



1995

# The Role of Supeman in American Culture: 1938 to 1955

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## Recommended Citation

Wehrly '95, Elayne, "The Role of Supeman in American Culture: 1938 to 1955" (1995). *Honors Projects*. Paper 24.  
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MAY 12 1995

THE ROLE OF SUPERMAN IN AMERICAN CULTURE:

1938 TO 1955

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HISTORY 490

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4/25/95

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## The Role of Superman in American Culture

“ . . . dreams peeling off the bedroom wall into three dimensions that moved, recreated themselves, and became yet further dreams.”<sup>1</sup>

Within American popular culture, the figure of the mythic hero arose in 1938 with the introduction of “Superman” in Action Comics.<sup>2</sup> With roots in traditional European and American heroes such as Samson, Beowulf, Paul Bunyan, and even Wyatt Earp, Superman provided a contemporary image for new generations of young people to idealize and emulate, if only in their fantasies.<sup>3</sup> The Man of Steel achieved a level of popularity unknown to earlier comic characters and breathed life - and profit - into the comics industry.<sup>4</sup> Between the years 1942 and 1946 sale of comic books jumped from 12 to 60 million copies per year.<sup>5</sup> During World War II over 80% of

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<sup>1</sup> Wiley Lee Umphlett, Mythmakers of the American Dream (New York: Cornwall, 1983) 95.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Goldwater, Americana in Four Colors (New York: Comics Magazine Corporation of America Inc., 1974) 16.

<sup>3</sup> M. Thomas Inge, Handbook of American Popular Culture v. 1 (Westport: Greenwood, 1978) 77.

<sup>4</sup> Goldwater 16.

<sup>5</sup> Susan M. Hartmann, The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940's (Boston: Twayne, 1982) 189.

boys and girls regularly read comic books.<sup>6</sup> Superman's instant success was due in large part to the fact that the Man of Steel was "the embodiment of all the values that Americans cherished," but more importantly, the world at the time of his debut was in the process of massive social and political upheaval.<sup>7</sup>

In Superman's dualistic world, chaos and human suffering are the result of individual criminals who violate established rules of authority, rogue nations seeking to conquer the world and impose "undemocratic" principles on its citizenry, or corrupt political or business leaders lured from good by the base instincts of greed and lust for power. For Americans the black and white comic book fantasies provided escape from an increasingly complex reality and encouraged a simplistic view of cataclysmic changes both in American society and the world at large. Within this dualistic context, Superman is presented as a redemptive figure: the hero who saves the American people specifically, but the world in general, from the destructive elements of a world full of sin and corruption.

The Superman character provided a fantastical answer to the problems of a world riding on the coattails of the worst economic disaster in history and a world war. With another global conflict rapidly approaching people sought to assuage their fears that the world was out of control: "Never did man so desperately need a dream in which he was again master of his fate."<sup>8</sup> Superman, disguised as the common "mild-

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 190.

<sup>7</sup>Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble, "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 22 (Winter 1988): 160.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Horn, *Women in the Comics* (New York: Chelsea House, 1977) 89.

mannered” organization man, Clark Kent, filled this void in the American psyche.

Fighting “a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American Way,” Superman reassured us of the potency, superiority and imminent triumph of American ideals over “evil” in its many forms.<sup>9</sup> In his most powerful cultural capacity, Superman served as a messianic savior from apocalypse - a secular Christ - soothing fears and anxieties about the destructive potential (and reality) of technology, the natural world, and human malevolence. His unerring faith in the “American Way” discouraged doubt about the adequacy of American economic and political structures to maintain order and serve human needs, as well as any discussion of the complicity of those institutions in the creation of domestic and world problems.

Popular culture, although often derided within academic circles, holds great value to one interested in documenting the hopes, fears, dreams and aspirations held by the masses who consume it. Artifacts of popular culture, especially comics, provide a lens through which the researcher may view a specific period of historical reality through the fantasies that appealed to the people of the period. Russell Nye explains the value of the comics specifically as having “reflected what millions hoped and feared, what they wanted and rejected, and what they thought about things that mattered to them. . . . The comic book is a visual extension of our private fantasies, our dream worlds . . . .”<sup>10</sup> In this way, the comic book as a historical artifact provides “. . . a language of visual stimulation that is at once specific, symbolic, and universal, characteristics

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<sup>9</sup> E. Nelson Bridwell, Superman from the Thirties to the Seventies (New York: Bonanza, 1971) 10.

<sup>10</sup> Umphlett 102.

that in a fantasy and nostalgic sense both enclose and expand the real world.”<sup>11</sup> Although seemingly a very private sphere, these “dream worlds” draw extensively upon public situational and ideological realities and are rich in historical context, as well as relevance.

