger’s Superman flew through suns at the speed of light, pushed planets into space, and traveled through time” (60). Just like the America, the new Superman seemed all-powerful and nearly unstoppable.

The Rise of the Comic Code

At the same time that Superman was changing, a nationwide cultural backlash to comic books was occurring in full force. While the war was still taking place, several organizations started voicing concern that comic books were damaging to children, both educationally and morally. In the mid-1940s a Jesuit priest and professor at Rockhurst College in Kansas City named Robert E. Southard insisted that “There is anti-American, dictator propaganda in the glorification of the wrong-righting supermen. If our youth get the notion that it is heroic for a private person to ‘take over’ in matters of public order we are ready for a Hitler” (qtd. Hadju 79-80). The link between comic books and politics of “the enemy” (both fascism and communism) was an idea that began to spread as the war ended. Comic book opposition became so strong by 1948 that the East Hartford Board of Education urged mayor, John W. Torpey, to advance legislation to ban all comic books from being sold on local newsstands, and that same year Detroit Police Commissioner Harry Toy attempted to ban the sale of comics to all minors in the Detroit area (226; 92). One reason for doing so, he claimed, was that he felt that comics such as *Superman* were filled with hidden “communist teachings” (92).

There were a few main arguments that conservative and religious organizations often made against comic books during this period. Comics, they claimed, glorified crime and violence, depicted women scantily clad and morally “loose,” and promoted problematic political ideas. In October 1948, the uproar over comic books became so strong that an eighth grader, David Mace—with the support of his teacher and the

Spencer Elementary School PTA—called for a door-to-door campaign to collect comic books from his town’s local children: “The kids brought them to school on October 26, a cool, dry sunny day, and they piled them on the grounds behind the building... [Mace] walked a few steps to the pile, took a matchbook from his pocket, and lit the cover of a *Superman* comic” (117). Interestingly, though many of the arguments made against comic books applied more to “crime” and “romance” comics than superhero ones, *Superman* was often the comic most symbolically used in anti-comic demonstrations, likely because the series was, by far, the most recognizable comic book of the day. Inspired by the events at Spencer, many other mass comic book burnings took place nationally over the next several years.

Up until the early 1950s, however, such furor against comic books seemed on the fringe of society, mostly limited to select conservative and religious groups. But in 1953, Dr. Fredric Wertham brought the controversy to mainstream consciousness with his bestselling book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham was a German-born psychiatrist who moved to the United States in 1922 to teach at John Hopkins University (Decker para 4). While Wertham started his career doing mainly scientific research on the brain as an organ, his interest soon shifted to social deviance and violent crime. He became director of the Lafargue Clinic, which offered therapy and aid for the poor and mentally ill in Harlem and also acted frequently as a consulting psychiatrist for both the New York state and national court system (para 5). Wertham also often performed psychological evaluations of convicted felons, which led to his work in the mid-1940s with juvenile offenders. Through interviewing these young criminals, Wertham noted that many of the teenage and child delinquents read comic

books religiously. He thus began to become convinced that comics were an “important environmental factors leading the kids to crime and violence” (para 8).

This led Wertham to write an article for the *Saturday Review of Literature* called "An Antidote to the Comic Magazine Poison," which would eventually be expanded into his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham's book was simple enough that the popular audience understood it, and sensational enough that the media covered its launch meticulously. Soon, Wertham's book was on the bestseller list and well-known in 1950s households nationwide. While many other anti-comic book pundits referenced *Superman* only obliquely, if at all, Wertham focused a good portion of his argument on superheroes and on Superman in general. He felt that all comic books were, in some sense of another, “crime” comics and thus were all equally harmful. One claim in his chapter “The Wrong Twist: The Effects of Comic Books on Children,” was that Superman “gives boys and girls the feeling that ruthless go-getting based on physical strength... is the desirable way to behave” and Wertham also insisted that such teachings “ha[ve] characterized a whole generation of central European youth fed on the Nietzsche-Nazi myth” (97).

While many who opposed comic books linked Superman to communism because of his 1930s and 40s pro-labor and anti-corrupt-business storylines (notably, there weren't many instances of “good” businesses in *Superman*, and it would be easy enough to see the early comics as strikingly anti-capitalist), Wertham, like Southard before him, insisted that the truly troubling political message in Superman was instead one of fascism and that Superman stories “present our world in a kind of Fascist setting of violence and hate and destruction” (Wertham 34). According to Wertham:

Superman (with the big S on his uniform—we should, I suppose, be thankful that it is not an S.S.)... engenders in children either one or the other of two attitudes: either they fantasize themselves as supermen, with the attendant prejudices against the submen, or it makes them submissive and receptive to the blandishments of strong men who will solve all their social problems for them—by force. (34)

Wertham insisted that Superman as a super, and thus superior, human that could be too easily used to teach children an authoritarian ideology. In many ways, this claim does not seem especially outrageous, but it is certainly odd to link Superman with Nazism given that the Nazis saw Superman as an example of the Jewish-American “other” and therefore undoubtedly a symbol of the enemy.

Furthermore, Wertham asserts that there was ample evidence that “Superman has long been recognized as a symbol of violent race superiority... [He] does not only have ‘superhuman powers,’ but explicitly belongs to a ‘super-race’” (34). Though he does not specify what examples he was referring to, by “super-race” can only assume that Wertham once again means to equate Superman’s alien/Kryptonian lineage with Nazism—though a fan of Superman comics could have pointed out to him that, according to Siegel and Shuster’s original story, Superman’s “race” was not super at all; it was the difference between his birth-planet’s gravity and ours, combined with the “radiation” of the nearby suns, that accounted for his super-powers.

The overall point of Wertham’s book was to show the American people that comic books were inherently damaging to America’s youth and often caused juvenile delinquency. He cited numerous references of young criminals tying women to train tracks, thinking themselves “invulnerable” or above the law, and acting out other scenes which resembled stories from crime and horror comic books. However, many of Wertham’s examples are circumstantial at best, often assuming that correlation

automatically indicates causality. Wertham also does not mention in his study that he was working entirely with impoverished children, a majority of whom lived without much if any parental involvement—not exactly a focus group that reflected the entire national youth population (Hadju 260).

Despite this, Wertham and his book were taken very seriously by both American citizens and the national government. On April 21, 1954, the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency called a hearing expressly to investigate the effect of comic books on America's youth. Dr. Wertham was called to testify, and he took the opportunity to discuss the dangers of "crime comics," which he insisted included superhero stories:

I would like to point out to you one other crime comic book which we have found to be particularly injurious to the ethical development of children and those are the Superman comic books... They arouse in children fantasies of sadistic joy in seeing other people punished over and over again while you yourself remain immune. We have called it the Superman Complex. (qtd Hadju 264)

As the Senate hearings continued, comic book companies agreed that, to survive as an industry, they needed to appease the public through some form of active content-regulation. Thus, on August 17, 1954 the Comics Magazine Association of America was formed. This new organization, put together by a majority of the current comic book publishers, "established a new code of standards for comic-book content, along with a system of enforcement to be directed by an unimpeachable independent overseer" (285).

In order to answer the public's outcry, specific rules targeted violence and immorality in comic stories. The rules of the Comic Code dictated that "no comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime," that "[p]olicemen,

judges, [and] government officials... shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority” and that “In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds” (Goldwater 24-27). Just as no crime details were allowed to be explained or shown, scenes of “excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play” were prohibited, and often any use of a “realistic” weapon was sent back to the artist (25). According to the self-regulation, comics must also emphasize the “value of the home” and foster a respect for “parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior” (25, *see Appendix for complete Comic Code*).

