

Superman: World Hero or Feared Other?

by

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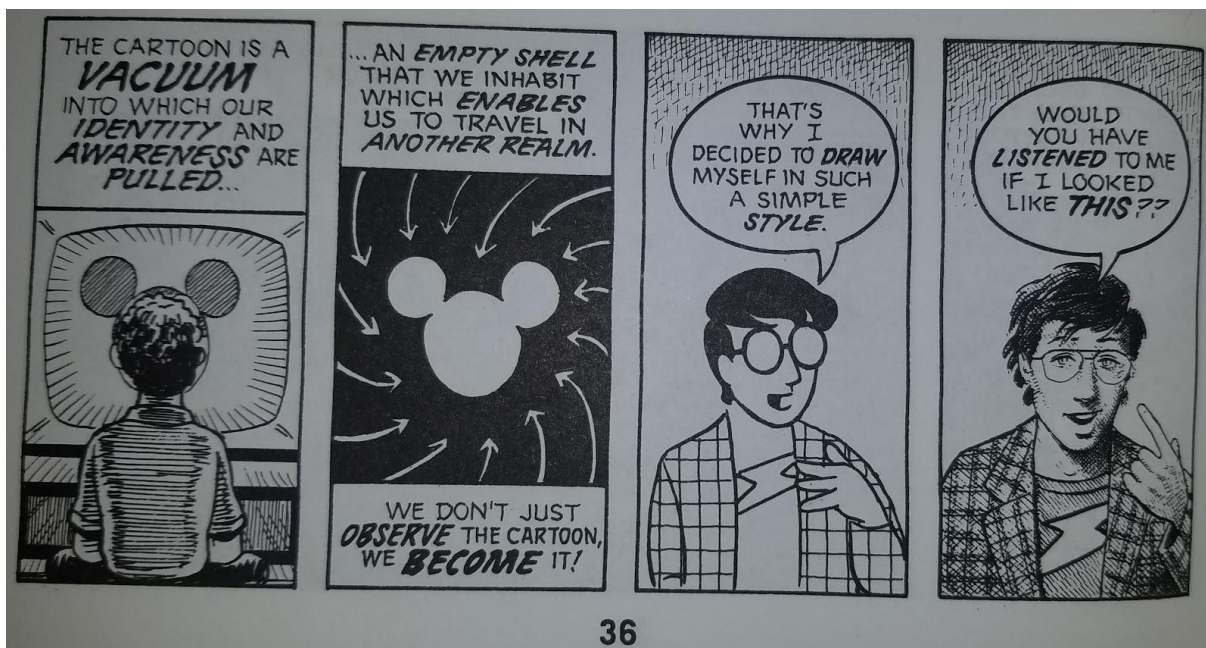
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INTRODUCTION

Superman, the definitive superhero and well-known American icon, is the superhero persona of Clark Kent. While he mostly goes by Clark Kent on Earth, some instead know him by his Kryptonian birth name, Kal-El. Named Kal-El by his parents on the planet Krypton, moments before the planet's doom, he gets sent off into space on a one way course set for Earth, crash landing in Kansas in a piece of small-town America aptly named Smallville. Here he is raised by the Kents, a kind elderly couple of farmers, before moving to the large nondescript American city known as Metropolis to become a journalist-slash-superhero. With the iconic phrase, "*Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's Superman!*" Superman has been incorporated into the American canon, spoken about in the same breath as Hercules and Gilgamesh. Superman is different from Hercules and Gilgamesh however, who were heroes with foreign origins that have been assimilated into the American "roots" to serve as inspirations and validation for the establishment of America. Superman on the other hand *is* the original American myth, the American dream, created by Jerry Siegel, a second generation Jewish immigrant with parents having come to America to flee anti-Semitic movements in Europe. If anything is true of America, it is that it was founded by immigrants—considering the indigenous population was systematically displaced. Like America's assimilation of Greco-Roman roots to validate its regime, Superman *learns* from Hercules, learns from Gilgamesh, takes those lessons and makes them his own—like America's "democracy" being adapted from Athens, Siegel recreates the Jewish identity through Superman as he fights for "truth, justice, and the American way." But, perhaps Superman's Jewish-coding is at odds with the "American way." To recreate the Jewish identity through Superman, Siegel, as a second generation Jew, writes Superman as an immigrant who will never know the firsthand experience of his world, like Siegel will never know the

first-hand horrors of the holocaust even though the holocaust is now incorporated into the Jewish-American canon, much like Superman being an American hero. Since Superman does not know his home planet unlike the typical Jewish immigrant who knows the trauma of displacement and the history of the holocaust, the parallel between him and the Jewish immigrant raises the question: Can you be Jewish without knowing the holocaust? Comic book novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman poses this question, by having the narrator ask his father. Like Jerry Siegel, Art Spiegelman is a second-generation Jew, the world of their parents is frightening and unknown. As Spiegelman recounts his father's experience during the holocaust, he draws not humans but animals, designating each ethnicity through anthropomorphism (Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, etc). Drawing the Jewish as mice, Spiegelman de-familiarizes through familiarizing, as drawing the Jews as such actually *humanizes* them, for the (non-Jewish) audience cannot racially profile the mice as they would a human caricature looking for stereotypical "Jewish features." Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* explains this phenomenon as follows:



McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1993. *Four panels, the last two of which summarize the main point, juxtaposing the narrator drawn in their usual simple style with a more "realistic" depiction, saying, "This is why I decided to **draw** myself in such a simple **style**. Would you have **listened** to me if I looked like **this**?" explaining this "simple style" lets the reader relate to the material more, allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions.*

A similar justification is provided for the depiction of Superman--despite his alien origins, he appears no different than your average human: specifically, white-passing, with pale skin, blue eyes and black straight hair, barring the singular curl sticking out on his forehead. If *Maus* depicts Jews as mice to *humanize*, implying that the audience would not be as sympathetic to characters that were *visibly* Jewish, then Superman's human appearance allows the reader to "forget" his alien origins. Kwasu David Tembo in "Among Them but Not One of Them: A Xenological Exploration of the Otherness and Power of DC Comics' Superman" relates Superman's alien origins to the racial "other," as Superman's whole character challenges what it means to be "human," merely because he looks it but he is not. Tembo writes:

The fact that Superman is an alien is taken as a first principle here. It is an extra-terrestrial creature that expresses many seemingly identical superficial traits with human beings that, however convincing, must not overlook the fact of Superman's essential difference from any and everything human. (182-183)

Kwasu David Tembo specifically argues that Superman challenges, subverts, or "goes beyond" stereotypes or so-called common knowledge of existentialism; Superman's whole character is an exploration in what it means to be human because he is not. Tembo specifically codifies Superman's "alienness" through the framework of a racial "other," inherently in opposition to western culture that defines "what it means to be human" by a colonialist hierarchy that determines non-white individuals as less human due to color, culture, or other considerations. In the question of "what it means to be human," simply being human is not enough to qualify.

Superman, an actual extraterrestrial, an allegory for the racial “other,” then becomes posthumanist because he pushes up against the societal convention of this invisible and default whiteness. That being said, Superman does “pass” as a white man, which Tembo acknowledges, writing:

The third-person neuter pronoun ‘it’ is the most accurate and basic term with which to discuss any ontological or existential aspects of the character ... To be clear, I do not believe that referring to Superman as “it” objectifies the character. On the contrary, I argue it draws attention to the fact that the character represents an interesting alternative to any human/inhuman dialectic precisely because it is both in interesting and challenging ways. (182-183)

Specifically, Tembo “reverse-passes,” a term used to signify a re-emphasis of the traits that “other” someone, instead of allowing one to be “passing,” which refers to an erasure of such “other” traits through highlighting the “desirable” traits that allow one to operate as the acceptable “default” in society. By referring to Superman with the pronoun of “it,” Tembo “reverse-passes” many of Superman’s superficial qualities that present as the “default” human, emphasizing the alien heritage, and specifying that the pronoun “it” does not serve to signify that Superman is more of a concept and plot device, but instead, *is* a character. By contrast, ascribing the pronoun of “he,” in Tembo’s words, “superimposes anthropocentric codes, qualities and categories of being onto a being that is genetically and philosophically Other to them” (182). Employing the pronoun “it” in reference to Superman does not objectify but recognizes his autonomy as the “other.” Superman is an alien; this is a statement that should not invoke "good" or "bad" morality, but is merely a question of heritage. Lately however, when Superman *is* acknowledged as an alien, it often comes with assumptions of an inherently bad morality. I argue

that a noticeable amount of Superman portrayals in the post-9/11 time period have picked up on the trend of highlighting his alien heritage for a "darker" take on the character, which pushes the idea that someone with great power would inevitably abuse it, especially if that someone is determined to be outside of societal norms, the "other." It invokes the wolf in sheep's clothing, meaning, he may *look* like us, but he is *not one of us*. His passing is not just survival but a *deception*, and for that, he must be punished and villainized.