The period of 1929 to 1945 has been described as one of dreaming, of escapism in American popular culture.<sup>12</sup> Americans took refuge in their fantasies when the hardships of the world seemed too much to bear. It was in this cultural climate that Superman was introduced. Superman No. 1 appeared in Action Comics’ June 1938 issue. Sent to Earth in a spaceship built by his scientist father from a far distant planet about to be destroyed, our infant hero lands in the Midwest and is found and graciously adopted by an elderly couple, Mary and John Kent. His adoptive parents soon become aware of his unique physical talents and make every effort to teach the young marvel he “must use it to assist humanity.” With his parent’s steady midwestern morals guiding him, young Clark becomes “Superman, champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!”<sup>13</sup> As Jeffrey Lang and Patrick Trimble state: “During the twentieth century, as America became even more technological, the hero came to represent the needs of the masses. . . . [and] the real monomythic heroes came from the lower classes or the great American mid-west”<sup>14</sup>

Superman resembles his Christian counterpart, Jesus, in terms of asexual origin (both also being mothered by a woman named Mary);

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>12</sup> William W. Savage, Comic Books and America, 1945-1954 (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1990) 3.

<sup>13</sup> Bridwell 20.

<sup>14</sup> Lang 159.

however, the comic book carries the theme even further by reducing the role of the female in his development to that of caregiver. The “sky-god” figure, represented by Superman’s natural father, later named Jor-El, is alone credited with his son’s existence on Earth. Instead of the body of a woman, the mythic hero arrives on Earth in a device designed by a male scientist, further removing women from association with power and the origins of the superhero. This theme of disassociation from women would continue throughout the first and subsequent issues, for Superman was, after all, a male character, and meant to appeal to young American male fantasies. Women occupy an ambivalent and often contradictory space in the Superman mythology, appearing in the comic as sexually desirable, but also dangerous and ambitious. Women, in general, are portrayed as in need of a great deal of protection and supervision -- variations on the “damsel in distress” which provide the hero with further challenges to test his strength and skill, as well as offering a feminine element with which to contrast the hero’s hyper-masculine characteristics<sup>15</sup>

Four female characters are present in the first episode. In the first series of frames, Jack Kennedy has been killed and Superman discovers the guilty party is Bea Carroll, a nightclub singer, who “rubbed him out for two-timing her” and framed an innocent woman for her crime. She is confronted by the Man of Steel in her dressing room and after having her charms rebuffed by our hero, she naively pulls out a gun and threatens him with it. With a lightning quick dash, Superman snatches the gun away with an exasperated: “You little vixen!”. He forces her to sign a confession, ties her up and flies her, trussed, to the governor’s mansion, arriving just

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<sup>15</sup> Hartmann 190.

in time to save the innocent life of Evelyn Carry from being extinguished in the electric chair.<sup>16</sup>

Next, Clark Kent is assigned to report on a “wife-beating at 211 Court Ave!”. Arriving on the scene dressed as Superman, Clark confronts a hulking ogre of a man brandishing a belt over a female figure stretched cowering at the bottom of the frame. Her arms covering her face, she could be any woman. The domestic abuser warns Superman: “Don’t get tough!”, even as he is being lifted into the air by superstrength. He is hurled against the wall by Superman, who reminds him: “You’re not fighting a woman, now!”. But his opponent refuses to acknowledge his fate and rushes Superman with a knife. When the blade breaks against super-skin, the fool finally cowers in fear and in the next frame is pictured fallen forward and supported by Superman’s arms. The Man of Steel exclaims “Fainted!”<sup>17</sup> The “feminized” reaction of fainting in response to Superman’s superior strength serves as an indicator that “real” men don’t beat women -- only cowards, or men who fail to dominate them by other means. Superman responds to violence with violence and the scene, except for the initial figure of the frightened woman, is painted as a battle between two opposing males, one who purports to be a “protector of the oppressed” and one who oppresses.

The last storyline includes a similar theme, but the female victim in this case is Lois Lane, Clark’s ambitious female counterpart in the journalistic world. The hazards and frustrations of a dual identity also are explored as Lois reluctantly accepts a date with her lackluster, “mild-mannered” compatriot. However, their romantic evening is abruptly and

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<sup>16</sup> Bridwell 20-28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 29-30.



rudely interrupted when a group of toughs cut in on Clark's dance, a scuffle ensues and Lois is disgusted by Clark's lack of manliness. As she hails a cab, she delivers a cruel blow to our hero in disguise, as she reveals why she avoids him: "Because you're a spineless, unbearable COWARD!". However, the thugs follow Lois and force her taxi off the road and kidnap her. Superman comes to her aid just in the nick of time, of course, and after roughing up the toughs, gives her a personal lift home -- in his arms. The next day at the paper office, Lois attempts to convince her boss that she saw Superman. He responds with disbelief and patronizingly asks her: "Are you sure it wasn't pink elephants you saw?"<sup>18</sup> Earlier, this same character had considered Superman worthy of reportage and had personally assigned Clark Kent to investigate such sightings.<sup>19</sup> Apparently, the word of a woman is simply too unreliable.

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After World War I and its unsatisfactory peace, the American people looked for reasons for U. S. involvement in what seemed to many a European conflict lacking in U.S. interests vital enough to justify risking American lives. The role of munitions manufacturers selling arms on loan to nations unable to pay up front became a major issue that emerged from the Nye Committee assigned to investigate U.S. involvement.<sup>20</sup> Such loans could only be repaid if the borrower was victorious in the conflict. When it

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 30-34.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas G. Paterson, J. Garry Clifford, and Kenneth J. Hagan American Foreign Relations: A History Since 1895 vol. II: (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co., 1995) 156.

appeared that the Allied powers might be vanquished the U.S. was forced to protect U.S. investment in the waging of a foreign conflict, in order to protect jobs and the economy back home. To pacifists such logic was not only barbaric but also represented the most irresponsible and amoral side of capitalism. Sending young men to die to protect the profits of “merchants of death” was simply unacceptable, and certainly unchristian.

