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# **The Role of Superman in American Post-War Culture**

*Elayne Wehrly*

Artifacts of popular culture must be analyzed within their proper social and political context for the dimensions of their meaning to truly be identified and understood. "Superman," as an icon of the post-war era, must be understood in such a context, for as J.P. Williams states, "Embedded within the content of television programs, films, comic books, and other forms of mass entertainment are assumptions regarding how members of a society should conduct their lives" (103). The social, political and economic upheavals of this period, coupled with improvements in mass communications, made popular figures such as Superman ideal vehicles for the dissemination of cultural propaganda as "the popular arts have become the artistic forum for promotion and reinforcement of established institutions and ideas" (Williams 103). As a piece of American culture, Superman is part child *and* adult fantasy, mythic hero, and god (Brown 301, Legman 33). He has come to represent in the collective mind the most "admirable" qualities of the American character, but also, upon closer inspection, many of the fractures and neuroses present in the American cultural and social psyche. (Friedrich 74)

Superman was conceived "during a sleepless summer night in 1934" by teenage delivery boy Jerry Siegel (Friedrich 66). The character was an alien orphan child with superhuman powers and strength, raised by an elderly Midwestern couple who teach him to use his powers "to assist humanity" (Friedrich 66). Our hero takes on a dual identity, that of Clark Kent, which enables him to survive in human society even though he is an outsider. Together with friend Joe Shuster, an illustrator, Siegel produced what eventually became an icon worth in excess of one billion dollars (Friedrich 69). By the post-war period, Superman had conquered the comics, radio, cartoons, movie serials and, in 1951, television as well

(Friedrich 71). “The Adventures of Superman” ran through 1957 and made its mark by becoming “the second most popular television show in the history of the medium” (Henderson 46).

Undoubtedly, the show would have continued had its star, George Reeves, not committed suicide before the start of the seventh season (Friedrich 73).

The enormous popularity of the television show mirrored the success of the icon in other mediums, without however, much of the controversy that haunted the comic book industry. Although considered one of the “cleaner” comics, Superman, along with other comic heroes, was viciously attacked during the post-war period by parents, Congressional committees, and child psychiatrists — most notably the vitriolic Dr. Fredric Wertham (Friedrich 73). Great attention was paid to the possibility that comics were corrupting the minds of children everywhere, right under the noses of their parents. Concerns ranged from the possibility that children would injure themselves trying to fly like their favorite hero to disproportionate numbers of youth becoming sex perverts and violent maniacs (Mandell 66, Warshow 95). Considering the incredibly violent period which had so recently ended in reality, it appears that adult concern for children (intensified by the post-war ideology’s emphasis on children and the family) coupled with feelings of fear and guilt after the war may have been projected onto comics during this period. Adults seemed so unable to prevent violence in reality that the least they could do was prevent their children from consuming and experiencing it in the form of comics.

The television show was decidedly more tame than Superman’s exploits within the comics’ pages. The man of steel used his brains and mere displays of superhuman strength more often than overt violence against the bad guys. However, the show

was hardly drawn in sophisticated terms. Fan Brian McCarthy remembered watching his favorite show while growing up: “Superman . . . existed in a time when social issues were framed in much simpler terms. Basically, the plot of each show was about clearly drawn “bad” guys (criminals), versus the obvious “good” guys (Superman/Clark Kent, Jimmy Olsen, and Lois Lane)” (1). In this way the television show maintained what Robert Warshow describes as

the comic book conception of human nature which sees everyone as a potential criminal and every criminal as an absolute criminal. The assumption that human beings will always follow out the logic of their character to the limit is one of the worst elements in the comic books. . . .(98)

This is of no surprise considering that the post-war ideology did its best to avoid complex analysis or thought on the social problems of the day, including crime. By clearly demarcating the lines between good and evil, Superman encouraged the ideology of the Cold War without dealing directly with any political issues:

though his motto was ‘Truth, Justice and the American Way,’ there was never any political content or ideology approached or mentioned. . . . This was before the era of civil rights, or women’s rights, so there were not complicated issues explored. There were no black characters or actors, and only one woman. (McCarthy 1)

By adhering to normative and non-threatening social relationships and stereotyped characters, “The Adventures of Superman” helped perpetuate and maintain the social and political status quo by refusing to “rock the boat.”