Superman as a character and as an icon was typically known for two things: Having super strength, and having super empathy. Superman and his unwavering optimistic attitude is a fundamental factor of the character, earning him the in-universe parody title of "Boy scout," a designation that carries the implication of being dedicated to an idealistic peace, possibly to the point of naivety. In recent years however, the super empathy has been dropped, being dismissed in some spaces for making the Superman story too simplistic, unrealistic even in the context of a world with super powered beings. What has taken its place is a stream of very popular Superman and Superman-like portrayals of the character, keeping the super strength, and adding a "realistic" dose of super suspicion, super untrustworthiness. Within the past 20 years, portrayals like *Injustice: Gods Among Us* (2013), *Zack Snyder's Justice League Trilogy* (2022), *Invincible* (2021), and *The Boys* (2019), have all featured Superman or a Superman-like character, whose interaction with humanity is rendered at best a failed attempt of an outsider to connect with human culture, and at worst their interactions with humanity are deceptive smokescreens to cover up their malicious agenda. Each of these stories work off the fear of alien invasion, with alien invasion being a projection of the western world's fear of the outsider, that all outsiders would be brutal colonizers, the role western nations have often played when being received as outsiders in other countries. The fear of the alien invader beyond the stars, of superior

technological or physical ability, is a projected fear of the western world getting its “just desserts,” which of course is typically coupled with the annihilation of Earth. In this way, the alien threats, the conversion of good Superman into evil Superman, stokes the fear of the outsider, positing that brutal colonization is the natural route of interaction between a “more advanced” society and a “less advanced” society. This also reroutes the exceptionally good status given to idealistic outsiders like Superman, instead transferring it to the western world, as their real conquest will be made to seem less destructive compared to the total annihilation of humanity done by non-human beings.

The rise in popularity of evil portrayals of Superman roughly lines up with the post-9/11 time period. In fact the television series *Smallville*, which featured an adolescent Clark Kent growing up in his hometown that the series is named after, would actually air its first episode roughly one month after the 9/11 attacks happened. *Smallville* featured many stories of Clark struggling to fit in with humanity, while keeping his powers and heroic actions a secret. Notably, the first few seasons would center on Clark having to save his fellow Smallville citizens from being harmed by other citizens who had been infected by pieces of Kryptonite, a substance that comes from Clark’s homeworld Krypton that crashed into Smallville at the same time Clark did. The *Smallville* setting simultaneously humanizes and further “others” Clark Kent, as Kathryn Polizzi notes in “Mapping Smallville: Critical Essays on the Series and Its Characters:”

The citizens of Smallville who are “infected” by the Kryptonite become violent and uncontrollable, and Clark must catch these “Meteor Freaks” who have been granted powers similar to Clark’s own. His actions therefore become symbolic of repressing not only his own ethnic background, but also of seeking to stop anyone who has been “infected” by his Otherness. (Polizzi 447)

Clark embraces assimilation through a repression of his ethnic background both in himself and as it appears in influences in others. However, Clark is still using powers sourced from his ethnic background to help humanity, but he frequently has to use them to help battle a form of foreign negative influence that he inadvertently brought to the population of Smallville. In *Smallville*, Clark is representing both a fear and desire for immigrants; the fear that immigrants will negatively influence the native-born population to go against American ideals, and the desire for immigrants who are so dedicated to American assimilation that they will fight back against influences from their own native culture in the name of maintaining American ideals. The series would even ‘play’ with the moral alignment of his birth parents and their reason for sending him to Earth, as the earlier seasons of the show portray Clark’s birth father, Jor-El, as a vague figure with confusing and seemingly ever changing motives and morality, causing Clark to jump between believing Jor-El wants him to conquer humanity, to believing Jor-El wants him to help humanity. This inconsistent thinking, and Clark simultaneously embodying desires and fears for immigrants, is an effect of Clark serving as a representation of national sentiments in post-9/11 America. Martin Lund discusses this effect in “‘Every Day is 9/11!’: Re-Constructing Ground Zero in Three Us Comics,” where he examines representations of 9/11 in contrast to reality:

Representations of 9/11 are themselves far from direct: the attacks did not disclose reality but provided ‘the occasion for constructing a sense of “reality” [...] that validated some ideologies and feelings while casting others as insignificant, inauthentic, and lacking moral urgency’ ... By early 2002, it was an ideologically charged memory site, ‘ready to be filled with whatever meaning or ideology or image the present decides to assign.’

(242)

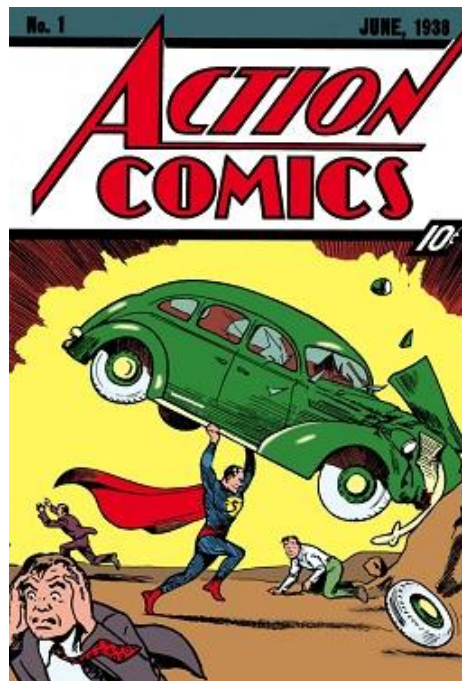
As Lund states, representations of 9/11 are used to invoke a sense of reality on something that, as a representation, is inherently *not* reality. Instead, the “reality” being invoked in 9/11 representations serves as a means of validation for “whatever meaning or ideology or image the present decides to assign.” Therefore a representation that has the status of being true to “reality” or “realistic,” has attained that status not by being a representation faithful to the actual events, but by being a representation that is faithful to the ideologies and feelings of the American public. In this sense, the change in public perception that the unwaveringly good Superman is “unrealistic” is reflecting post-9/11 American sentiments on the untrustworthiness of foreigners, particularly foreign heroes.

I argue that the rise in popularity of evil portrayals of the iconic American character Superman are a result of xenophobia, as his turn to villainy is often attributed to his alien outsider characteristics, encapsulating this fear of the other and emphasizing his other worldly heritage as proof of Superman’s inevitable abuse of power. A frequent factor of the evil Superman story is the dichotomy between Superman and Batman. Batman, the secret hero identity of billionaire Bruce Wayne, is the only DC comic character to match Superman’s popularity in modern media portrayals. They both have been in the titles of numerous blockbuster movies released in the post-9/11 time period, starring together in *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), and have been the titular character in DC comics other forms of media, such as the video game series *Injustice: Gods Among Us*. In their recent portrayals a dichotomy has formed, where Superman is the well-intentioned outsider who eventually fails to understand humanity, proving himself heartless, while Batman is the disillusioned human with a realist worldview, resentful and separated by his extreme wealth. He remains a positive influence to humanity, and he is seen as having a “heart of gold” even in his more controversial moments.

As Batman's personal separation from humanity and use of extreme force are considered reasonable and justified, he is not disqualified from his trustworthy status or extralegal privileges for having great unchecked power, while Superman's unchecked power will always lead to "reasonable suspicions" for his potential evil alignment and supposes plans to turn against America and the world at large, a dichotomy present both in films like *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* as well as video games like *Injustice: Gods Among Us*. The consistency of these portrayals sends the message that America's real heroes are the controversial-yet-trustworthy upper class, while America's real villains are the outsiders whose claims of idealism are deceptions to distract from their unforgiving quest to unseat the brutal-but-reasonable rulers of white America.