The Superman comic dealt with this issue, as late as 1939, when the U.S. was again opposed to involvement in yet another World War.<sup>21</sup> Superman follows a trail of intrigue and discovers that a munitions manufacturer, Emil Norvell, has been bribing a public official to vote for involvement in a South American war. Superman decides to teach Norvell a lesson by forcing him to enlist in the army and carry his own weapons into battle: “What I can’t understand is why you manufacture munitions when it means that thousands will die horribly”. The profiteer scoffs: “Men are cheap -- munitions expensive”. Unable to see the primacy of human life over profits, Superman leads the evil capitalist into battle. As the first shell bursts overhead, Norvell is reduced to a shivering coward when his own life is in danger: “This is no place for a sane man! I’ll die!” Norvell agrees never to manufacture weapons of destruction again -- only firecrackers -- and is allowed to return to the United States his lesson learned. But Superman’s job is not yet over. He captures the lead generals of the opposing armies and forces them to fight each other to the death. When the men meet face to face they claim: “We’re not angry at each other!” and that they know of no reason why their armies are battling.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 215.

Superman deduces: "Gentlemen, it's obvious you've been fighting only to promote the sale of munitions! Why not shake hands and make up?"<sup>22</sup>

The fact that the munitions manufacturer was allowed to return home and continue his business, albeit in a less murderous vein, reflects a realization that such men are vital to the workings of a capitalist system, but their irresponsible impulses to drive for profit at the expense of all else must be restrained by virtue and good moral sense. The "merchant of death" is offered his salvation by Superman, who shows him the error of his ways and holds the key to his continued survival. The man repents and vows only to dabble in "innocent" capitalist pursuits -- the sale of children's explosives. The generals, too, are spared a terrible fate at the hands of Superman, by recognizing his "truth". Although these men no doubt were responsible for thousands of deaths -- all were allowed the opportunity to repent and repudiate the false gods of profit and power. This is in contrast to the first villain of the Superman saga, Bea Carroll, for whom Superman made no deals and practically delivered to the electric chair himself. A woman who kills a man is a sinner without hope of redemption, worthy only of contempt and a fiery death. She is expendable as a woman in ways that men, especially elite men like generals and heads of corporations, are not, and as a *female* killer in a patriarchal society she is more dangerous than any man could ever be.

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By 1941, Superman had become an instrumental force in the struggle against fascism, but for the most part battled it out behind the lines with

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<sup>22</sup> Bridwell 34-50.

saboteurs and domestic threats to national security. Superman, “foe of all interests and activities subversive to this country’s best interests, . . . loses no time in going into action when he encounters a menace to American democracy.”<sup>23</sup> In a comic version of the 1936 Olympics, Lois and Clark attend the “Dukalia-American Sports Festival” which Lois remarks: “. . . looks more like an anti-American demonstration than anything else!”, as the Dukalian athletes march by with their arms raised in the “hiel.”<sup>24</sup> Suspicious, Clark slips away and “whips off his civilian garments standing revealed as the mighty **SUPERMAN**: “I’m convinced this sports festival is but the front for an organization fomenting unAmerican activities . . . .” The Dukalian consul, Karl Wolff, complete with hitlerian moustache, delivers an inflammatory speech that riles our hero: “Present here is the flower of Dukalian youth! You have seen them perform physical feats which no other human beings can. Proof, 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!” Unable to control his temper any longer, the Man of Tomorrow swoops down and begins a display of physical prowess on behalf of the United States that awes the Dukalians. He grasps the foreign athletes and hurls them like shot puts, hurtles the pole vault with a Dukalian tucked under his arm, and runs the hundred yard dash in “two seconds flat!” Our hero then grasps the consul by his shirt collar and deposits him on the top of a flag pole. The deposed orator cries out: “You can’t leave me here!”, to which Superman sarcastically replies: “Don’t like it there, eh? Well, you’re free to let go any time you want!”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>24</sup> Paterson 153; Bridwell 64.

<sup>25</sup> Bridwell 64-66.

Symbolically, Superman represents the superior abilities of the American people -- even if he is an extraterrestrial immigrant.<sup>26</sup> The vulgar display of power against the Dukalians is typical of the quintessential purveyor of “the American Way”, as Martin Williams describes him:

Superman is a crude version of the hero . . . . Unlike his more developed analogues in all the world’s great religions, Superman does not offer love or goodwill, self-knowledge or contemplation as keys to man’s salvation. He offers his own physical powers. Ultimately Superman’s message for man rests in his own superior strength and lies in his power to be an enforcer of his own judgement of what is good and what is evil.<sup>27</sup>

Superman in this sense is not only a redemptive messiah for upstanding American citizens, he is judge, jury, and executioner of those he deems the foes of American interests. Superman upholds the gospel of force and justifies violence not only in response to real attacks, but to *perceived* threats to American security, and even to insult. The Man of Steel becomes the symbolic representation of what Robert Jewett has termed America’s tradition of “Zealous Nationalism” which “seeks to redeem the world by the destruction of the wicked.”<sup>28</sup> Rather than resolve conflicts through “reasoned argument and orderly debate,” Zealous Nationalism attempts to “impose beliefs through violence and other uses of power.”<sup>29</sup> In Superman’s world unacceptable beliefs are punished with violence, and

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<sup>26</sup> Savage 5.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Barrier and Martin Williams, A Smithsonian Book of Comic Book Comics (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 1981) 18.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Jewett, The Captain America Complex (Philadelphia: Westheimer, 1973) 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

such punishment is considered legitimate as he is “on our side.” Viewed in this way, Superman is anything but a symbol of freedom and democracy; instead he represents the ordering influence of brute force and the mindless nationalism he is supposedly fighting against in the struggle against fascism.