The only character with more than one dimension was Superman. His alter-ego, Clark Kent, a “mild-mannered newspaper

reporter” was a character post-war audiences could relate to, while Superman embodied their greatest fantasies. As a kid, McCarthy found this aspect to be the “most appealing and alluring”:

Here was a person who lived a ‘normal’ life by day, but who could become a virtually omnipotent being in an instant — and address and resolve any conflict or problem which might surface. Who wouldn’t fantasize about the ability to lead a double life, when one’s alter-ego was so good, powerful, and universally revered? The fact the Clark was portrayed as a humble not-very-powerful person, who didn’t command much respect . . . accentuated the appeal to the average person and the psychology of everyday life for most people . . . . (McCarthy 2)

Critics, however, viewed the dual identity as evidence of social and cultural crisis. Heinz Politzer described Superman’s dual persona as “the schema of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde — a pattern bordering on that of the pathological swindler and criminal. . . . The double face and the split personality are symptoms of a disease that has attacked our civilization. . . . It is also an attribute of modern dictators. . . .” (353) The dual identity is evidence of a society unable to reconcile itself — caught between selves, unable to synthesize national identity or cultural ideology to a satisfactory extent. Post-war society, under the rise of corporate liberalism, encouraged identification with the nine-to-five corporate man, while fearing and mourning the passing of the courageous, conquering individualist. Superman represented the incorporation of the two separate selves into one body — one real, the other fantasy.

By offering in Clark Kent a character so familiar to post-war society, that of the “organization man,” Superman tapped into the desires and fears of many people. Afraid of being lost in the crowd,

emasculated by corporate politics, and with the threat of nuclear war seemingly omnipresent, the superhero provided a fantastical release from post-war stress, while at the same time validating the use of force and technology to achieve “just” ends and deliver us from the clutches of “evil.” A vivid example of Superman as savior from apocalypse appears in an early comic described by a reviewer in 1940: “Superman . . . catches the bomb much as an adagio dancer might catch a partner, crying, ‘This thing has got to stop!’ And ‘with a flip of his wrist the bomb hurtles back to its source’” (Brown 301). But Superman provides no real solutions to the problems of post-war society, rather he saves us from ourselves time and time again.

Superman represented the all-powerful male hero/god present in patriarchal warrior societies. Maintaining this fantasy of the conquering male was of supreme importance as returning soldiers adjusted to post-war life and possibly explained the outstanding success of the television show. However, instead of fighting the Axis, Superman now battled it out with everyday criminals here at home. Often bank robbers or other thieves used mechanical devices in an attempt to ward off the powers of Superman, but these efforts invariably failed. In an episode titled “Blackmail,” an extortion ring holes up in an underground bomb shelter with leaded “Superman-proof” walls. When confronted with Superman himself, the leader tries to use a new Anti-Superman weapon, which naturally blows up in his face when he attempts to use it against our hero.

In Cold War terms, criminals are the subversives, but the ominous symbolism of the bomb shelter raises subconsciously the possibility that Superman may not always be our friend and patriot. If Superman is such an all-powerful force, what stops him from using those powers to serve his own ends or those of our ene-

mies? The answer apparently is the inherent goodness of the “American Way” and Superman’s natural desire to do the “right thing.” This stands in contrast to the impotence of technology in the hands of an enemy when faced with Superman’s superior strength and power, as exemplified by the uselessness of the Anti-Superman gun. In this way American forces are shown to be impervious.

It is this aura of invulnerability that is the ultimate appeal of Superman and the essence of his meaning in American post-war culture. As McCarthy said:

I was able to lose myself in the world of this ultimate male role model, who possessed all the desired male attributes . . . and see him triumph in the end each week over ‘evil’. . . . Clark Kent, who often seemed impotent in the face of day-to-day trials and tribulations . . . could change into the ultimate male fantasy of power, omnipotence, and universal respect and admiration. That was a fantasy any American male could relate to and live vicariously through with exhilaration and satisfaction. (3)

In this way, every post-war American male, young or old, could carry around a “Superman” in their head, an imaginary “S” on the chest of every man in a gray flannel suit.

The fantasy of the omnipotent male takes on mythic proportions precisely at a time when it seems most at risk, as women join the work force in record numbers and corporate politics strips men of their sense of self-possession. The fantasy takes over where reality leaves off. As Politzer said in 1949, “Superman is a product of the last war, the shadowy but legitimate son of the Hitlerian age and the atom bomb . . . foreshadowing a world in process of formation, a world that is certainly new but far less brave than it thinks or

claims to be” (352). If people were not afraid, if they did not feel a powerlessness, there would be no need for a “Superman.” The presence of Superman as a major icon within American culture is evidence of a society that did not feel in control of its present or its future — post-war fears which manifested themselves in the god-like superhuman figure.

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