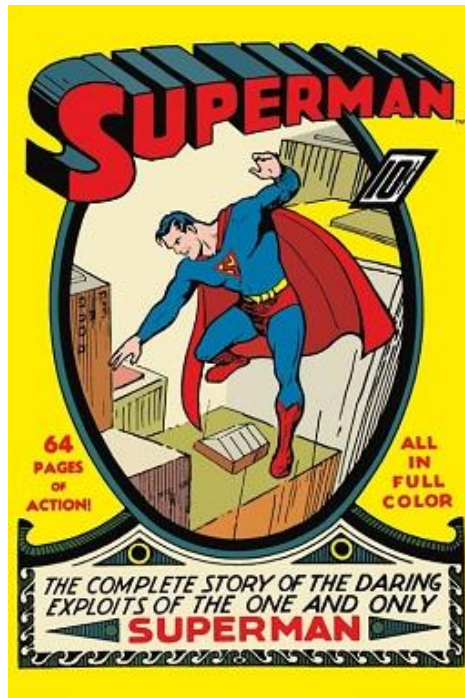
SECTION 1: Superman's Origins

In June 1938, America would get its first taste of Superman on the cover of the first issue of *Action Comics*, a mere distant glimpse of a strange and strong figure in red and blue lifting up a big car, which a helpless victim finds themselves trapped under. Perhaps most mysterious, this red and blue figure looks more menacing than heroic, an arrow shape invoked by the metal of car's bumper pointing down at the helpless victim, as if the red and blue figure means to crush it down on top of them. The green car itself draws the most attention, huge and taking up the entire center of the cover, heightening the mystery that this seemingly regularly sized man is able to hold it in the air. The people around him almost seem to be running from him, scattering away from where this phenomenon is happening; these people are dressed in regular clothes, further emphasizing the strangeness of this figure dressed in odd red and blues.



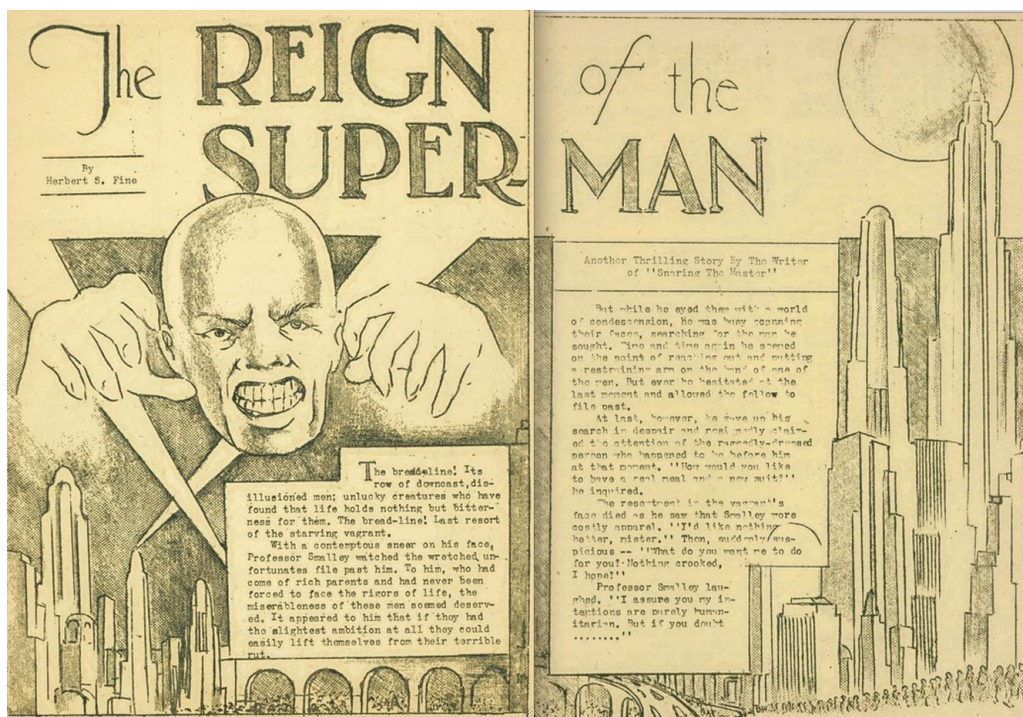
Shuster, Joe. *Action Comics #1*. DC Comics, 1938. *The first of an anthology comic that introduced many iconic superheroes, Action Comics #1 was not just the birth of the Golden Age of comics but the superhero age as a whole.*

Action Comics #1 was the birth of Superman, an alien sent away from his home planet to live amongst humans and save them from themselves. Superman would go on to flourish in the comic book medium, spawning the first self-titled superhero comic shortly after his debut, *Superman*, only a year later. The covers of *Action Comics #1* and *Superman #1* can be seen as a symbolic mirroring of each other: where Superman was once grounded and burdened under the weight of a car, off in the distance, he is now unencumbered by gravity and actively in flight, front and center. Where Superman once looked up, now he looks down, where he once looked right, he now looks left; where Superman once looked toward the possibilities of the future, now Superman can define his past in the spotlight of his own comic. And the tagline, "The complete exploits of the one and only Superman," only misrepresented the truth a little bit. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say "the one and only superman *as he is now.*"



Shuster, Joe. *Superman #1*. DC Comics, 1939. *The first superhero to get a self-titled comic, Superman strikes a pose similar to what will eventually be his iconic "in flight" position, just at a different angle.*

The original Superman pitch was instead a short story penned by Jerry Siegel and illustrated by Joe Shuster, titled "The Reign of the Superman" and previously published in a science fiction fanzine. Instead of the extraterrestrial and extraordinary Clark Kent, the story featured the impoverished earthling Bill Dunn who temporarily gains telekinetic superpowers through a serum given to him by a mad scientist; whereas Clark Kent uses his powers for good, Bill Dunn would abuse his powers, seeking world domination. As the serum formula is lost when Dunn murders the mad scientist, Dunn loses his powers for good and despairs at the fact that he will go back to an unremarkable life.



Siegel, Jerry. "The Reign of the Superman." Science Fiction: The Advance Guard of Future Civilization #3, 1933. *The first pages of Siegel's original Superman story, a more villainous take on the Nietzschean concept.*

Similar only in name, this original Superman was fundamentally different from the eventuality of the character, not just in morality and medium but in tone, taking on a more apparent

philosophical bent, whereas the new Superman would be "simple" in that he fought for truth, justice, and the American way. This was also a casualty of the comic book format, due to the widely adapted Comics Code of the era. John C. Traver in "Hero or Villain? Moral Ambiguity and Narrative Structure Under the Comics Code in 1950s Superman Stories," describes the decades-long influence that the Comics Code has had on American comic books to either the benefit of the censor or the comic author. Traver specifies the Code's effect on DC comics characters like Superman, citing that "DC aligned its superheroes squarely on the side of established authority and emphasized responsibility to the community over individualism" (Traver 257). DC characters followed the Code's specifications of having morally strong heroes who aligned with authority, always triumphing over evil. In regards to Superman, Siegel would have been required by Code to have him be an authority figure or be aligned with authority, acting as an origin for the depictions and interpretations of Superman as a state apparatus. This new Superman was the epitome of community, not individualism.

The name Superman draws from inspirations from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Ironically, the 1939 Superman would be more Nietzschean than the original 1933 inception, despite its cerebral slant, in contrast to the newer version's black and white morality. Though the 1933 version is seemingly more in-line with the Nietzschean philosophical aesthetic, the 1939 version is more in-line with the actual theory of the Superman:

I TEACH YOU THE SUPERMAN. Man is something that is to be surpassed. What have ye done to surpass man? ... I conjure you, my brethren, REMAIN TRUE TO THE EARTH, and believe not those who speak unto you of superearthly hopes! Poisoners are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying ones and poisoned

ones themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so away with them! Once blasphemy against God was the greatest blasphemy; but God died, and therewith also those blasphemers. To blaspheme the earth is now the dreadfulest sin, and to rate the heart of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth! ... It is not your sin—it is your self-satisfaction that crieth unto heaven; your very sparingness in sin crieth unto heaven! Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the frenzy with which ye should be inoculated? Lo, I teach you the Superman: he is that lightning, he is that frenzy! ... Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman—a rope over an abyss. (Nietzsche 21-23)

Superman is an evolution of man, but not of the body—what makes a Superman is not superpowers, but super *morality*, the emphasis on community over individualism, or, the earth over the singular, one god, the self. The concept of the "superpowered" Superman is merely a physical manifestation of that morality; it stands to reason that an "evil" Superman would lose his powers, such is the case of Siegel's 1933 Superman who tries to essentially become god through world domination. Superman is not a god, and does not seek to take over the earth, but protect it: this is the theory established by Nietzsche and fulfilled in the story of Siegel's 1939 Superman. Nietzsche's Superman also presents an alternative to Christianity, which Siegel's 1939 Superman embraces as an alternative, becoming more in touch with the Jewish coding of his origin story. If "to blaspheme the earth is now the dreadfulest sin, and to rate the heart of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth," (Nietzsche 22) and the new 1939 Superman literally descended from the "unknowable higher" of outer space, to be accepted on earth Superman must give himself completely to it. Superman, in hiding his "unknowable higher" origins in pursuit of remaining "true to the earth," is only able to exhibit his powers—the last

vestige of his otherworldly heritage—in protection of it, not unlike how Siegel is only able to express his Jewishness through abstracting it within Superman's home planet Krypton, as an overtly Jewish Superman would likely not have gotten published as it risked alienating the Christian audience. And so, Kal-El becomes Clark Kent.