In 1942 an issue of Superman comics included a story of suspected saboteurs from the nation of Napkan, a thinly veiled reference to Japanese aggression, as all the subversive characters had distinct but distorted Asian features and practiced “jiu jitsu.” Superman eavesdrops on the ambassadors of the aggressor nation with the aid of his superhearing and discovers a devious plot to overthrow the pro-U. S. government of a South American nation: “. . . it will be but the beginning. We will perform similar coups in the other Latin American nations until South America is all anti-American. After that, attacking the United States will be a simple matter.”<sup>30</sup> Anti-Japanese feelings and fear of sabotage and subversion were reinforced by depictions of Asians as imperialists hungry for world domination.<sup>31</sup>

During the war years, Superman served as a morale booster both at home and overseas, as comics “proved tremendously popular among G.I.’s outselling . . . Life and Reader’s Digest by a ratio of 10 to 1.”<sup>32</sup> The Man of Steel starred in “America’s Secret Weapon” issued in 1943 and the story is an obvious attempt to arouse hawkish patriotic sentiments. Superman appears before a crowd of G.I.’s in training as part of a USO program and offers to take part in simulated military maneuvers “if it would help the morale of the men . . . .” (165). His participation is qualified, however, by

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<sup>30</sup> Bridwell 107.

<sup>31</sup> Paterson 269.

<sup>32</sup> Goldwater 16-17.

his assertion that “If anyone thinks I’m doing the army a favor, he’s got the wrong slant . . . I’m just as anxious to see our boys in action as they are to see me!” (164). The Man of Steel is chosen as a member of the “Blue team”, and Lois, an honorary, but passive, member of the “Red team,” complains: “I’d hoped you’d be on my side!” Superman responds, “Maybe it’s just as well young lady! How could I keep my mind on war if I had to rescue you every five minutes?”<sup>33</sup>

Superman performs incredible feats of strength during the mock battle, including punching a tunnel through a mountain of rock with his bare fists. His activities are tactical in nature and he does not take part in mock combat with the other soldiers. Our hero stops to check on Lois and she exclaims indignantly:

“Don’t look at me as if I need rescuing! For once, I don’t!”

“You would if this were really war,” he reminds her.<sup>34</sup>

Due to his help it appears that the Blue army has won. However, the Red general steps up and tries one last time to rally his troops:

Men of the Red Army! They say you’re licked! But what if the men who came out of that mountain weren’t your own buddies? What if they were Japs or Nazis? Would you quit fighting just because you were taken by surprise and outnumbered? Would you let down the folks who are counting on you to save your country and the world?<sup>35</sup> (171).

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<sup>33</sup> Bridwell 164-165.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 171.

The Red troops respond with a resounding "NO!", and rising to the occasion, turn the tide against Superman and the Blue team. After the smoke clears, Superman gives an impromptu speech of his own:

It's the winner who rates the cheers -- and I was on the losing side today! I have seen proof that American soldiers cannot be defeated by SUPERMAN or anyone else -- not even Mr. Schickelgruber's so-called master race! I hope the whole world hears of this and of our nation's 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! . . . **Hooray for the American fighting man -- the real champion on land, on sea and in the air.**<sup>36</sup>

The story strived to maintain a distance between the fantasy of Superman and the reality of World War II. There can be no doubt that the Man of Tomorrow is on our side, but he cannot fight our wars for us. He serves more as a highly sophisticated strategic device, while keeping the bloody duty of actual fighting to the courageous "common man." Superman cannot prevent war, or eliminate American casualties, he can only give us moral and tactical support. The presence of Superman as an American ally reminds the nation of the moral rectitude of their crusade and assures American men of their virility and military prowess. By asserting that Lois would be in need of rescue if the battle were real, Superman affirms the idea that the battlefield is an essentially male domain. The "rescue" of Lois from such conditions would not only be for her own good, but also serves to remove the impure female element from male space.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 172-173.



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Post-war comics saw Superman immersed in stopping domestic criminal activity, as well as repelling various invaders from outerspace, including a plot by “Martler,” a Martian dictator and admirer of Hitler, who hoped to attack and conquer Earth with his league of “Solazis.”<sup>37</sup> However, issues on the home front occupied most of Superman’s time. As the post-war world adjusted to domesticity, so did Superman, and his relationships with women became a common theme.