Every comic book was required, from this point on, to “submit to the Authority *for advance review and judgment* all material intended for publication in a comics magazine, to insure code compliance” or the printers would refuse to run the issue for publication (23). The strictness of the rules, as well as how they were enforced, meant that the requirements for comic stories were “far more rigid and puritanical than the earlier ACMP comics code, the FCC guidelines, or the Hays Office standard for motion pictures” (Hadju 291). In many ways, the code did what it set out to do—it “saved” the comic industry from the public rage and absolved it of any perceived past “crimes” against America’s youth. However, the comic books that were now published were sometimes nearly unrecognizable when compared to their pre-Comic Code counterparts. The code called for a complete sanitization of all material, leaving little room for the social or political commentary so notable in the early comic books.

The New “All-American” Superman

Of all comics during this period, the already-overhauled Superman was not hugely affected by the Code. However, certain rules still made it impossible for the

character to exist in exactly the same way he once did. After all, “disrespect for established authority” was what made the Superman of the Depression era the character that captured so many readers’ hearts, and the abolishment of it “cut to the source” of the original Superman character (Hadju 293). In Siegel’s and Shuster’s populist stories, Superman was the voice of the oppressed and often corrupt politicians or law officers were the true “villains.” After the Comic Code, the government in Superman tales would always be “right.” Another element made problematic by the code was where the stories’ action came from. In his previous incarnation, the thrilling tales showed Superman breaking through the villains’ walls, bouncing bullets off of his chest, and often knocking his opponent out cold with a swift super-punch. However, the ban on most cases of “knife and gun play” or any other type of seemingly excessive violence made such storylines difficult. On top of all of this, the “new guidelines for Superman” also prohibited “the destruction of private property,” often a staple favorite of Superman’s dramatic entrances (Gordon 182).

In order to accommodate the new 1950s audience and the Comic Code, Mort Weisinger continued to add fantastical, science-fiction-based elements to *Superman* stories and expanded on the Man of Steel’s weaknesses in order to create tensions and conflicts without relying on villains, gangsters, and guns. The main “tool” for conflict that Weisinger used was “kryptonite.” Kryptonite made its first appearance in comics in 1949, a transplant from the Superman radio show which ran from 1942 to 1949 (Daniels, *Superman* 106). The radio show actually made several additions to Superman-lore, but Siegel and Shuster kept most of the new additions, like Kryptonite, out of the comics while they were in control. In the new post-Siegel/Shuster Comic

Code environment, kryptonite was used “to turn each new Superman story into a sensation.... [G]reen kryptonite could merely weaken and eventually kill Superman, but new types were invented that could do almost anything” (106). Weisinger’s most utilized “type” of kryptonite was his invention of red-kryptonite. In the Comic Code era *Superman* stories, red-kryptonite was a supposedly unpredictable substance which could have nearly unlimited strange and bizarre effects on Superman. From the mid-1950s through the 1960s, red-kryptonite had, among many other things:

made Superman’s hair and nails grow uncontrollably... transformed Superman into a terrifying Kryptonian monster... transformed Superman into an infant... made flames shoot out of Superman’s mouth and endowed him with the power to make his wishes come true... driven Superman insane... endowed Superman with the head and antennae of a giant ant... transformed Superman into two separate individuals... [and] made Superman’s face literally change color to reflect his emotions. (“Red Kryptonite”)

All of these effects were, by definition of the plot, temporary and thus resolved completely at the end of every issue. With the use of red-kryptonite, many Superman issues were able to offer strange and exciting stories without any violence or villains at all. Thus, while Shuster and Seigel’s Superman was a work of “social fantasy” where a man with great physical-powers was able to fight back against those who had social-power, Weisinger’s *Superman* series was made up of a series of “modern fairy tales” and predicaments drawn from science fiction (Wright 61).

Even when Superman did fight enemies during Weisinger’s era, they were often beings from outer-space or large robots or monsters. It was nearly unheard of for this Superman to face a human villain directly. Thus, Weisinger’s Superman was able to side-step accusations of fascism; rather than dictating with force how human citizens should act, Superman protected Americans from extremely unusual and

unpredictable phenomena, such as natural disasters, monsters from outer-space, and magical creatures. If corrupt humans—such as gangsters—were the villains of a story, Superman rarely fought them directly, but instead tricked them through some sort of convoluted or clever plot. For example, in the tale of “The Super-Bot,” two criminals create a robot who looks exactly like Superboy (Superman as a youth) in order to swindle local business out of protection money. Superboy discovers this and pretends to be the robot in order to sabotage the crooks’ operation (*Superboy #163* 101). The crooks are done in by their own greed and gullibility, and not a single punch is thrown or a gun drawn.

Another notable change to the tone of the post-Comic Code Superman is that he was now rarely depicted as being solely based in Metropolis. While the Superman of the Depression era was a figure of the city—fighting crime in crowded apartments and swarming streets—Comic Code era Superman often traveled outside the city to foreign lands, outer space, and the suburbs. In fact, there seemed to be a conscious effort in these stories to tie *Superman* stories to suburban values and “the value of the home.” Superboy was often shown as living within an idealistic suburban setting where he used his superpowers to do chores around the house—he whitewashed fences in “only a few seconds,” trimmed the yard’s hedges with just his hand, and used super-speed to cut a turkey for family dinner. During each scene, Mr. and Mrs. Kent are shown sitting and looking at their adopted son contentedly, sighing: “That’s our boy... No! That’s our Superboy” (*Superboy #3*; *Superboy #18*).

Another example of the comic series’ new suburban values is shown with a noticeable change in the character of Lois Lane. In the comics of the “Golden Age,”

Lois was depicted “as an aggressive, career-minded reporter” who was fiercely competitive with Clark Kent and who would do anything to chase down a lead and get her story on the front page (Fleisher 145). However, with the Comic Code’s emphasis on “the value of the home” and the 1950 mass-media’s emphasis on “clear gender divisions, with a notable glorification of the housewife’s role” (Speigel 111), Lois Lane was considerably changed in her depiction and values. Now starring in her own Comic Code approved series, this era’s Lois was defined almost entirely by her romantic pursuit of Superman and was often shown baking, babysitting, or in various stages of dating/marriage. One “imaginary story” from her comic series shows what it would be like if Superman and Lois Lane actually married. In this issue, Lois and Superman sleep in separate twin beds and when she wakes up in the morning and looks at him fondly, her thoughts read: “The Darling! I’ll go make him breakfast before he awakens!” (*Superman’s Girlfriend Lois Lane #19* 21). It is understood that Lois has given up her reporting career now that she is married and is a full-time housewife. The cover of the comic even shows her dressed in high heels, pearls, and a white apron, and saying to Superman (presumably going “off to work” to save people), “Hurry home, dear! Supper will be ready soon!” At one point in the story, she accidentally burns the lunch she is making for him and begins to cry. Therefore, Superman tries to cheer her up, cooing: “Smile if you want a super-kiss... And don’t worry your pretty little head about making lunch! Here are some hamburgers fried by my X-Ray vision” (*Superman’s Girlfriend Lois Lane #19* 29). Lois sighs and thinks, “I’ve got a marvelous husband, and I’m the luckiest girl on earth!” (29). Far from the passionate, intrepid reporter who intentionally stormed off to cover a dangerous story

in *Superman #1* because her boss said it was “no job for a woman,” this Lois Lane clearly helped reinforce traditional marriage and gender values. Her appearances in the Superman comic also helped *Superman* writers from this era allow for non-violent and villain-less plots; in several issues, the main conflict of the comic is that Lois is trying to trick Superman into revealing his secret identity and marrying her, but the readership knows that Superman will inevitably triumph over her “silly” plots and give her a stern lecture about her childishness.

Under Weisinger’s reign, *Superman*’s writers and artists did everything they could to associate Superman with suburban and distinctly American values. Even his “alien” origin was modified to seem more familiar and suburban. In flashbacks to when Superman was “Super-baby” on Krypton, Superman’s parents Jor-El and Lara are shown sitting in a room identical to a typical 1950s living room—complete with sitting chairs and a turning-knob television set (although the Kryptonian version seemingly projects in 3-D). Jor-El and Lara are pictured sitting together and enjoying a program while their baby plays with what looks like a toy-truck and a teddy bear—a picture of 1950s domestic bliss on an alien world (*Superboy #87* 31). In this way, Superman’s alien origins are not alien at all. Thus, between his strangely “American” alien infancy and his Norman Rockwell-inspired Midwest childhood with Mr. and Mrs. Kent, Superman’s background allowed readers to see his character not simply as an American-immigrant, and thus on some level still foreign, but as “All-American.”