Superman's Jewish roots suffer erasure in the modern era, the character is often simplified in public perception down to a generic white guy in red and blue. This is perhaps why many of Superman's adaptations feel the need to superimpose other traits to circumvent this perceived lack of complexity, despite Superman already being a complex character in his own right. Most egregious, Jerry Siegel's *own* Jewishness tends to be erased, the perception of Superman reflecting and subsequently wrapping back around to the creator himself. His biography found on *Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors* titled simply "Jerry Siegel," noticeably lacks any mention of Siegel's Jewish roots. The biography posits that Superman's creation is only attributed to "lying awake thinking of girls that he wished would date him and imagining that if he had some special power they would do so" ("Jerry Siegel" 2), affording him this inherent white masculinity to make him relatable, without any specification of the exact "who" this makes him relatable for. This is not unlike the white-washing Superman undergoes to make him more relatable, as the article continues:

Whatever the ancestry of Superman, he became an original character in his own right, with traits and a history almost every American youth, in more than one generation, could recite by heart: babyhood on the planet Krypton; transit to Earth by his scientist father when Krypton exploded; boyhood with an old couple named Kent in Smallville; adulthood as mild-mannered newspaper reporter Clark Kent in Metropolis; romantic possibilities with colleague Lois Lane; opposition by villain Lex Luthor; and

vulnerability to Kryptonite. These traits accumulated gradually around Superman over the years, and indeed many of the secondary details, such as Superman's virginity or lack thereof, would be changed back and forth. ("Jerry Siegel" 2)

The biography initially posits masculinity as essential to his creation, but then attributes his sexuality to a "secondary detail," establishing these concrete and external trivia as what makes Superman, Superman, instead of the abstract and internality of his character. It also outright dismisses "the ancestry of Superman" as inconsequential, even though what follows is all about his ancestry being *other than human*, but still takes care to stress this masculine relatability through the word "boyhood," affording his masculinity to a default, white-washed relatability, stripping away any context. Perhaps it is a point of contention that Superman's Jewishness is so easily erased from his origins: Chris Reynolds-Chikuma discusses the contentions of the Superman-Jewish connection in "Lund, Martin. Re-Constructing the Man of Steel, Superman 1938–1941, Jewish American History, and the Invention of the Jewish–Comics Connection," through riffing off the established analysis of Martin Lund, refuting the notion that the Superman-Jewish connection is blatantly obvious, praising Lund's good scholarship and thorough analysis that show the weakness of previous studies. In the example of the Superman-Moses connection, Reynolds-Chikuma acknowledges their similarities are weak: "Clark's impediment itself (occasional or not) is enough as a reminder of Moses' impediment when added to the other signs. It is all of them together, including the parallel between the basket and the rocket, that hint at Moses, not one in isolation" (3). The author argues that there could be several factors for these weaker connections, stating that making the character too obviously Jewish could alienate white protestant readers, or that appearing as a Bible imitation could be perceived as sacrilegious. Reynolds-Chikuma notes that Lund cites the anti-Semitic reaction of the

Schwartz Korps about Superman which reinforces the fact that Superman was perceived as Jewish by at least some people. The author argues that:

If it is true that Superman is not the result of a frank Jewish commitment to enter the war, destroy Hitler and protect European Jews, it can be seen as a difficult compromise between some Jewish identity, some American feelings, some pro-peace convictions, and some commercial necessities. (4)

The authors of these comics had to not oppose the boss, and work in a market where many buyers were statistically not Jewish, and possibly even anti-Semitic. Reyns-Chikuma states that an issue with Lund's analysis is how he will take only the first publication as a source to refute other critic's Jewishness interpretations. Reyns-Chikuma notes that Superman's creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, would have been teenagers during Superman's first issues and would be insecure, if only for commercial reasons, to make these clues supporting the Jewish interpretations of Superman obvious, and to show they accepted assimilation and whiteness. They follow up saying that Superman's story, and those of similar heroes, accumulated their "roundness," on Jewish issues through their many episodes. Similarly, Brad Ricca in "Superman Is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way by Harry Brod (review)" analyzes Brod's content-based approach to Jewishness in comics, explaining Brod's viewpoint as "we should be primarily looking at the work itself, not its creators, if only to avoid giving "everyone a blanket license" to equate a creator's religious background or any one-off Jewish references in comics stories with actual narrative meaning" (Ricca 31), or, that the author's background is irrelevant to the content of the stories, and should not be used as proof of inherent Jewishness—or lack thereof—in said stories. Ricca describes such a content-based analysis from Brod as follows:

With Superman, it is not then really the Orthodox background of his creators, but the combination of “the superman and the super nerd into a single character” that reveals an avatar for contrasting social types and masculinity that is very persuasively Jewish.

(Ricca 32)

For Brod, it is not Superman’s creator that makes him Jewish, but his expression of masculinity in the comic that makes him so. Examining the difference between context and content and how the extreme of one can lead to the detriment of the other, Ricca grapples with the effectiveness of Brod’s content-based analysis, writing:

The author’s explication of Spider Man as a Jewish story might seem like a stretch to some readers, but it may work equally well to discuss the limits and questions of Brod’s content-only approach. His work on Superman as a Christ figure is also a little abrupt, but is very timely for audiences interested in debating the new Man of Steel film. (Ricca 32)

Though Ricca admits that “Such a content-based approach to analysis allows Brod to make some interesting points as to what makes a comic Jewish” (Ricca 31-32), he also stresses the shortcomings of completely separating the Jewish author from their work, resulting in certain interpretations seeming like “a stretch” when unaware of the context, or even the possibility of the intrinsic Jewish element being completely removed.

Despite the need to avoid alienating a Christian audience, Superman would still embody traces of his Jewish origin, from his inception to modern day portrayals. Michael Soares discusses these various traces in his scholarship, “The Man of Tomorrow: Superman from American Exceptionalism to Globalization.” Soares notes that Superman not only invokes the story of Moses in his arrival to Earth as an infant refugee, but that Superman also references Samson, as Soares writes:

Superman's otherworldly strength is reminiscent of Samson, whom the Old Testament describes as owing his power to long locks of hair. Like Samson, Superman uses his strength to alleviate the suffering of others, even remembering the Biblical hero and acknowledging his fictional DNA with a single curl of hair adorning his forehead.

(Soares 748)

Soares goes on to discuss Superman's quick Anglicization that will continue to modify the character over the years. These acknowledgements of Superman's Jewish origins are still present in some modern renditions of his character. For example, Grant Morrison's and Frank Quitley's *All-Star Superman* go beyond adapting Superman's signature curl and end up having Superman meet the mythological hero Samson himself. In comparing how each character is drawn in *All-Star Superman*, they are not identical, but both characters are drawn to have distinctly similar facial structures. In particular their hair texture and color match up, with Superman's signature curl on his forehead indeed invoking Samson's curls.



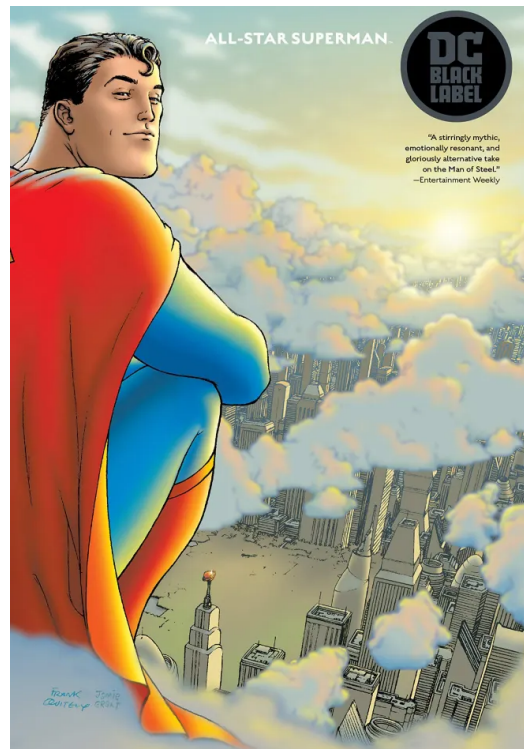
Morrison, Grant, et al. *All-Star Superman*. DC Comics, 2018. *A comparison of Superman's face taken from the cover of All-Star Superman on the left, to Samson's face from All-Star Superman on the right. The similarity of Superman's features to Samson's features is a nod to Superman's Jewish origins.*

The characters meeting as fellow heroes goes out of the way to legitimize Superman as a character that is at least adjacent to mythological canon. The choice made by the authors to not just have these characters meet, but to be drawn with so many similarities, is a modern day intentional nod to the Jewish origins of the Superman character. The authors of *All-Star Superman*, who stated their goal with the book was to create a “timeless” Superman story, offer a modern portrayal of Superman that embodies both present ideals and Superman’s past ideals dating back to his creation, which functions as a stark contrast to the modern live-action adaptations of the Superman story.