Our hero’s dual personality prevented him from entering into a truly intimate relationship (marriage of course being the Man of Steel’s only morally legitimate option) -- as his crime fighting career would put his mate in danger: “If criminals ever learned my Clark Kent identity, they could seize my wife as a hostage to force me to stop fighting them!”<sup>38</sup> Women, by virtue of being weak and vulnerable to kidnapping, create vulnerabilities in “supermen” and prevent the full realization of super abilities. Relations with women, therefore, pollute male strength and, in fact, reduce “supermen” to mere mortals.

Superman reveals this dilemma as he ponders the possibilities of a life with his college sweetheart: “There’s only one way I can marry and be sure she’ll never be endangered! I must tell her my secret identity -- and then give up my **Superman** career and remain only in my Clark Kent identity!”<sup>39</sup> The Man of Steel is prevented from having to make such a drastic decision, as his sweetheart reveals a secret identity of her own --

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

she is a mermaid from "the sunken island known as Atlantis" on a mission to "learn of the surface people's progress" and must return to her people beneath the sea.<sup>40</sup> Superman's romantic intentions are foiled, but he is saved from having to make a critical decision about his future as a superhero -- and the world shall continue to benefit from the Man of Tomorrow's magnificent exploits. Superman's single status was of great importance to the myth, as a hero must not be bridled by ordinary social entanglements, and certainly cannot have his existence circumscribed by an exclusive relationship with a woman. A quintessential loner: "The superhero could have no distractions from the responsibilities of saving the world, and such an emotional distance allowed the superhero to maintain an almost superhuman sense of objectivity."<sup>41</sup>

However, post-war emphasis on domestic obligations required that the comics at least *suggest* that Superman could become a "family man." A comic cover from the 1950's -- "Featuring 'SUPERMAN'S FUTURE WIFE!' Can you guess who she is?" -- pictures the Man of Steel sitting at home in a panelled family room across from a female figure whose face is covered by a blank square. Two small boys in superboy costumes are flying around the room chasing a ball, one boy having just flown *through* the wall! Superman exclaims: "Dear, can't you keep our Super-twins out of mischief?" The faceless woman replies: "But Superman, how can I control them when they've got super-powers just like their dad?"<sup>42</sup> The identity of the female, although presented as a "mystery," is really of no importance, as it is the superhero's fatherly presence that takes center

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 264.

<sup>41</sup> Lang 162.

<sup>42</sup> Bridwell 209.

stage. Continuing the theme of female incompetence, Superman's wife is even inept at child rearing when forced to contend with boyish super-strength. It is obviously up to the hero to maintain order and establish authority in his own home, as well as the world at large. This further explains Superman's reluctance to marry -- as no woman could possibly handle super-children on her own and would require help from her super-spouse, taking precious time away from his crime fighting activities.

By manufacturing a *possible* domestic future for Superman, the myth managed to present him as a model for fatherhood and paternal authority, without jeopardizing his independence from society. During the post-war period and the baby boom, fatherhood became central to men's lives, and the presence of a strong male figure in the home was thought to be essential for the health of the family and society at large. With regard to children, this presence was necessary to "counteract the overabundance of maternal care," which might turn children, especially boys, into "'sissies,' . . . homosexuals, 'perverts,' and dupes of the communists."<sup>43</sup> It was up to fathers, like Superman, to prevent this from happening to red blooded American boys.<sup>44</sup>

The faceless female represents what Simone de Beauvoir termed "'the Other' in traditional society" -- a symbolic phenomenon that resigns women to the role of the passive, ineffectual being: ". . . society takes for granted the implication that man is the subject in art and life. Man is seen as the active sex. . . . she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the

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<sup>43</sup> Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (Harper Collins, 1988) 146.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

essential.”<sup>45</sup> In terms of the dominant gender ideology during the post-war period, such an image of the “universal” housewife was not controversial. It was Lois Lane and her competing desires for Superman’s affections and a successful career that created tension within the comic.

Undermining Lois’ autonomy and ability was Superman’s disapproval of her aggressive journalistic tactics, his constant rescuing of her from dangerous circumstances, and his often patronizing comments concerning her apparent inability to look out for herself, as it were: “Lois Lane was never quite as self-sufficient as she believed.”<sup>46</sup> Such thematic subversion of Lois’ autonomy was necessary, as her “desire for responsible self-hood, for the achievement of authenticity through individual choice, comes up against the assumption that a woman aspiring to selfhood is by definition selfish, deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender.”<sup>47</sup> It was Superman’s duty to remind Lois (and the reader) when her exploits went beyond acceptable limits for her sex.

However, Lois Lane did provide an ambitious independent female image at a time when such characteristics were becoming more acceptable for women, but such images simply did not come without tension. As Susan Hartmann states: “. . . most of the popular media represented and validated women’s novel wartime roles and confirmed their ability to rise to new challenges. At the same time, the public’s anxieties about those departures from convention were equally well represented.”<sup>48</sup> Women had gained substantial experience as breadwinners during the Depression,

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<sup>45</sup> J. P. Williams, “All’s Fair in Love and Journalism: Female Rivalry in *Superman*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* v. 24 (Fall 1990): 105.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>48</sup> Hartmann 204.

and had joined the work force en masse during the war years.<sup>49</sup> Such changes in female work patterns and economic roles threatened traditional male dominance in the public sphere, especially during post-war reconversion, as returning soldiers perceived women as competitors for jobs.<sup>50</sup>