This tone was so comprehensive that Superman’s “alienness” was often forgotten or completely ignored. When, as often happened in Comic Code-era stories, outer-space creatures would attack Earth, Superman would be referenced as if he were

human and not alien himself. In one issue of *World's Finest* comics, some sort of spell is seemingly cast on Superman, turning him into “a hostile alien being” (Boltinoff, *World's Finest* #105). When this occurs, Superman is drawn with buggy-eyes, green skin, and antennae—a stereotypical 1950s image for a “Martian invader.” The story is paradoxically titled “The Alien Superman,” as if the sensational title were a contrast to his usual state as simply an American hero.

Immediately after World War II, Superman was closely associated with the troops, but now Superman was becoming more and more synonymous with specifically domestic American values. Even how he spent his leisure time seemed like a fantastical, science-fiction version of what a “normal” American would do; the cover of *Superboy* #77, for example, shows the Boy of Steel playing a relaxed game of tennis on the moon. Between his heroic moral certainty, his immense power, and his picturesque family background, it is no wonder that Superman was soon labeled as standing for “Truth, Justice, and the American Way.” This now iconic “motto” for Superman can be dated to the *Superman* television series, first aired in 1951 (Eagan 90), but the phrase was soon integrated into the comics, and the descriptor soon became linked to the meaning of Superman’s character. Notably, what the “American Way” actually meant for the Man of Steel was never explicitly stated, but as readers witnessed him existing in a world of suburbia, peace, and consumerism, a sense of the 1950s value system certainly emerged. During this period, Patrick Eagan asserts, Superman was so closely linked with image of American identity that he became “just that: an ideal figure, an emblem of our patriotism, a flag with a human face” (89).

Trials of a New Era

The 1960s brought the real inequalities concealed by the myth of the American Dream to the forefront of American thought. Beginning with peaceful civil rights rallies in the early 1960s, the publication of the *Feminist Mystique* in 1963, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, and culminating with “urban riots in the late 1960s,” America was becoming a nation that could not ignore economic and social and sexual disparity in the way it once had (Jillson 228-29). Also, as the Vietnam War continued seemingly without an end in the 1960s, youth rebellion, mass gatherings and protests became more and more common. However, throughout all of this, Superman remained a figure of the status-quo, the smiling image of 1950s America’s power, authority, and moral certainty. The turmoil of the 1960s emerged from new voices—the voices of the young and the oppressed—while those involved with the *Superman* title stayed the same and continued to support what had become the “traditional” image and message of the Man of Steel. However, the all-powerful, all-American Superman “resonated differently for audiences of the McCarthy period than for audiences of... Vietnam [era] America” and sales once again began to drop, just as they had after the end of World War II (Eagan 90). The “American Way” no longer connoted white, middle-class suburbia, but instead many different “Ways” and perspectives. As America continued to grow more diverse in its national dreams, goals, and values, Superman was fast becoming so irrevocably linked to the 1950s “American Way” that he was in danger of becoming irrelevant to a whole new national generation.

Chapter Three

In the Mirror: Social Change and Introspection in post-Vietnam Superman

America's movement from the 1960s to the 1970s was characterized most of all by change. As historian Bruce Shulman describes it in *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, “the last days of the Sixties signaled the end of the post-World War II era” (4). By the end of that decade, the “unchallenged international hegemony and unprecedented affluence” that American had experienced after World War II had broken down (Shulman 6). America's position as a global leader had fallen as a result of international opposition—especially from Italy, East Germany, Canada, and France—to the Vietnam War (Daum, Gardner, and Wilfred 175). Combined with several radical social movements—e.g. the civil rights movement and anti-war movement—at home, the international tension caused America to become increasingly isolated from the rest of the world (175).

During this same period, more and more Americans were completing high school and going to college. This national increase in education caused the workforce to become more diverse and “women, minorities, and immigrants,” who were traditionally marginalized, “moved into the economic mainstream” (Jillson 234). More women participating in both mass-popular culture and the national work force also meant a shift in the image of the “traditional” suburban style nuclear family. In the 1950s, the roles and expectations within a family were rather clearly set and thus the achievement of the American Dream was largely seen as familial, with each member of the family playing his or her role within the framework of American values. In the post-1960s environment, however, definitions of success were no longer strictly

familial, but increasingly individual. In this new America, women in particular started to “forge identities apart from their families” and achieve success as separate and significant workers (Sochen 95).

One of the notable reasons for the level of change was that those who had previously been seen as wild youth in the Sixties were now the new generation of adults helping to define American identity and values (Shulman 2). This “new” working adult generation—with a drastically different set of values from the previous generation—notably affected the comic book industry as well.

A New Kind of Superhero

New writers and artists were bringing fresh ideas and perspectives to the comic book industry, and this was initially reflected more prominently in DC Comic’s rival: Marvel Comics. Marvel started in 1939 as Timely Comics, but did not have a strong superhero comic resurgence until the mid-1960s (Courtial 2). Then, between 1962 and 1965, Marvel launched several new superhero titles including *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, *Daredevil*, and *The Hulk* (5-7). All of their titles emphasized a new, youth culture as well as the faults and politics surrounding the characters. Marvel’s chairman, Stan Lee,

...insisted on giving his characters more complex personalities. Spider-Man was neurotically obsessed with status and worldly success. The members of the Fantastic Four, a nontraditional but recognizable family unit, spent almost as much time squabbling among themselves as they did confronting bad guys... All of these characters were the kind of heroes America seemed to need: readers could admire them but, more importantly, readers could identify with their human frailties. (Lang and Trimble 165)

Marvel comics were also more directly political than the DC comics of the period. The prejudice against the “mutant” X-Men, for example, was widely read as a metaphor for racial discrimination, and Spider-Man was depicted as often giving passionate “half-republican, half-anarchist speech[es]” while at school with his friends (Courtial 5).

While Marvel was creating new types of Superhero comics, DC was sticking to its post-World War II formula. In 1969, Superman was still being transformed by red kryptonite, out-smarting strange aliens, and disguising his secret identity from Lois through elaborate and silly plots. When politics or popular culture did make their way into Superman’s fictional world, the plot frequently concluded in a way that stressed “traditional” American values. For example, in the 1965 story “The Swinging Superman,” Superman is brainwashed by a mix of red kryptonite and “groovy” rock music, and he must overcome to the urge to dance to a tune “bouncier than the Beatles” in order to save the day (*Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen* #88). In 1969, Jimmy Olsen grows a beard and joins a group of anti-war (and anti-Superman) protesters for a “Hippie Hate-In” (*Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen* #118). The teens are reduced to little more than caricatures as they chant that “the Man of Steel is a no-good heel!” and hold up signs reading “We hate money!” and “We hate Superman!” Once again, the clearly defined link between Superman, defender of the “American Way,” and the status quo is notable.

By beginning of the 1970s, fans were vocal in their complaints that Superman was too conservative, too powerful, and that his stories were far too conveniently solved and gimmicky (Jacob and Jones 212). Soon, “DC’s market was smaller than

50% of Marvel's share” (Bongco 137). A changing America called for a different Man of Steel, as the “American Way” that his character stood for no longer resonated with his readership.

When editor Mort Weisinger retired from DC Comics in 1970, new editorial director Carmine Infantino selected Julius Schwartz to be the new Superman editor. Schwartz initially said that he “didn’t want to do Superman” but that he would agree to the job if he could really “make changes” (Daniels, *Superman* 132). Schwartz brought in many writers who were a part of what Les Daniels called a “new generation of talent,” which included Denny O’Neil, whom he picked to write the first issue of the “new” adventures of Superman. In an interview in Daniels’s *Superman: The Complete History*, Schwartz explains that the Superman of the 1950s and 60s “could balance the earth on one finger. But when I did Superman, he would have to use both hands to hold up the earth” (qtd Daniels, *Superman* 132).