SECTION 2: The Timeless Superman Story

If one says "Superman," the image conjured more likely than not is going to be him with his arms bent triangular in akimbo, legs standing strong and tall, the projection of pure confidence. Superman: synonymous with *power pose* to the point where he might as well appear under the definition of the term. If Superman did not invent power posing, he certainly refined it. What says "confidence" more than being literally, *physically*, unbreakable, capable of feats beyond the capabilities of the earthly born human being? As the power pose is a technique involving the outward projection influencing the inner—the "fake it til you make it" mentality—one has to wonder why Superman is always drawn in that specific pose, often found on the cover of your local Superman comic right next to him suspended in flight (usually with his fists out, which also projects this picture of bravado) if he is *already* unbreakable. Why is this the immediate association when hearing "Superman?" Envisioning him like this, do we project our insecurities, assuming that he *needs* the pose, needs this display of the power pose to become the invincible man the culture has come to know him by? Would the passersby still recognize Superman if he was standing like a regular man? *Recognizing* Superman becomes an important aspect to Superman: though the same identity as Clark Kent, his "human" persona *must be distinguishable from Superman himself*, must be recognizable as two separate identities, two halves of a whole. The culture recognizes Clark Kent as human, but also, as an *extension* of Superman, whereas Superman would be the "true self"—is Superman recognized as human himself, without being rounded out by Clark Kent's presence? *All-Star Superman*, written by Grant Morrison and penciled by Frank Quitely, features a deviation from the stereotypical Superman on its main cover art. His back to the camera and shielded by his cape, looking over his shoulder with his knees drawn up to his chest, Superman sits on a cloud overlooking the city

of Metropolis. His signature "S" denoting his Kryptonian heritage is nowhere to be found, invisible from line of sight.



Morrison, Grant, et al. *All-Star Superman*. DC Comics, 2018. *The cover art for All-Star Superman. Though there is a “wide-screen” version that includes a visible Kryptonian symbol on Superman’s cape, the image is strategically cropped to obscure it when adapted to the comic book ratio 6.63" x 10.24".*

In an interview uploaded to YouTube as *Grant Morrison On Superman, Batman, Justice League, Doom Patrol, HAPPY! Animal Man, Green Lantern!!*, the author recalls meeting with the Superman cosplayer that inspired the design and personality of his Superman, saying “I just thought Superman is like invulnerable, of course he's not defensive ... this is a guy who can't be hurt, nothing can hurt him, so he'd actually be super relaxed, and the way this guy was sitting, that is actually Superman” (1:33:50 - 1:34:10). So Morrison confirms that the power posing Superman popular culture has been inundated and infatuated with is *not* the Superman Morrison seeks to portray in relation to this specific iteration as he appears in *All-Star Superman*. The last

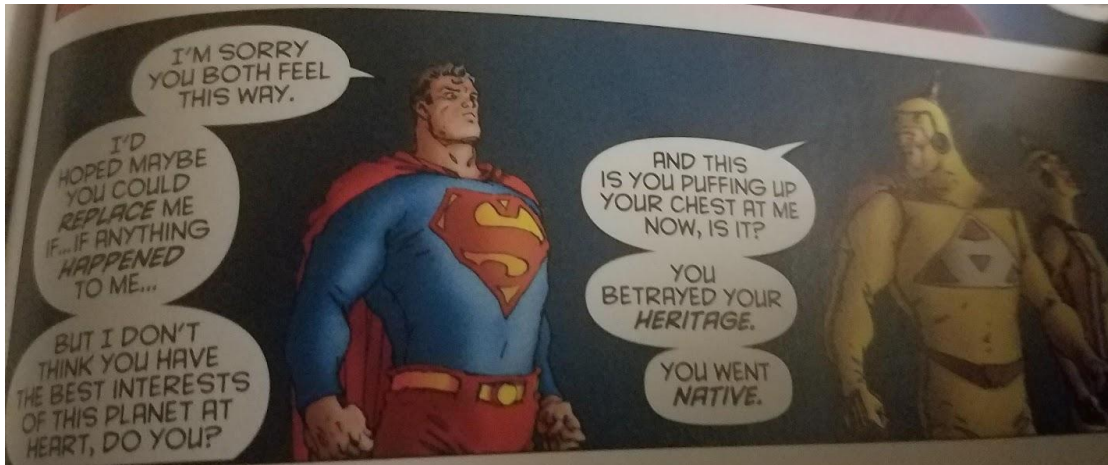
few pages of *All-Star Superman*, which contains notes about the writing process and concept art about the comic, Morrison further explains:

It's rare for an artist to really emphasize the difference in physicality between Superman and Kent ... we wanted his disguise to seem plausible. Generally, Clark Kent is shown as a tall, well-built man whose only real difference from Superman is his slicked-back hair and bottle-top glasses. We decided Superman could release his posture so that his shoulders slumped, his spine curved and his belly stuck out. He could give himself pigeon toes. Rather than a cowardly, sickly *milquetoast*, we decided instead to make Clark too BIG for his environment. He's playing the part of a hulking farmboy who's used to wide open spaces and can't help bumping into things or tripping over people in the big city. We also decided that each time Clark did something clumsy, he would actually be saving someone's life. Even as Kent, Superman is never off-duty. (Morrison 198)



Morrison, Grant, et al. *All-Star Superman*. DC Comics, 2018. *Concept art that appears in All-Star Superman, drawn by Frank Quitely. Details the difference in posture between Clark Kent and Superman; Clark Kent's back is noticeably hunched, whereas Superman's back is straight and strong.*

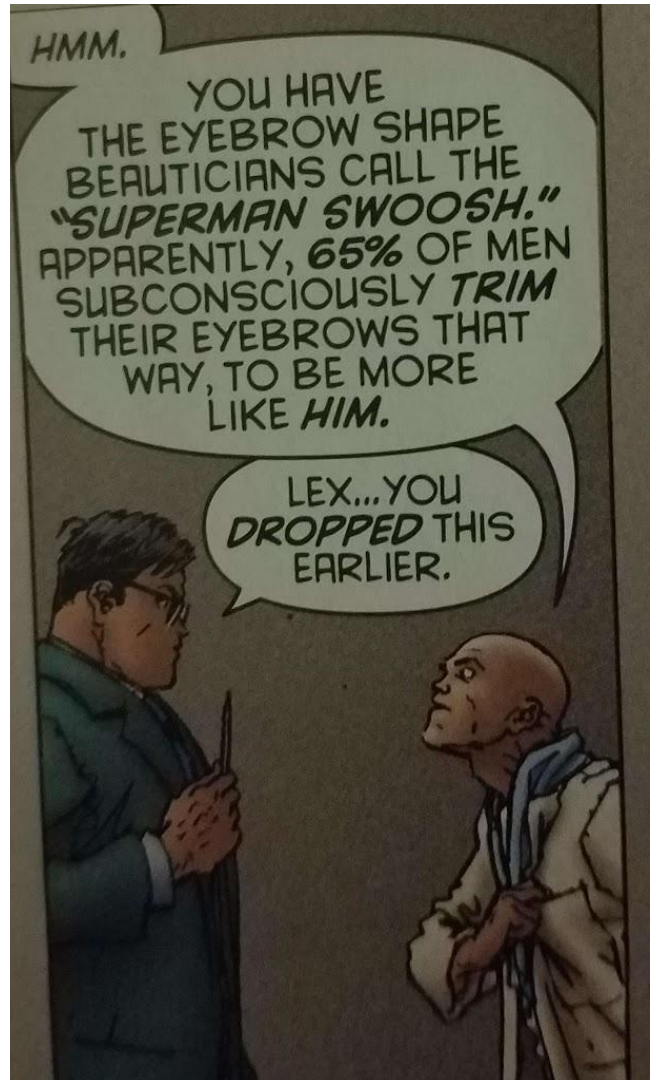
Morrison once again confirms conventional knowledge: Superman and Clark Kent exist as separate entities, *even though canonically they are the same person*. The viewer will never see Clark Kent and Superman in the same room together, nor will the characters in the DC universe. Morrison also reveals a few other interesting character building facts: Clark Kent is the disguise of *Superman*, not the other way around--the "true self"--and, "Even as Kent, Superman is never off duty" (Morrison 198). It is the age-old question, is Clark Kent Superman, or is Superman Clark Kent? For Morrison, Clark Kent is a construction of Superman, but also, Superman is all the things Clark Kent is. Superman *is* a farm boy, that is not just part of his cover story; like Clark Kent, Superman is too big for his environment, but is able to float above it all whereas with Clark Kent he has to physically reduce himself, make himself smaller by slumping his shoulders and curving his spine. Morrison and Quitely asks us to swap the power posing Superman for the self-shrunken Clark Kent, and realize, *that is where Superman projects*, Superman fakes it until he makes it. This, of course, is not to imply that Superman is faking his humanity, but the opposite: Superman is adapting *for* humanity. Looking at instances where Superman does do the stereotypical power pose in *All-Star Superman*, he is called out for it by the person he does it at, who is a fellow *Kryptonian* space explorer no less, "And this is you puffing up your chest at me now, is it? You betrayed your *heritage*. You went *native*" (Morrison 209). Calling back to the cover of *All-Star Superman* where the Kryptonian symbol is not shown on Superman's breast, he is neither Kryptonian by Kryptonian standards, *nor is he human* by Earthling standards, as characters like Lex Luthor will use Superman's foreignness as justification to plot against him. If Superman and Clark Kent are two halves of a whole, they are also neither one nor the other.