Affirmation of new roles for women in popular media, including comics, were countered with thematic devices that undermined the notion of complete female autonomy and authority: "The outcome of these stories frequently reinforced the idea that female autonomy was temporary and illusory."<sup>51</sup> A May 1951 issue entitled "The Girl of Steel!" provides a prime example of this phenomenon. Lois Lane turns into a "super-being" after tinkering with a "vivanium machine," an invention by Lex Luthor, "capable of making anyone temporarily 'as powerful as **Superman!**'". Lois attempts to use her powers but shows herself to be "generally inept," for in the words of Superman: "'She doesn't have the skilled control necessary to direct her strength, . . . not knowing how to control super-power is worse than [having] **no power**' at all". After her artificial powers have waned, Lois exclaims: "Oh -- I'm so glad to be just plain Lois Lane again, now that I've learned how useless super-power is without the wisdom to use it!"<sup>52</sup> Her lesson learned, Lois happily returns to her ordinary duties as Superman's love-interest and damsel in distress. Her recognition of Superman's heroic superiority is crucial to the mythology -- for as the representative of the female, Lois must accept patriarchal hegemony of

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<sup>49</sup> May 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>51</sup> Williams 106-107.

<sup>52</sup> Michael L. Fleisher, The Great Superman Book (New York: Harmony, 1978) 194.

"superpower" in order for the male redemptive hero to maintain symbolic legitimacy. She recognizes and accepts the sphere of "superpower" as belonging to Superman alone. Similarly, in post-war America, women were encouraged to return to the domestic sphere and capitulate to men in economic and political matters.

Another issue entitled "Lois Lane, **Superwoman**" presents a Lois whose super-powers are completely illusory -- a trick managed by Superman to protect his precious secret identity, as the cover claims: ". . . it takes a **Superman** to produce a **Superwoman**."<sup>53</sup> Lois and Clark are assigned to cover a story of magicians performing "unusual feats." This "magic," however, is really somehow the result of Superman's powers, although the "magicians" are not aware of this. During the interview with the unsuspecting charlatans Lois accidentally falls off the roof. Thinking his magic can save her life, "Doc" yells "abracadabra" and attempts to turn Clark Kent into Superman. Playing along, Kent reveals himself as Superman, with the magician's belief in their powers protecting his secret persona. After saving Lois seconds before she hits the pavement, Superman is "magically" turned back into Clark Kent.

Believing he has magical abilities, Doc convinces Lois that he has turned her into "Superwoman." Relying on super-speed that renders himself invisible, Superman creates the illusion that Lois can fly, punch her hand through walls, etc. -- all to keep her believing in "magic" so she does not guess that Kent's transformation into Superman was real. Lois, enjoying her new identity, foils a bank robbery -- with Superman's invisible help, of course. A robber, being pummeled by Superwoman's fists exclaims: "Ooch! She's no lady -- she's a **booby-trap!**" Superman

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<sup>53</sup> Bridwell 186.

quickly grows weary of maintaining the illusion of Lois as Superwoman, however: "This pinch-hitting for Lois is getting monotonous!" He finally manages to get Lois to change her mind about the advantages of super-power by staging a ball in honor of "Superwoman". Although Lois is the guest of honor, no men will dance with her for fear of being crushed by her super-strength (after an invisible Superman stomps on the feet of her first partner!). Superwoman's potential suitors repeatedly decline her offers to dance, one exclaiming: "I'd rather dance with an elephant!" Lois sobs in the corner, realizing her "super-powers" have come at the expense of her feminine charms: "That settles it! If being Superwoman means being a wallflower, I'm through!"

Once magically restored to ordinary Lois Lane, Clark Kent offers her a dance. Lois responds by slapping his face and proclaiming: "You men who try to keep women weak and defenseless -- I hate you!" Puzzled, Kent decides: "Whoever understands a woman is a **better man than Superman!**"<sup>54</sup> Such a response by Lois, after having just decried her superstrength for driving away the attentions of men, serves to illustrate the unpredictable, illogical, and fickle nature of "feminine psychology."<sup>55</sup>

Lois is portrayed as a dupe -- easily fooled and manipulated, furthering the notion that women are not capable of handling the responsibilities of super-power. Never fully aware of her limitations and the extent of her ineptness, Lois abandons her heroine identity only when she realizes it interferes with her relationships with men. For women, even identity as a superbeing is not satisfying if it makes one unattractive

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<sup>54</sup> Bridwell 186-197.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 186.

to men. The comic reinforces the centrality of men in women's lives and female dependence upon men for identity and self-worth.

Susan Hartmann suggests that the wartime and post-war heroines of popular culture contended with such gendered constraints, even as they explored new territories of female action: ". . . these new models were rooted in a context which sustained the centrality of women's domestic lives and their relationships with men."<sup>56</sup> Unlike the unencumbered Superman, women's lives were circumscribed by their social obligations and interactions -- namely their romantic attachments with men, that precluded them from ever completely fulfilling the role of the hero.