The new version of Superman was less powerful, far more like the original Siegel and Shuster creation of 1938. To explain his decrease in strength and powers, O’Neil’s first story involves a chemical explosion that hits not only Superman but a stockpile of Kryptonite. According to the story, the alien mineral that was so often used in the “Silver Age” of the 1950s and 60s was now considered harmless to Superman (the rock’s natural radioactivity was “erased” by the explosion) and thus obsolete. Comic writers would now have to rely on other, more “realistic” situations for Superman plots and could no longer fall back on the “crutch” of Kryptonite. In the comic, the same Kryptonite-destroying explosion also ripped much of Superman’s powers from him, therefore not only leaving him less invincible, but also emotionally

confused. Much like the Marvel superheroes, DC's Superman now had to defeat more than just villains and monsters—he also had to conquer his own doubts and fears.

In *Superman* #238, after realizing that his powers are not what they once were, Superman hesitates before saving a collection of ship passengers, including Lois Lane, from a group of arms dealers because he is afraid that even his “remaining powers would fail” (15). Disgusted at his hesitation, he thinks: “I’m a pretty poor excuse for a Super-Man these days—and that must change!” (15). The triumph in this Superman story arc thus comes not when he regains more of his old power, but when he gains the confidence and drive to be a hero “no matter what.” This triumph mostly occurs in *Superman* #240, when Superman is left momentarily without any powers at all. At this point, he realizes: “I can die!” and that his new mortality makes him vulnerable to everything that would have bounced harmlessly off of him before, such as knives and guns (14). However, in order to save a friend from a group of violent gangsters, Superman holds on to the idea that he “can’t change my whole personality—my very identity... I’ve got to be who I am!” (7). While fighting the gangsters, Superman thinks: “I’m not used to fighting—battles have always been easy to win. [I] must force myself to realize that my will—my determination—is all that stands between myself and death... No super-strength, no super-speed—nothing except a single desperate man!” (15). The Superman of Weisinger’s era could never have been described as “desperate”—the Supermen of previous eras did not possess such emotional complexity, mainly because they were symbols more than characters. However, the new Superman required—as this story’s editorial panel reads—“a hero’s quest for himself!” (15). The values that this Superman stood for become especially clear when

he declares that his emotional preservation and determination in the face of lost powers was “in every important way...my greatest victory” (15).

Overall, the 1970s tales of Superman painted him as more inherently human and personal, and far more attuned to the various conflicts between his identities. He was no longer an all-powerful symbol, but a more complex character whom readers could understand and relate to more. This was DC’s goal, as Superman editor Infantino stated: “[Readers] want someone they can relate to. Like kids today, Superman... suffer[s] from an inability to belong” (qtd Lang and Trimble 170). Thus, Superman constantly struggled between his identity as a hero and his more private and more “human” identity as Clark Kent. The Man of Steel’s new emotional vulnerability particularly matched the 1970s new emphasis on self-exploration, self-discovery, and spirituality; while personal development was depicted as regularly linked to politics in the Sixties, the quest for personal fulfillment and authenticity had become detached from the political arena in the 1970s, and personal reflection and emotional fulfillment were now private goals for the Everyman (Shulman 79). Thus, the new lower-powered Superman was following a path parallel to contemporary Americans, who were constantly searching to find their place in the world and solidify their sense of self.

However, as the 1970s continued, Superman did regain more of his Silver Age strength, and even more new questions about Superman’s “character” emerged. One important new theme in *Superman* fortuitously emerged the same year that Richard Nixon set in motion the infamous Watergate scandal: the theme of “trust.” *Superman*’s characters were now seriously questioning if someone as powerful as the Man of Steel could really be trusted. As one comic character named Morgan Edge, owner of *The*

Daily Planet, states: “I don’t trust anyone who can’t be stopped! A wise man once said, ‘Power corrupts—and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ Who’s to say that Superman will be an exception?” (*Superman* #233 5).

In 1972, a story in *Superman* #247 called “Must There Be a Superman?” similarly examined whether Superman “was helping or hurting the people of earth by solving so many of their problems for them” (Daniels, *Superman* 138). Throughout the 1970s, several other Superman-centered comics addressed new themes of fear over how much destruction the Man of Steel could potentially cause (e.g. *Action Comics* #423 and *Action Comics* #450). In one 1977 issue of *Action Comics*, for example, the “sonic force” from Superman moving at super-speed actually ends up causing an unstoppable tidal wave. At the story’s end, Superman muses somberly on the “natural forces at work in the world that can’t be stopped” and on the “lesson [that] a man’s worst enemy can sometimes be himself” (Conway, *Action Comics* #647 20). During the same year, an issue of *World’s Finest Comics* even conjectured that a being as powerful as Superman could easily use his powers to become an Orwellian “Big Brother” or create a social and government system not unlike that of Nazi Germany. Wertham’s worst suspicions about the concept of a Superman play out, and the comic’s cover even shows Superman watching over an army of soldiers, who are wearing Superman arm-bands and extending their arms in a way that evokes the Nazi salute (Haney, *World’s Finest Comics* #247). These fears and questions were new and unique to Superman stories—while Superman occasionally caused destruction in the 1950s, in those cases he was always under the influence of red kryptonite and always volunteered to fix any damage that he had done when he recovered. As the symbol of

America, its values and its “goodness,” earlier readers were never even supposed to consider that Superman could choose to be dangerous, careless, or political. However, the 1970s examined these possibilities that went alongside seeing Superman as emotionally human, and the implications of such a humanity that came bundled with inherent concerns and anxieties.

This anxiety over the idea of “absolute” power was reflected in America outside of the comics as well. Watergate helped prove to American citizens that, with too much power, there is “an almost irresistible temptation” to abuse it (Schulman 48). Thus, public response led to several new laws and resolutions to limit governmental power, such as the War Powers Resolution and 1978 Ethics in Government Act (48). It now seemed important, and necessary, for American citizens to view delegate authority figures, whether Superman or the President, as not just symbols or representations of their nation, but as complex and flawed human beings.

A Crisis and a New Start

For America, the 1980s did not renounce the cultural values and legacies of the Seventies, but built on them, taking the emphasis on personal fulfillment in a different cultural direction (Shulman 220). Coming of age and influencing the work market during this period were members of “Generation X,” who helped define the individualistic tone for popular media in the next few decades. The main difficulty with defining Generation X is simply that there is very little specific cohesion to analyze. According to Geoffrey Holtz’s *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind Generation X*, members of this generation had a far more varied range of interests,

lifestyles, and career choices than previous generations, and they were “also free of any defining event or experience. Whereas the Great Depression, each of the world wars, the Vietnam War, and Woodstock offered previous generations a definitive, powerful touchstone for group identity, [members of Gen X] have nothing like this” (Holtz 3). With this sense of disconnect and diversity in the generation, there was an even stronger emphasis placed on claiming one’s identity and individuality, to find a sense of certainty in a world full of enigmas.

Comic book stories during the 1980s often contained similar themes of self-doubt and uncertainty, and used them to even further underscore comic characters’ humanity. Comic books paralleled current social and personal concerns especially strongly in this era, as there emerged a new, younger generation of comic writers (such as Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and Howard Chaykin) at the same time that the traditional comic book audience was now older than in previous eras. As independent comics became more prevalent and stores which sold exclusively comic books became more and more common, comics began to be read almost exclusively by teenagers and young adults, rather than only younger children. Because of this, comic books became more much more multifaceted and complex. As Alan Moore wrote in 1986, comic readers of the Eighties “demand new themes, new insights, new dramatic situations. We demand new heroes” (qtd Dubose 915).