Morrison, Grant, et al. *All-Star Superman*. DC Comics, 2018. Featuring the line, “You betrayed your heritage. You went native,” (209), showcasing the Kryptonian rejection of Superman.

If Clark Kent saving people while “in disguise” is proof that Clark Kent is Superman acting fragile while invincible, then Superman puffing his chest out when he or Earth are insulted is proof Superman is Clark Kent acting invincible while fragile. As Clark Kent is going to play down his alienness, Superman is going to play down his humanness. When Clark is threatened, he will act like Superman—on the inverse, when Earth is threatened, Superman will act like a human. These two personas are indivisible from the individual who uses them. Both Clark Kent and Superman are an act, as everyone is simultaneously an act and themselves. There is a filtering of “I do the actions I want to do” combined with the filter “I do the actions for the reception of others I wish to receive.” Clark Kent and Superman are portrayed differently from each other to fit the situation, but they are both authentic expressions of the character. While Superman does what Clark Kent is not supposed to do, flying around and saving people while being outwardly alien, Clark Kent does what Superman cannot do, be a journalist on the ground and give a voice to those who lack it. While there is often the question in Superman stories on whether or not it is appropriate for him to speak for humanity, Clark Kent speaks for humanity in each edition of *The Daily Planet*. Many are thankful for Superman’s help, but it is often the

media like *The Daily Planet* which solidify Superman in good, or sometimes bad opinion. The voice of news outlets carry far greater power over humanity than Superman could hope to achieve with his many powers. Yet when hiding his alien identity in his human persona Clark Kent, he becomes part of the news outlets, legitimizing his voice on the planet he lives. Lex Luthor in particular is a fan of Clark Kent's journalism, and while he may disagree with Kent's views, he consistently listens and often respects his views. When in conversation with Superman on the other hand, Lex Luthor will automatically be in full disagreement to what he puts forth, from his opinions all the way down to his eyebrows. Lex Luthor is not just upset at having his plans thwarted, but at *who* is thwarting his plans, not just someone with immense power but with an *alien* power, a power that abides by a different set of rules than Lex Luthor's money can buy. *All-Star Superman* features a plot where Clark Kent is interviewing Lex Luthor, who is on death row for, broadly, crimes against humanity, in which he posits "Superman made me do it" (Morrison 104), as a defense during his trial. Although Luthor is typically bothered by the general heroic intervention to his schemes, his particular hatred for Superman comes from his concern over how his public influence and reception as an exceptional member of society will be affected by an outsider like Superman also becoming an exceptional member of society. Luthor, operating as the force of fear, jealousy, and hatred, resents the idea that anyone would even want to look like Superman. Lex Luthor, when he notices Clark Kent's eyebrows copy Superman's, as Luthor is unaware that they are the same person, attributes it to a cultural influence, saying "You have the eyebrow shape beauticians call the "Superman Swoosh." Apparently, 65% of men subconsciously trim their eyebrows that way, to be more like *him*" (Morrison 112).



Morrison, Grant, et al. *All-Star Superman*. DC Comics, 2018. *Featuring the line, “Apparently, 65% of men subconsciously trim their eyebrows that way,” (112), demonstrating the cultural influence of Superman through fashion, and parallel to the Kryptonian rejection of Superman with the human acceptance of the hero, with the exception of Lex Luthor.*

As eyebrows have nothing to do with villainous schemes, this particular fear characterizes Luthor’s resentment of Superman as jealousy. With humans being by far the culturally dominant and most populous species on Earth in this story, this jealous fear serves as an allegory on the supremacist view that accepting any form of outside culture is a defeat and a loss of one’s own culture, even when their own culture is clearly dominant and unthreatened. Luthor also specifies

that men choose this eyebrow style “subconsciously,” implying this stylistic influence has sinister undertones that have been snuck past the dominant human population’s awareness.

Luthor’s fears that he puts forth in his off-handed eyebrow comment are based in supremacy and xenophobia, as Luthor exemplifies the importance of something as unremarkable as eyebrows, to strike at his bigger grievance that the majority human population is favoring the appearance and actions of a minority alien. Luthor specifying that human men do this “subconsciously” to “be more like him” is implying that Superman’s foreign exceptionalism has tricked humanity into giving up their supremacy as the sole exceptional species to be modeled after. Ultimately, Lex Luthor’s hatred of Superman comes from the jealous fear of not being the sole credit for all that is good in the world. The fear that humanity, Americans, that wealthy scientists like himself will lose their exceptionalism, and with that, their absolute control over the general public. Tying into Lex Luthor’s later statements to Clark Kent gives context to the otherwise typical villain rant of the hero who thwarts his devious schemes, “If it wasn't for Superman, I'd be in charge on this planet” (Morrison 124). In context of Luthor’s fears of humanity submitting to an outside cultural influence, Luthor’s complaints ring similar to the disillusioned white supremacist. The very existence of positive and powerful people of foreign origin will always be a threat to the supremacist. Superman functions in his universe as the living and breathing truth that exceptionalism is not just found in a specific nation's borders, or even on a specific planet. Luthor, especially as a rich white man, feels especially entitled to “be in charge on this planet,” to be the specific name and face of exceptionalism in the universe. Superman gets in his way through his many exceptional acts that disprove the American capitalist supremacy that favors people like Luthor. Luthor has stated how he likes Clark Kent for being “Humble, Modest, Uncoordinated: Human” (122). Clark Kent essentially passes as a human due to these perceived

inferiorities. Luthor himself possesses none of these qualities, yet uses them to identify Clark's belonging in humanity.

Besides incoordination, Clark Kent still exhibits humble and modest behavior as Superman. Yet, the fact that Superman is not strictly inferior is what makes him unacceptable as an immigrant. When Luthor lists Clark's "incoordination" as a qualifier for the human experience, he is speaking about American individualism. White America seeks to keep its citizens separate and individual, focused on their own wants at the expense of others. The ideological counter to this is a mass coordinated force, which is how immigrants are often seen through this fear mongering American nationalist lens, with American politicians like Governor Greg Abbott taking up to declaring an 'invasion clause' on twitter in response to higher volumes of immigration, classifying immigrants as organized invaders. Immigrants are assumed to always be working in tandem with each other, a unified force towards a presumably sinister agenda to unseat the house of personal freedom and responsibility, America. Recent broadcasts done by Fox News stoke this fear, with countless stories done on migrant caravans that are reportedly "storming U.S. borders," with Fox News often stressing the large number of migrants and the inherent dangers they will bring with them. Fox News would also go on to define multiple countries in Central America and South America broadly as "Mexican Countries," an attempt to tie all people who live south of the U.S. border as sharing a national allegiance and culture. Lex Luthor likes Clark Kent as he comes off, uncoordinated physically, but also uncoordinated with some greater force. Regardless of Luthor's estimation of Kent's intelligence, he respects him for thinking and presenting his own ideas. When Clark Kent puts forth these same views as the Superman persona, Luthor will dismiss Superman's ideology, grouping him with the overall alien threat. No matter how harmless, or even beneficial the migrant may be, there is the constant

threat that they have but one agenda tying back to their outside roots, while American citizens will always be able to choose their allegiance individually.