The vulnerability felt by men, not only in the face of women's expanding roles, but also with regard to rapidly advancing technology and general readjustment to post-war life during this period, is illustrated symbolically by a 1949 issue entitled "The Scrambled Superman." Lex Luthor has invented the "atom scrambler" which can "project any solid object into the 4th dimension -- and reassemble it anywhere in the world!" Luthor uses the ingenious device to "exile Superman into the 4th dimension, where the Man of Steel finds himself transformed into an invisible phantom, existing only as 'a cloud of disembodied molecules.'" Utterly helpless, our hero manages to contact Lois Lane, "who courageously invades Luthor's laboratory hideout and activates the atom scrambler," returning Superman safely "to the world of three dimensions." Superman makes quick work of capturing Luthor and destroys the Atom scrambler, proclaiming: "It's too dangerous to let exist!"<sup>57</sup> Obviously anything that requires Superman to be rescued by a mortal woman, bereft of even

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<sup>56</sup> Hartmann 189.

<sup>57</sup> Fleisher 193.



artificial superpowers, is a hazard too great to have any legitimate purpose what-so-ever.

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Throughout Superman's spectacular career his arch nemesis, Lex Luthor has plagued the world with his devious schemes for world domination. The evil mastermind, like Dukalian Karl Wolff, resembled the dictators in reality, and his continuing struggle against Superman represented the age old battle between good and evil, with evil always being beaten down but never fully destroyed. Luthor proved a formidable foe, possessing powers similar to Superman, but accomplished through the use of technological devices and other artificial means. Luthor was the comic-book world's secular Satan: a brilliant mind corrupted by jealousy of Superman and insatiable lust for power.

In a world consumed by fear of the power of technology to wreak havoc and catastrophe, Luthor represented the use of scientific knowledge for evil purposes. Luthor's devices explored the possibilities for world domination by scientific means and played out the fears of a world held hostage by doomsday devices and their creators. With the successful use of atomic power in warfare such story lines seemed less implausible and reflected the paranoia and anxiety of the war and post-war years.

Luthor used many diabolical schemes in his quest to destroy his arch-foe and conquer the Earth. The manipulation, corruption, and capture of "prominent men" was one such weapon in his arsenal. Luthor made such a subversive attempt in the summer of 1940 as "an unexpected wave of unemployment hits the country . . . millions suffer from hunger,

business staggers, and the United States is faced with the worst depression in its history!” Clark Kent, on a mission to uncover the root of the financial crisis for the Daily Planet “detects a strange odor in the offices of America’s financial leaders” and discovers upon further investigation that Lex Luthor has placed “a narcotic incense . . . in the offices of prominent men throughout the nation, thus enslaving them!” With the nation’s financial managers in his grasp Luthor manipulates the stock market to his own advantage reaping millions in ill-gotten wealth. Superman defeats Luthor in a dramatic showdown that appears to have resulted in Luthor’s death, but somehow the fiend manages to escape, surviving a mid-air collision with Superman in his private aircraft. Superman recognizes that he has at least defeated his opponent for the time being: “Most important of all, is that the menace has been removed -- and that the nation is returning to its former prosperity!,” as the nation’s financial wizards have been cured of their addiction.<sup>58</sup>

This story illustrates the belief that the nation cannot function without “responsible” economic manipulators and that drug use results in vulnerability to subversion and criminality -- especially the control of one’s mind by outside forces. The success of the U.S. economy is dependent upon its elite managers without whom the nation will drift into chaos, poverty, and despair. Evident in this piece as well are anxieties about dependence upon massive economic structures and market forces sensitive to manipulation and the subsequent notion that management of capital was a more crucial activity than production itself. The economic strains of the depression still lingered in the collective mind, but did not result in a full scale rejection of capitalist ideology.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 185.

Luthor experimented with all types of methods for achieving his goals, including the use of earthquake machines, cutting off or contaminating the supply of water, robbing vaults, along with the creation of various weapons of mass destruction.<sup>59</sup> The character illustrated an obsession with scientific and personal power -- a paranoid and neurotic need to control others and the natural world. Rather than an indictment of such obsessive needs, Luthor represented these tendencies unrestrained by democracy and the use of overt force without respect for individual freedoms.

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Jor-El, Superman's natural father, appears in the January-February issue of 1952, "The Lost Secrets of Krypton. Lex Luthor, in an attempt to retrieve kryptonite from the dead planet, instead obtains a secret vault formerly belonging to the planet's greatest scientist, Jor-El. Inside Luthor finds "a treasure trove of amazing inventions," including a "petrifying ray," capable of turning people to stone; a "super artificial lightning projector;" "invisibility spray;" and "levitation bombs' designed to to reverse the pull of gravity." The vault also contains a "mystery invention" with unspecified capabilities, but which comes with the dire warning: "Beware of the dread power of this machine! turn it on only if you desire power over all men!" Luthor is delighted by this discovery and upon activating the machine finds himself confronted with the image of Jor-El on the machine's "television-like screen." Knock-out gas emanates from the device and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Luthor is rendered unconscious as the image of Superman's father proclaims:

You turned on this machine because you desired power over all men! But, I, Jor-El do not intend that my secrets shall ever be used by power-lusting plotters to dominate their brothers! So I included this machine as a safeguard against ambitious plotters like you! And this gas from it will make you helpless to work evil!<sup>60</sup>

Like a wrathful God, Jor-El rises up to smite those who would abuse his great scientific achievements for evil purposes. This reference to the Almighty must be cloaked in the garb of a great extraterrestrial scientist, much like the messiah must come disguised as a superhero in cape and tights, for "the secularization of society has made the Christ-like redemptive figure unacceptable in modern times."<sup>61</sup>

The World Wars had unleashed the demons of technology and human misanthropy, revealing the inadequacy of social controls to prevent widespread aggression and destruction. Deep-seated insecurities about the future of the human race led to reflections in popular culture of the notion that "if human beings are to survive the technological age they eventually must be rescued from themselves."<sup>62</sup> However, technology, itself, is also presented as a potential source of human salvation, as in 1953 Superman creates "an armada of colossal machines designed to cope with catastrophes" after his death, although the machines are eventually used against him by Luthor. Technology in the atomic age is ambiguous -- a

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 195-196.