By the early Eighties, both Marvel comics and DC started to advertise many of their comics as “Suggested for Mature Readers,” and therefore offering comics which dealt “explicitly with violence and sexuality,” and essentially branding the Comic Code as “a spent force” (Bongco 100). This allowed comic book authors and artists to

explore new aspects of superheroes that would have been impossible while the Comic Code had been compulsory. However these new, more “adult” comics often still featured superheroes as the main protagonists. Perhaps superheroes seemed especially important in the 1980s because it seemed at the decade’s beginning that “America had been victimized both at home and abroad”—in situations such as the kidnapping of American embassy employees in Iran, inflation and an oil shortages, and an oncoming national recession (Dubose 915). However, the post-Nixon America was not the same nation wishing to be “saved” as in the 1930s and, with the birth of the “flawed” superhero in the 1970s, readers could not even trust that superheroes could really save anyone who felt they needed it.

In 1985, DC Comics showed that current superheroes were not just imperfect but also truly “mortal,” emotionally and physically. It was in this year that DC Comics decided that their comic book universe had become too contradictory and convoluted and that they needed “to start again with a clean slate” (Daniels, *Superman* 148). Thus, DC launched a major comic event called *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. The overall purpose of the series was to create a situation in which all pre-1985 comic stories could be considered null and void so that new stories could be created without having to worry about the characters’ immense, accumulated pasts. Moreover, one important side-effect of the series was that author Marv Wolfman was able to create scenes of intense action and intimacy between all of DC’s major superhero characters as they united in order to fight their universe’s inevitable destruction. It is in this series that readers were able to see, for the first time, the Superman showing that vital and intense human emotion: grief.

In the famous scene from *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #7, Superman's cousin Supergirl is killed by a machine known as the "anti-monitor." In her last breaths, she says to Superman: "You're crying—please don't. You taught me to be brave, and I was. I—I love you so much. For what you are. For how good you are" (Wolfman, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #7 39). After this, a tear falls from her eye and her hand drops against the ground. The final panel on the page is Superman's black silhouette against a blood-red background, his head thrown back in a soundless scream as he cradles his cousin in his arms. For thousands of readers who could still remember a time when Superman was little more than a symbol of "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," the effect of such a stark and desolate image must have been chilling.

In the comic's next scene, Superman's actions and emotions are entirely unlike that all-powerful symbol of the previous era. Instead, he is a lone individual in mourning: "It's not fair. She shouldn't have died for me. Where is he? The anti-monitor. I—I want to kill him for this!" (40). Though Superman is talked out of vengeance by his fellow superheroes and thus he is able to stay formally "heroic," his passion and desire for retribution against his cousin's killer adds an important dimension to his character. In this imagining of the Man of Steel, Superman has the same doubts, fears, and passions as any "normal" American citizen—he is not a morally superior being or a symbol of patriotism, but a normal person who just happens to have extraordinary powers.

In many ways, this interpretation of Superman is yet another interpretive imagining of the American Dream. When Ronald Regan was elected President in 1980, one of his core messages to the American people was the durability and

continuance of this dream. He pronounced that America was “a place where ‘everyone can rise as high and as far as his ability will take him’” (“Ronald Regan” 6). President Regan was even said to have even viewed himself “as a simple citizen” who just happened to achieve the office of the presidency (6). In this way, we might similarly view the 1980s interpretation of Superman as a “simple citizen” who happens to have superior ability and thus literally can go farther than others.

This emphasis on both normalcy and personal success are especially notable in the comic *The Man of Steel*. The effect of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was that all pre-1985 DC comics characters were all considered “dead” and their previous stories and histories were now simply “non-existent” in new storylines. Therefore, all of DC’s popular characters, such as Superman, were now blank-slates ready to be redrawn. In 1986, DC comics launched a new comic to redo and retell the origins of Superman, from a contemporary viewpoint in a contemporary setting. Written and penciled by John Byrne, *The Man of Steel* tells nearly the same origin story offered by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1938, but with an entirely different tone and emphasis. For Siegel and Shuster, the origin of a baby sent from a distant planet was just a means to explain how Superman became so “super,” and thus it only took up one page of the original *Superman #1* comic. For Byrne, however, Superman’s origin was what made him who he was—both as an alien and as a human. Thus, the entirety of *The Man of Steel #1* focuses on the destruction of Krypton and Clark Kent’s life with the Kents. Byrne also notably contrasts both sections of the story—Krypton and Kansas—showing the conflicting values that support and create the character of Superman.

The story opens on the planet of Krypton, which looks exceedingly different in Byrne's view than it did in the Silver Age stories of the 1950s. While the comics of the Fifties and Sixties attempted to make Superman more familiar and less "alien" by depicting his home-world as a science-fiction interpretation of American suburbia, Byrne's "new" Krypton is as different from contemporary American life as possible. The first scene shows Superman's father, Jor-El, staring at what looks like a fetus in a metal sphere. When his wife Lara comes up behind him, she scolds Jor-El for dangerously "remov[ing] the matrix from the gestation chamber" (Byrne, *Man of Steel* #1 2). It is soon revealed that Kryptonian women are sterile and that Krypton's children are now grown inside "matrices" until they are fully developed and ready to be "born" (3). The architecture and clothing on Krypton is similarly mechanical and cold—the walls are metallic and white, and both Lara and Jor-El wear boxy long robes and black hoods to cover their hair, with Lara's hood and robe decorated with angular, gold plates.

The cold, angled world of Krypton is immediately contrasted to the wild, free "world" of Kansas. Jor-El projects a picture of the American plains on a holographic screen, focusing in on an image of a farmer working in the fields. Lara shrieks: "That savage! He—He bares his naked, hairy flesh... He touches unprocessed soil! Oh, Jor-El, what kind of hell do you seek to send our child into?" (6). When Jor-El then explains that living near Earth's yellow sun will give their son Kal-El the powers of "almost a God," Lara hopes that her son will therefore "rule them [and]... shape them to proper Kryptonian ways" (6).

Superman's potentially hostile alien origin is therefore in direct contrast, and even conflict, with his Midwestern, Kansas upbringing. Notably, when Jonathan Kent suggests that the crash-landed baby Kal-El might be "some kind of Martian" his wife Martha is quick to assert, "He's as human as you or me!" (14). Bryne proceeds to walk the reader through the Kents' memories of their new adopted son Clark growing up: playing with his toys, going to his first day of school, doing his chores on the farm. As Clark starts to gain his alien powers, he does so while playing with his dog and helping his mother find her purse; the memories are depicted as warm, supportive, and safe—the opposite of the harsh environment of Krypton (16).

The Kents also instill in their adopted son a clear set of personal and social values. While this had been implied in the past, previous eras' versions of the Kents were mostly symbolic placeholders for the nuclear family, and the comics rarely showed them imparting any serious lessons for their son outside of making sure that he protected his secret-identity and cooked the pot-roast long enough with his x-ray vision. In Bryne's story, however, the Kents are the foundation for Superman's entire sense of heroism. Jonathan Kent stresses that Clark is "an American citizen, and that means you've got responsibilities!" (Bryne, *Man of Steel* #1 17). As his powers start to manifest, the Kents make sure to stress to Clark that he "should never use [his] special abilities to make [him]self better than other people—to make other people feel useless" (18). Clark makes it clear to his adoptive parents that it is directly because of their lessons and values that he feels that he must "seek out the people and places that *need* somebody who can do the things I can do" and be a hero to them—and he makes it equally clear that he will do so as secretly as possible in order not to become a

celebrity or to take personal credit (18). That, after all, would be selfish and contrary to the way the Kents raised him.

The Kents are also Clark/Superman's sounding board and support. After he finally reveals himself to the world by saving a falling plane, Clark rushes back to his parents' house. He confesses:

They were all over me! Like wild animals. Like maggots. Clawing, pulling. Screaming at me. And it was all demands! Everyone had something they wanted me to do, to say, to sell... So I flew away... and just *shook*. With outrage. With fear! They'd taken everything you've taught me and ripped it apart. I know I have to use my powers to help people who really need me, but now they're going to be expecting me. And I just don't know how to deal with it. (28)

Not only is Superman's need for emotional and familial support unique to this period, but so are his feelings of uncertainty, fear, anger, and disgust. Superman is not an "ideal" but instead a more complex and rounded character, but who is striving to seem and act like an "ideal" in order to meet the values that he was taught by the Kents.

When Clark learns of his alien origin, his mind is flooded with Kryptonian language, history, and art, and he wonders if that means that he is losing "my mind—my humanity" (Bryne, *Man of Steel* #6 17). Up until that point, he admits, he had thought that he might have come to Kansas via a secret Russian experiment (using rocket ships), and thus be able to "prove" his Americanism through assimilation and the accepting of American values. However, this identity is called into question now that he is revealed to not only not be American, but not even human. However, with the values of his parents fresh in his mind, Clark affirms to himself that "Krypton bred me, but it was Earth that gave me all I am. All that matters. It was Krypton that made me Superman, but Earth that made me human" (22). In this way, Clark affirms his

identity outside of his birth parents, and instead chooses his own path based on “all that matters” to him and what he sees as his humanity.

Interestingly, though Byrne updated Superman’s sense of background and identity, he did not update Superman’s overall moral values to match “the times.” While Superman of the 1930s and 40s matched the tone and concerns of the majority of readers, and Superman of the 1950s reflected the national values, the Superman in the *Man of Steel* is depicted as more conservative, civil, and even naïve than the rest of the comic’s characters. He often politely calls the women he saves “Ma’am” or “Miss” and, when Superman saves a teenager from being robbed, he takes the time to remind her to turn down her boom-box music because “consideration for others is the only thing that keeps life bearable” (Byrne, *Man of Steel* #2 07). He even is shown as being more virtuous and moralistic than many of his fellow superheroes. When he first meets Batman, Superman thinks that the other vigilante is too rough and an “outlaw” and threatens to bring him in to the police (Byrne, *Man of Steel* #3 5). From the other perspective, the darker and politically harsher (and often notably liberal) super-heroes Batman and Green Arrow tell Superman that he is far too idealistic and acts like a “big blue schoolboy” (Miller, Frank 186). While all superheroes of the 1950s encouraged respect for leadership and the status quo, in the comic books of the 1980s most examples of “heroship did not occur without defining oneself as an entity separate from the powers that be and transcending traditional notions of law, order, and justice” (Dubose 916). Batman threatened criminals with severe bodily harm and thus was often pursued by the police because of it. Green Arrow felt that “the system” was corrupt and that he must work outside of it. Marvel superheroes were often at odds

with law enforcement and government, and some superheroes such as The Punisher even killed. However, with Superman still promoting and embodying many of the same values that he endorsed in earlier periods—such as respect for the police force and for the community—he is set apart from other heroes, thus becoming more of a distinct character and yet also more linked to his previous comic incarnations.

With modern superheroes often disagreeing over values, tactics, and politics, there emerged a clear message that “correct” views on morals and laws can often come down to perception. This became even clearer as the decade crossed over into the 1990s and Superman’s sense of personality and individualism became even more nuanced.

The Mortality of Superman

The Nineties as a decade continued to highlight the American “individual.” The same year that the USSR collapsed, Nirvana’s *Nevermind* reminded the youth of America to “come as you are” (Oxoby xvii). Individualism and capitalism became even more inexorably linked as advertisers focused more and more on niche marketing, and personal choice or customizations—in other words “having it your way”—was key to many 1990s advertising campaigns (128-133). Works of entertainment also tried to appear as unique and individual in some way. In order to be as appealing to a mass market as possible, each product or narrative work had to set itself apart in order to seem relevant and, thus, cool. Comic “gimmicks” such as foil or holographic covers, fake character deaths, or superfluous changes to a superhero’s costume were standard in the comic book market, and such variations led to a peak in

commercial success. Comic sales were high and the comic book companies felt vindicated that “[a]fter decades in America’s cultural gutter, comic books had finally emerged as a respectable and fantastically profitable entertainment industry worthy of a listing on the New York Stock Exchange” (Wright 280).

However, even with the industry’s overall success, the *Superman* comic was once again fairing poorly on the stands. Thus, Superman editor Mike Carlin and his team made one of the most notorious comic book decisions of the 1990s—they decided to kill Superman. When DC announced in 1992 that “Superman would die,” fans nationwide saw the event as more than just a comic book gimmick for higher sales. The death of Superman could also be seen as the death or defeat of a national perspective, “parallel to the recent defeat of President George Bush and the failed Republican campaign” (Wright 282).

Superman may have been more human than ever, but he was still conservative and strove for a moral ideal at all times. Meanwhile, Americans were experiencing a backlash against conservatism, and many teenagers especially saw Superman as “corny” and “kind of a dork” (“Headline News”). On September 2 1992, CNN reported on comic book fans’ reaction to the looming death of the Man of Steel. One boy in a comic book store said that he was happy about the death because, “I’m an anti-Superman fan. I don’t like him. He’s like a boy-scout compared to other superheroes.” In general, CNN journalist Jennifer Moss reported, Superman seemed too moral and “too gentle for today’s teenagers.”

In the “real world,” voters were attracted to Bill Clinton as a candidate partially because of his “personal failings” (Wright 282). The personal struggle with

darkness was more interesting than the external struggle with evil, readers of all ages decided. Thus, as Bradford Wright asserts, “the ‘Death of Superman’ was... a powerful metaphor for American culture... in the post-Cold War era” (282).

When Superman’s eventual death was announced, Clark Kent had just taken a significant step in his relationship with Lois Lane in the comic narrative. This era’s Lois was back to her characteristic 1940s-style career focus and wit and no longer resembled the romance-obsessed character from the 1950s. Perhaps it was because of this emotional equality that DC comics felt that the time was right to take Clark and Lois’s relationship to a more official and significant level, and to do so in the most mundane and “human” way possible. While an imaginary story about a Superman and Lois Lane engagement from the Silver Age might have shown Superman whisking Lois off to the moon or crushing coal into diamonds for her ring, in the 1991 *Superman* #50, Clark Kent proposed to Lois Lane “over soda and tuna in Dooley’s restaurant at the base of the Daily Planet building” (Daniels, *Superman* 168). The normalcy and the setting were both significant to the tone, as well as the important detail that he proposed not as Superman, but as his truer, more “human” self, Clark.

Lois and Clark are thus in the midst of their engagement and planning a future together when the monster Doomsday arrives. Introduced in *Superman: the Man of Steel* #18, Doomsday’s only purpose is to destroy. Unlike other comic book villains who act out of their personal view of the world, Doomsday is more an act of nature than a full character. The comic makes it clear that he does not “want” anything, but he simply exists to move forward, to cause “destruction and death” (Jurgens 15). In order to stop Doomsday, Superman must literally keep fighting until both of them are

mutually destroyed. The fight is shown only in bits and pieces—an arm here, a face there—but the end result is both Superman and Doomsday collapsing to the ground, broken and bloodied; a symbolic image of two superpowers who cannot defeat one another without defeating themselves that was likely not lost on much of the comic's post-Cold War audience.

The death of Superman resonated with modern comic readers in a way that his life hadn't. "The Death of Superman" in *Superman #75* sold over 6 million copies (Daniels, *Superman* 169). Comic book fans wore tee shirts asking in bold, black lettering: "Where were you the day Superman died?," and debated passionately over what would happen to Lois Lane and the fictional city of Metropolis now that their iconic "savior" was gone.