<sup>61</sup> Ian M. Taplin, "Why We Need Heroes to be Heroic," Journal of Popular Culture, vol. 22 (Fall 1988) 138.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

double-edged sword that threatens to extinguish all life, but upon which the fate of human-kind apparently also rests.

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Growing out of the American frontier tradition of the heroic individual, the ethic of capitalist competition, and patriarchal notions of masculinity, Superman both embodied and transcended the qualities deemed most valuable to American society. At its height, the Superman figure served as both a propaganda tool and as a reflection of the tensions and contradictions present in American life. His character provided a barometer of American beliefs and values during extremely tumultuous political, social, and cultural upheavals. When in doubt, American's could look to the Man of Steel to point the way toward true "Americanism."

A conservative at heart, Superman was avidly anti-revolutionary both at home and abroad, narrowly defining justice as the maintenance of order and preservation of the status quo. The Superman comics avoided or greatly oversimplified the most controversial aspects of American life. Attempts to deal intelligently with issues such as race, gender, or American imperialist practices could have shattered the nationalist consensus the comic was attempting to create in the minds of its readers. As Ian Taplin states: "The culture industry is predicated on the production of goods . . . for mass consumption. Its resiliency lies in its ability to contain, through commodification, even the symbolic gestures of revolt."<sup>63</sup>

The Superman comic managed the containment of radicalism and the transmission of conservative social ideologies through the use of simplistic

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 136.

plots and underdeveloped characters: “By reducing societal complexities and international relations to comic-book conceptions of good and bad we confront caricatures which are as much products of our own imaginations as they are manifestations of some pernicious demonic conspiracy.”<sup>64</sup> Viewed in this way, the myth has the unique ability to turn illusion into reality by shaping the collective imagination in ways which do not threaten the established social order. The manipulation of the perceived reality of the consumer is accomplished, not because the consumer is unable to tell fact from fiction, but because the myth “articulate[s] commonly-held sentiments and transmit[s] them from generation to generation” resulting in a “perceptual parameter which codifies reality in a simplistic yet subtle way.”<sup>65</sup> For the consumer, the myth “replaces the troublesome and problematic facts of the real world with a counterworld of pseudofacts. . . . more consistent than the real one and more in line with his own hopes, fears, and prejudices.”<sup>66</sup>

The mass consumption of the superhero mythology reveals a prevailing collective desire for a redemptive figure who will swoop down and save us from our self-inflicted apocalypse. There existed no chaotic circumstance that Superman could not put to order through super-strength and ingenuity. Throughout World War II and the Cold War, people sought refuge from their anxieties within the realm of fantasy -- a realm in which crises were resolved with relative ease and the wicked were always punished. The necessity of this escape is evidence of the lack of feelings of human efficacy in response to social problems:

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1973) 466.

As individuals, implicitly recognizing our inability to significantly alter our lot, we embark upon inner journeys of gratification, punctuated by periodic escape attempts which alleviate the accumulated tensions . . . . As long as there are heroes to pick up the pieces and restore reality to its 'correct' state, the magnitude of our acquiescence will never be realized.<sup>67</sup>

Our collective anxieties and guilt feeling purged through the consumption of imaginary tales of redemption, we remain as passive receptors of cultural propaganda, without ever having achieved actual change.

The violent nature of this redemption, as portrayed by the comics, is also a significant element in understanding the role of the myth. The war had taught Americans that "Evil . . . was not just an abstract concept. . . . that good people could die because other good people had lost the capacity to feel empathy for suffering."<sup>68</sup> Yet, instead of condemning violence, myths like Superman reified the use of force in the name of vanquishing evil and preserving good. Termed "regeneration through violence" by Richard Slotkin, such myths portray "violence as the means of both cleansing . . . and regenerating true faith in the community" and "suggests a world view in which the most powerful or most clever members of the community are also the most moral."<sup>69</sup>

As a cultural icon supposedly embodying the American values of "freedom and democracy," ironically the Superman myth symbolizes that, in fact, "democracy is really expendable . . . [having failed] under conditions of external stress," leaving brute force as the only influence

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<sup>67</sup> Taplin 141.

<sup>68</sup> Lang 161.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 166.

capable of producing and maintaining order.<sup>70</sup> In a world that had lost faith in political institutions, human nature, and even in God, Superman represented the last hope for our salvation: “He was everywhere at once, a godlike redeemer, but he didn’t ask for worship and redemption only cost a dime.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Taplin 139.

<sup>71</sup> Lang 161.



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