In the comic narrative arcs following Superman's death, many imposters and admirers attempt to fill the Man of Steel's shoes, but they are either morally misguided or simply not "super" enough to handle the responsibility that Superman held for so long. Finally, the media's speculation that "Superman might belong to a past generation, that he indeed might be dead and buried," was dismissed with the Man of Steel's resurrection (Daniels, *Superman* 172). Superman returned in October 1993, in *The Adventures of Superman #505*, with a dramatic reveal that the Man of Steel had not actually been dead, but instead had been in a "Kryptonian coma" which allowed him to heal and revive. The one main, noticeable difference between the pre-Death Superman and the resurrected one was his new, longer hairstyle. More "hip" than his previous, traditional side-sweep, Superman's hair hung down his neck and was tied back in a ponytail when he was in his "secret identity" as Clark Kent. Superman

writers also tried making the Man of Steel a little edgier and a little darker. However, some readers were vocal in their resistance to this new, post-Death version of Superman. Mike Carlin, Superman editor in the 1990s, was surprised at the “level of venom that some people have towards us for trying to do something that they haven’t seen before” (qtd Voger 125). But Carlin also notes that new characteristics and darker stories also brought in new readers who no longer thought of Superman “as a cartoon they saw when they were 8 years old” (93). The edgier Superman, in Carlin’s view, was more “up-to-date” and less “corny” (93).

However, even the “edgier” Superman still had his Midwestern values, his family in Kansas, and a loving fiancée—and thus did not fit the same mold as the other “dark” heroes who were depicted as emotionally mysterious loners. In the end, DC slowly faded out Superman’s attempt at a “new” attitude, right in time for his marriage (Daniels, *Superman* 176). In *Superman: The Wedding Album* released in 1996, Superman symbolically trims his hair back into its iconic style for the wedding day. Also significant and symbolic is that, unlike other superhero wedding specials that would occur throughout comic history, the Superman-Lois Lane wedding “was a dignified affair, with no lunatics disrupting the proceedings and no divine intervention at the last minute” (175). In fact, *The Wedding Album* is a simple, sweet story with little action. Instead, readers are treated to close examinations of Clark and Lois on their wedding day, such as Clark trying to build a relationship with Lois’s estranged father as he finds an appropriately fitting tuxedo for the wedding and Lois trying to convince her mother and her friends that she is not going to put aside her personality and start “cooking in a crock-pot” now that she’s getting married. The story was

nearly pedestrian in its normalcy, which underscored what DC Comics had been stressing for two decades now: Superman was human and, while his powers may not have been “normal,” his emotions, desires, and needs certainly were.

Over the next decade, Superman would mourn the death of his father, Jonathan Kent, who dies of a heart attack while Superman is saving the world from alien-invader Brainiac (Jones, *Superman* #870). He would struggle with wanting a child with Lois but not being able to have one (Jones, *Action Comics* #844). He would continue to struggle with the divide between his identity as a human, a hero, and an alien. He would strive continuously to balance personal happiness with his core values and personal sense of responsibility. In other words, he would do his best to live, as American man and Superman, his version of the American Dream.

Conclusion

We are the Ones We've Been Waiting For: The Future of The Man of Steel

Since his first appearance in 1938, the character of Superman has gone through distinct changes in order to keep up with the changes in social values and the changing definition of what it means to be “successful” in America. In the Depression era, mutual achievement, on the communal and national level, was viewed as more important than individual, solitary success, thus accounting for Superman’s emphasis on supporting America’s troops, as well as punishing those who would disrupt or harm other citizens’ prosperity. However, after the end of the War, the rise of suburbia went hand-in-hand with a new national emphasis on the success of the home, the status quo, and the nuclear family. During this “Silver Age” era of the 1950s through 1970, Superman did little more than support these values and act as the ultimate symbol of American authority and conservative values. Through the 1970s, however, and into the recent age, Superman has reflected society’s movement toward the focus on wholly personal values and individual success.

What is especially interesting about these dramatic shifts is that, when examining the correlation between changes in American values and changes in the character of Superman, there emerges a sense of a clear pattern. First, the focus and definition of the American Dream begins to shift nationwide, causing the values of the current Superman incarnation to no longer match the values most important to the national readership. *Superman* comic book sales then inevitably fall, and DC comics must react to the new national perspective and change the comic and the character in

some significant way. This was as true after World War II as it was after the civil rights movement and during and after the throes of the Vietnam War.

So the question we must now ask is: where is Superman headed now? That is difficult to say, but one thing is for sure—Superman is well overdue for a major character overhaul. There hasn't been a significant change in the character of Superman since 1986. For over twenty years, DC writers and editors have been constantly pushing Superman further in the direction of being more individualistic and more human—and the stress on individuality has gotten even more pronounced. For example, while the 1986 *Man of Steel* series humanized Superman in a way never before seen, DC's next retelling of Superman's origins, *Superman: Birthright* (2003), went even further. Written by Mark Waid and drawn by Leinil Francis Yu, *Superman: Birthright* was designed to be a Superman story for the 21st century, highlighting contemporary issues such as new Web and communications technologies, international relations, and the concerns of terrorism post-9/11. Along with time and setting changes, however, Waid also makes the young Clark Kent even more introspective and filled with the angst and uncertainty that comes with growing up. Yu's art mimics this tone, as Clark/Superman's face is often drawn angularly and partially obscured with brooding shadows. While the Clark Kent in the *Man of Steel* transitions smoothly into his new identity, with only occasional doubts about the media and societal expectations, the Clark in *Birthright* is so conflicted about his path that he leaves his home to spend time in Africa, soul searching and working as a journalist. This version of Superman drinks alcohol—a detail which still bothers many readers—and chooses to be a vegetarian because he can sense, on both a spiritual and

microscopic level, “the death of an organism” and thus the act of eating meat disturbs him (Bailey 3). Waid depicts Clark as a character unique from everyone else around him, and not simply because of his superior moral character. This Superman has likes and dislikes, political opinions, and the real fears of a young adult who doesn’t know what his place is in life will be. However, fans were mixed in their reactions to this new, seemingly more realistic story and DC comics has since declared through editorial notes that *Superman: Birthright* is now considered a separate, stand-alone story and is not a part of Superman’s official canon.

In general, Superman’s sales are starting to show the familiar tell-tale signs of the need for a drastic change. In April 1997, five years after *The Death of Superman*, the monthly issue of *Superman* sold a respectable 77,046 copies. Ten years later, in April 2007, the sales for the monthly issue of *Superman* were down to 55,681 copies. At the close of 2008 and the beginning of 2009, the average monthly sales for the *Superman* title were between 46,000 and 48,000 copies (Miller, John). To put this in perspective, in the mid to late 1970s, an average comic sold approximately 100,000 copies (Tolworthy). Today, it is common for a comic to sell only 20,000 copies, but best-selling comics still usually sell over 100,000 issues in their release month. In 2008, not a single Superman-centric story made either the Top 10 best selling comic or the Top 10 best selling graphic novel lists. *Superman: Birthright*, for example, while receiving some fan support and critical acclaim upon release, only sold 48,588 copies of its first issue in July 2003 (Miller, John). Just a few months later, the third issue of *Superman: Birthright* sold only 41,805 copies—the same month that *Batman* sold 235,122 (Miller, John). As the data repeats, month after month, it is becoming hard to

ignore that comic book readers in today's era are finding Superman increasingly irrelevant.

Perhaps this is mainly because the American Dream has gone through yet another shift, and once again the national vision does not match what Superman represents. Right now, he stands for individuality; his stories consist of how he thinks and feels as a person, and his battles and triumphs are almost always set up to highlight his singular, personal success. This still matches the Regan-era image of the American Dream as emphasizing the individual and his or her personal values, and de-emphasizing shared values and societal unity (Rowland and Jones 432). However, on November 4 2008, millions of Americans showed that the Regan-model of the American Dream wasn't the model that they ascribed to anymore. The election of President Barack Obama was a validation of his message during the campaign, which boiled down to a clear underscoring and redefining of "the American Way." As Richard Rowland and John M. Jones affirm in their article "Recasting the American Dream and American Politics," throughout his speeches "Obama attempted subtly to re-define the American Dream to move the pendulum away from a near-exclusive focus on individual responsibility and instead toward a larger focus on societal responsibility for achieving progress toward key goals" (434). Take, for example, Obama's acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention:

[T]hrough hard work and sacrifice, each of us can pursue our individual dreams but still come together as one American family, to ensure that the next generation can pursue their dreams as well... each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will, but that we also have the obligation to treat each other with dignity and respect... That's the promise of America— the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation; the fundamental belief that I

am my brother's keeper; I am my sister's keeper. (“Barack Obama, Illinois”)

The rhetoric of Obama’s campaign emphasized national support and unity, as well as a sense of interdependence on one another. During the same Democratic National Convention speech, he urged voters to remember that on the road to success, “We cannot walk alone” and that “Individual responsibility and mutual responsibility [are] the essence of America's promise.” By specifically repeating the a version of the phrase “the American promise” as connected to “mutual responsibility,” Obama privileges communal responsibility over individual, or at least stresses that a nation cannot truly promote one without the other. His speeches stress the “conviction that the sufferings of one are the sufferings of all,” and that it is the interconnectedness of American citizens that “makes this country work” (Rowland and Jones 435).

Obama’s view of the American Way, that we “rise or fall as one nation,” seems closer to the views of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who—as I previously stated—stressed that Americans had an “interdependence on each other... we can not merely take but we must give as well [and] if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline” (Roosevelt para 17). It makes sense that Americans would resonate with President Obama’s message more than one which builds off of the values of the 1980s and 90s. When Regan redefined the American Dream, “it was easy for him to argue that the balance between individual and community values had shifted too far toward government action” (Rowland and Jones 442). When the economy was booming during the Clinton-era, the American Dream built on individual values and success seemed fulfilled. However, in 2008, with the crashing stock market, troubled banks, and

falling home values, the economic landscape actually resembled 1930s America more than any other time period. Furthermore, the reasons for the failing economy are nationally understood to be the result of individual greed and the desire for profits—the byproducts of an American Dream built solely on individual success, even at the expense of others.

Thus, a return to the values of community and interdependence that inspired Superman's creation in the first place seems reasonable. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that throughout his campaign, Obama was often compared to the Man of Steel. Several examples of pop art and posters depicted images of Obama in traditional Superman poses and costumes—one popular work of art was even created by legendary comic book artist Alex Ross. Obama himself underscored the comparison when he joked at the 2008 Alfred Smith Memorial Dinner that he “was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father Jor-El to save the planet Earth” (“Obama and McCain”).

With the resurgence of Depression-era values and Superman references in modern politics, one might believe that the next major change to Superman may actually be to revert him back to his 1930s origin and persona. But there is one crucial difference between the social perspective of The Great Depression and that of today. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman was a omnipresent savior who could save Americans from their everyday problems, and this appealed to a nation which felt helpless and in need of saving. However, the message of Obama's campaign that resonated with 2008 America is best embodied in a quotation from his February 5 2008 speech in Chicago, Illinois: “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. *We* are the ones we've been waiting for. *We*

are the change that we seek. *We* are the hope of those... who have so little, who've been told that they cannot have what they dream, that they cannot be what they imagine” (CQ Transcripts). This sense of personal responsibility puts Americans not in the role of helpless citizens waiting to be saved, but instead in the role of “Supermen” and “Superwomen,” those who act together to be extraordinary and give hope to others.

Interestingly, the recent story arc of Superman, *Superman: New Krypton*, aligns itself more with this new shift in values than previous stories. In this story, Superman discovers that he is not the only survivor of his planet Krypton and, instead, that the city of Kandor was preserved in entirety. When these Kryptonians create a new home on Earth, Superman suddenly finds himself not simply one extraordinary being, but a member of a community of over 100, 000. The storylines follow the actions and politics of all Kryptonians, Superman just being one of many. The question permeating the comics is what community Superman is truly a part of—the human community, where he gained most of his core values, or the Kryptonian community, with whom he shares blood? In the March 2008 issue of *Superman: The World of New Krypton* (a smaller series within the larger framework of *Superman: New Krypton*), Superman makes the choice to leave Earth for the newly created planet of New Krypton and take a working position supporting the resurgence of Kryptonian society and culture. Though he does not fully agree with the current governmental leadership on New Krypton, he wishes to help his fellow Kryptonians adjust to their new home, and to offer his fellow citizens his personal “value... [and] to serve among them” (Robinson 11). This certainly aligns with one of the core messages of President

Obama—namely, the setting aside of personal politics and ambition in order to serve and help the whole nation succeed and flourish.

However, it is too early to see if this will be Superman's true new direction. Given that the sales of *Superman* and *The World of New Krypton* still hover at approximately 48,000 copies a month, DC comics may have to do something far more drastic to allow Superman as a character to connect with the American people again. But the *New Krypton* experiment is certainly a start. One thing is for sure—Superman has changed significantly throughout the decades to support “Truth, Justice, and the American Way,” however each era defines that descriptor. One can expect more changes in the future as America and its core values continue to change and be shaped by history. As long as Superman's story continues, he will be America's Hero—Man of Steel or Man of Tomorrow—namely, the hero that we feel we need in order to support who we are as a nation.

APPENDIX

Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America. Inc.

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CODE FOR EDITORIAL MATTER

General Standards Part A

1. Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
2. No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.
3. Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
4. If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.
5. Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates the desire for emulation.
6. In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.
7. Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated.
8. No unique or unusual methods of concealing weapons shall be shown.
9. Instances of law enforcement officers dying as a result of a criminal's activities should be discouraged.
10. The crime of kidnapping shall never be portrayed in any detail, nor shall any profit accrue to the abductor or kidnapper. The criminal or the kidnapper must be punished in every case.
11. The letter of the word "crime" on a comics magazine shall never be appreciably

greater than the other words contained in the title. The word "crime" shall never appear alone on a cover.

12. Restraint in the use of the word "crime" in titles or sub-titles shall be exercised.

General Standards Part B

1. No comics magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title.
2. All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
3. All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.
4. Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly nor as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
5. Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism are prohibited.

General Standards Part C

All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency, shall be prohibited.

Dialogue

1. Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired undesirable meanings are forbidden.
2. Special precautions to avoid references to physical afflictions or deformities shall be taken.
3. Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and wherever possible good grammar shall be employed.

Religion

1. Ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible.

Costume

1. Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure.

2. Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.
3. All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society.
4. Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.
NOTE: It should be recognized that all prohibitions dealing with costume, dialogue, or artwork apply as specifically to the cover of a comic magazine as they do to the contents.

Marriage and Sex

1. Divorce shall not be treated humorously nor represented as desirable.
2. Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at or portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable.
3. Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered. A sympathetic understanding of the problems of love is not a license for moral distortion.
4. The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.
5. Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions.
6. Seduction and rape shall never be shown or suggested.
7. Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.

CODE FOR ADVERTISING MATTER

These regulations are applicable to all magazines published by members of the Comics magazine Association of America, Inc. Good taste shall be the guiding principle in the acceptance of advertising.

1. Liquor and tobacco advertising is not acceptable.
2. Advertising of sex or sex instruction books are unacceptable.
3. The sale of picture postcards, "pin-ups," "art studies," or any other reproduction of nude or semi-nude figures is prohibited.
4. Advertising for the sale of knives, concealable weapons, or realistic gun facsimiles

is prohibited.

5. Advertising for the sale of fireworks is prohibited.
6. Advertising dealing with the sale of gambling equipment or printed matter dealing with gambling shall not be accepted.
7. Nudity with meretricious purpose and salacious postures shall not be permitted in the advertising of any product; clothed figures shall never be presented in such a way as to be offensive or contrary to good taste or morals.
8. To the best of his ability, each publisher shall ascertain that all statements made in advertisements conform to the fact and avoid misinterpretation.
9. Advertisement of medical, health, or toiletry products of questionable nature are to be rejected. Advertisements for medical, health or toiletry products endorsed by the *American Medical Association*, or the *American Dental Association*, shall be deemed acceptable if they conform with all other conditions of the Advertising Code.

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