SECTION 3: Superman in the Modern Picture House

Superman as a character is nearly a century old from his debut, with the first issue of *Action Comics* being published in 1938. In the decades following his creation by Jerry Siegel, numerous writers, artists, directors, and producers have reimagined Superman countless times. Many of Superman's current backstory elements were added on in the years after the character was transferred away from Jerry Siegel. However, the method of how each version of Superman is constructed and deconstructed can be used to determine a kind of cohesiveness for the ideas the specific creator has assigned to Superman. Jerry Siegel himself hailed from immigrants, and in all iterations of Superman the character is also an immigrant. If the American immigrants of Jerry Siegel's time were the Jewish—as his parents were Jewish immigrants who fled anti-Semitic movements in Europe—then the immigrants of today are popularized as “Mexican,” even if they are not, to the point where ethnicity has become racialized in America, similarly to the Jewish identity, as both exist outside the acceptable white Protestant American qualifiers. The immigrant is considered Mexican just by virtue of being an immigrant, and especially if they are of any Latino descent, as “Mexican” becomes a race in itself, the immigrant race. A modernized Superman, if adhering to his roots as an American immigrant, would subsequently have to incorporate aspects of the immigrant of today that appears in popular culture, the hypervisible immigrant, as Superman is a pop culture icon *and* one of the most iconic immigrant stories in American media. However, I argue modern portrayals of Superman specifically corrupt the “immigrant” essentiality of his character to be a negative, ascribing to a xenophobic worldview that someone like Superman *would* inevitably use it *against* humanity, *proving* that he is not human. For these interpretations, any “humanness” Superman might have is ascribed to an external influence instead of an internal one. A defunct plotline from *Zack Snyder's Justice*

League Trilogy posits this when he describes Lois Lane, Superman's love interest, as "the key" to Superman's heart in interviews that explain what would have been:

Speaking about the moment, Snyder explained "Because Lois -- and it's in the Justice League teaser; it wasn't in the movie apparently... it's this line where Bruce says, 'I was right here, and Barry Allen came to me and he said 'Lois Lane is the key.' And then [Wonder Woman] goes, 'She is to Superman; every heart has one.' And [Bruce] goes, 'I think it's something more, something darker.' ("Batman v Superman's Nightmare Scene")

The discontinued plotline revolves around an "evil" Superman, manipulated by supervillain Darkseid with Lois Lane's death as the catalyst. If Lois Lane is the "key" to Superman's heart, then her death results in Superman losing that heart, or losing that humanity. In this telling, Superman's humanity is not an innate, inherent thing, nor is he autonomous in the storyline—he functions less as a character, and more as a concept, not unlike the stories made up about "illegal" immigrants to dehumanize people. Superman becomes "evil" not because it is consistent with his character arc, but because it proves a point. Superman is an alien, foreign to Earth sensibilities; his villainy is a tragedy, but only because he was never actually human, but *made* human through associations and relationships. His morality is not his own, but superimposed on him through other actors, notably Lois Lane—and yet, Snyder's Superman is also shown to have formed an appreciation of the Earth and humanity *outside* of his relationship with Lois Lane.

Zack Snyder's Justice League Trilogy is made up of three movies that center Superman; while the later two films will introduce additional DC Superheroes, the first movie, *Man of Steel*, features Superman and his origin story. In a scene taking place during Superman's childhood, young Superman is on a school bus with his classmates when a sudden popped tire causes the bus to

crash into a lake. Looking around at his drowning classmates, Superman quickly jumps from his seat, leaves the bus through the rear exit and pushes the bus back onto dry land. Superman is shown saving people because of his own motives, long before he even first meets Lois Lane. Despite this development, Superman's fate in the trilogy is to turn evil, with Superman's teammates attributing this change of morality to Lois Lane's death. Snyder's Superman has his backstory pushed to the side to fit the heteronormative trope of the man whose only motivation for being moral is that he loves a woman, and that the death of this woman means the death of the man's morality, or his metaphorical heart; this act divorces Superman's morality from his own person, instead putting it in the hands of the biological human. It implies that Superman was only a force for good because his human partner, who was in control of his sense of right and wrong, decided he should be right. Put simply, it implies that Superman, the outsider, never had or never could have their own understanding of humanity and morality. However, if Lois Lane was his heart, then what exactly compelled him to save the school bus full of his classmates after it drove into a lake, many years before Lois Lane was any sort of factor in Superman's life? As he had no other motivation, it can be concluded that Superman saves the kids on the bus because he considers it the right thing to do, as further proven when he rebukes his father's argument that hiding his status as an alien is more important, with the response, "What was I supposed to do? Just let them die?" Superman, even as a child, is shown to value life even over his own safety, positing that sacrificing their lives for his secret is unthinkably selfish. Superman's metaphorical heart, his sense of morality, is set many years before he even dons the title "Superman." The persona of Superman is created specifically to serve as a way Clark Kent can act on his heart, to save as many lives as he can without having to risk exposing his hidden identity. However, the later films in the trilogy assert that Superman being a bad day away from turning evil is a logical

progression of the character, stripping the *context* away—Superman is Superman *because* of his unshakable resolve in his moral compass—in favor of *content*, in favor of breaking him down. This aligns with the claim that Snyder’s Superman is effectively not a constructed character, because these are not Snyder’s *own* characters, as he is pulling from an existing canon, conceptualizing them only to make a point. Superman is functioning as an icon before a character, this symbol of American goodness, or assumed goodness, ready to portray any element, ideal, or trope put on him. Superman is not allowed to be a character in his own right. His black and white morality is the extent of his characterization, the trilogy moralizing through Superman whereas other characters are allowed to be autonomous beings, always talking *about* Superman and what he stands for but never talking *with* him.

Ultimately, Snyder does not believe that Superman has this inherent goodness, or that Superman is a character who can stand on his own merit. For Snyder, Superman is not interesting on his own. Instead, he feels the need to establish the character externally, whether that be through Lois Lane, or through comparisons with other iconic figures. In Snyder’s *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, Superman is conceptualized as an allegory for Jesus Christ, a Christianization of the character that simultaneously seeks to further alienate him from his Jewishness while maintaining a veneer of relatability for the protestant American audience, interpreting Superman through this familiar framework, at their level, while presenting him as the absolute ideal, above their level. In a conversation between Lex Luthor and Senator Finch, Luthor says, “devils don’t come from hell beneath us. No, they come from the sky,” referencing Superman’s status as a Christ-like figure but ultimately inverting him into that of an antichrist, a designation which exists because its relation to Christ, as antichrist does not exist without Christ himself. Through relation to Superman, Jesus Christ is used to legitimize Superman as an

American icon—but also, Jesus Christ himself becomes dehumanized. Was not Jesus Christ designed to be human? Designed to be relatable, literally down to earth, in comparison to his heavenly father? Jesus is not a god, but the son of one, an important distinction. However, Snyder's trilogy posits that Superman is a god because of his Christ-like comparisons. Similarly to Superman, Jesus Christ is also white-washed and Americanized, and assumed to have an anti-immigrant stance despite being a refugee himself. Donald Trump being considered the "second coming of Christ" despite taking a strong stance of "build the wall" encapsulates that contradiction. Similarly, a Superman spoof, the character Homelander from *The Boys*, holds a very Trump supporter ideology—even going as far as to romance the Nazi character Stormfront—despite being based off a character who was breaking through Nazi defenses to force Hitler to surrender in “How Superman Would End The War” which was published in 1940.

Snyder's Superman, even at his best, allows for characters like Homelander to exist, because Snyder's Superman has become *the* Superman, the imitation superseding the original context, where fans will posit that even Homelander is more authentic than Superman himself, a more "realistic" depiction. In John Shelton Lawrence's review of “Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero by Danny Fingeroth, Foreword by Stan Lee,” he analyzes Danny Fingeroth's scholarship on the intrinsic Jewishness of Superman and subsequent assimilation into popular culture, these more "realistic" depictions devoid of context. Lawrence discusses Jewishness as an identity intrinsic to the Superhero culture cult, primarily through Danny Fingeroth's scholarship on Superman, who “self identified as a New York Jew with eastern European roots, is trying to reconstruct the culture of persons from a recently lost world of immigrants so foreign and so strange as to take on the air of fairy tales” (218). According to Lawrence, the lost Jewish identity is reconstructed or “found” through these

superhero stories, these fairy tales. Lawrence continues that Fingeroth “Rather than listing important Jews in comics as a tribal celebration, Fingeroth aspires to present the superhero fantasy's “Jewish inflections,” as he puts it, trying to separate them from elements found in predecessors such as Gilgamesh, Hercules, Zorro, or the Lone Ranger” (218). The act of reclamation through mythologization simultaneously solidifies and abstracts the Jewish identity through new icons like Superman that are on the same level but also fundamentally different as “Gilgamesh, Hercules, Zorro, or the Lone Ranger,” assimilating Jewishness into the American canon for overall consumption, eventually removing the Jewish context entirely. Lawrence continues:

Even Stan Lee (Stanley Martin Lieber) ... emphasizes that Fingeroth's attribution of Jewish ethnic values is “speculations and conclusions.” Lee and his cohorts felt “in the front of our minds that we were just trying to make the best action-adventure comics we could”—not attempting to portray or project Jewishness and certainly not noticing it. In other words, they saw themselves as assimilated and making popular American stories in the process. (218-219)

So even Stan Lee, commonly referred to as an authority on comic world matters, attributes Fingeroth’s Jewish analysis as “speculations and conclusions.” When regarding Superman strictly in the confines of his status as an icon, he becomes a target of projection; this is important because it emphasizes the rapid erasure of Superman's status as a Jewish icon. If it stands that there is no true version of Superman, or an authentic version, we can instead look into the factors involved for the chosen story-teller to come to the conclusion of *why* the character would choose to act in the way that they do. The argument is in the fact that the evil portrayals of Superman do not go the lengths to properly flesh out his character, leaving him as a canvas for

projection. Alternatively, they modify elements of his story to produce the “Evil Superman” result, such as the else-world character of Ultraman raised by the Luthors. As icons however, they typically retain the status of goodness, even if they only hold that status to criticize their goodness, such as in *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, where Superman is “good” only as a vessel for Batman and Lex Luthor to criticize. Maruo-Schröder in their scholarship “‘Justice Has a Bad Side’: Figurations of Law and Justice in 21st-Century Superhero Movies,” argues that the effect of Batman being posited as reasonable for having their mistrust of Superman and having to be prepared to kill him at any moment for the safety of humanity, acts as a justification for real life extreme military preparedness and extralegal responses. The author notes Batman’s philosophy and how it relates to America’s current security practices in post-9/11 America, writing “According to him [Batman] society has to act on the possibility that Superman could abuse this power and wipe out the human race, formulating a sort of politics of prevention reminiscent of current preemptive security practices” (Maruo-Schröder 10-11). Maruo-Schröder here describes the end result of Superman becoming a vessel of projection for xenophobic fantasies, as Batman is ultimately posited in the films to be the most reasonable hero, the hero who literally reasons the most as compared to Superman who is more passive in his ideology. The message in the film stands that you can never let your guard down against outsiders, even if it is someone who appears as blatantly good and assimilated as Superman. This is because no matter how good Superman is, he will always be an outsider, and thus will always be seen as liable to use his powers against humanity. This justification goes beyond the sole fact that he has great power, as Batman having enough power to kill someone as powerful as Superman is again posited as reasonable by the film. Therefore, the possibility that justifies this extreme

preparedness is that an outsider like Superman has power in the first place, as it is only power in an outsider's hands that needs to be prepared for.

SECTION 4: The Superman Parody

Homelander from Eric Kripke's Amazon series *The Boys* (2019), adapted from Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson's comic series of the same name, is an evil superhero who is written as a Superman parody. While the specific American motif in his outfit, which features an American flag cape and has features in the style of exaggerated American military regalia, is also a parody to Marvel's aptly named character Captain America, Homelander draws most from the Superman character, matching his powers, outsider status, and borderline mythological presence, albeit a Christian one. *The Boys* features numerous evil parodies of popular superhero characters, which is a criticism of the conflation of celebrity and heroic status, but this project will focus on the Superman-parody character Homelander, as well as the Nazi-refugee hero Stormfront who ultimately becomes his love interest. Homelander, like many of the superheroes from *The Boys* universe, is claimed to have received his powers from an unspecified genetic mutation, which is considered by many to be divine action from the Christian God, and that otherwise he lived a stereotypical American baseball-filled life. In truth, he was artificially grown from the DNA of an older hero named Soldier Boy, and grew up in a lab where he was experimented on to test his powers. Although the TV adaptation does not share the comic's version of Homelander's public backstory of him being an alien sent to Earth as a baby, which is a more direct analogue to Superman, Homelander is still established as unnatural, both by his genetic mutation and "unnatural" means of being born. The owner of the lab, a company named Vought, would later go on to place Homelander in their public superhero team "The Seven" and turn him into a major celebrity presence and American hero.

In the first season of *The Boys* in an episode titled "Good for the Soul" Homelander is an invited guest to speak at the "Believe" Expo, a massive outdoor convention for Christianity with

events featuring various Superheroes. Homelander was instructed by his boss, Madelyn Stillwell, to appear politically moderate in his speech responding to a terrorist attack that ended in a passenger plane “Flight 37” suffering a fatal crash. Unknown to the public is that this crash was actually caused by Homelander destroying the plane’s controls through a careless mistake while “saving” the plane, a completely fatal event since Homelander refused to save any of the passengers in order to cover up his mistake. While Homelander is given a politically moderate speech to read at the event, his personal familiarity with being an outsider in America and the reception outsiders get from the public, particularly the extremist Christian patriotic American, makes him argue for his speech to instead be a direct militaristic response to the vague foreign threat, which I argue is an acknowledgement of not just the phobic hatred of outsiders, but how Homelander himself embodies that fear, and can weaponize it to establish trust with the many mistrustful Christian nationalists in America. Despite demands to follow the script, Homelander insists that the crowd will be more receptive to a more aggressive stance:

“My speech. It reads like corporate fucking mayonnaise. We’re talking Believe here.

These are my people ... There is an opportunity here. People are scared. They don’t trust Washington, or the coastal elite, and they hate foreigners. What they want is a little John Wayne frontier justice. And that is what I do. Don’t forget... it was me that saved that

Flight 37 thing. I turned that into a win. For us.” (*The Boys*)

Homelander saying “These are my people” is a statement that does not imply a shared heritage to his audience. Homelander is instead acknowledging the large population of Americans who have extremist patriotic and Christian beliefs that he knows he caters best to. Homelander jumps on the opportunity to weaponize the nation’s fear against foreigners, a move he did when he insisted he was too late to save “Flight 37” from the terrorists, yet in conversation with Stillwell

specifies, “it was me that saved that Flight 37 *thing*. I turned that into a win. For us.”

Homelander is familiar with the fear of the outsider as he embodies this role himself, no matter how loved he is by humanity his genetically mutated powers and his “unnatural” birth separates him, as evidenced by his childhood being spent completely isolated in a brutal laboratory. As he is familiar with outsider status, he is able to turn this negative potential fear of himself into a positive, primarily through shifting the target of hatred onto another, just as he turned the “Flight 37” incident into a win. When Homelander says, “They don’t trust Washington, or the coastal elite, and they hate foreigners,” he is discussing how the corporate speech will garner him negative attention, specifying that the negative attention which manifests as mistrust for the government and “coastal elite” will manifest as hatred for the outsider. Homelander needs the positive reception partly because he will face greater consequences for receiving negative attention. Homelander will instead go along with his personal speech, utilizing the fear and hatred of outsiders by declaring himself not a mad dog kept on a leash, but a reasonable dog, a person even, who turns his anger where it is justified. By feeding into and weaponizing their fears against more susceptible groups, Homelander appears reasonable in spite of his outsider status, as he feeds into the crowd's expectations by passionately declaring he was sent by God to serve the people of America. An effective statement, as unsurprisingly many of the people at the “Believe” expo already hold the belief that the people in America who receive superpowers were given them intentionally by God. In truth, all superpowers are a product of a formula called “Compound V” which is created and owned by the Vought Company, meaning all superheroes in the world are either current or former test subjects. Though just as Vought did for Homelander, all other superheroes have a publicly accepted backstory, some that even the heroes themselves believe since they were too young to remember their trials with the compound. When

Homelander gives his speech, going off script, he receives the resounding positive reception he expected to receive:

“A terrible tragedy befell our nation this week. Terrible. And let's not mince words about this. We.. were... attacked...” (cheering) “America was attacked.” (cheering) “Some people... they want me to come out here and speak empty platitudes to you all. A little bit of corporate talk. But I don't want to do that. I can't do that. You want to know why? Because I believe that what God wants me to do is to get on over there, find the filthy bastards that masterminded this– whatever cave they're in– and introduce them to a little thing called God's judgment!” (cheering) “That's what I think! Sounds like the *American* thing to do! Sounds like the *right* thing to do. But no. No, no, no, no, no. Apparently, I got to wait for Congress to say it's okay.” (crowd booing) “Right? I say I answer to a higher law.” (cheering) “Wasn't I chosen to save you? Is it not my God given purpose, to protect the United States of America.” (*The Boys*)

Leading off the last words of his speech, Homelander proceeds to float above the cheering crowd, flying up-right, his legs together and arms stuck out straight to each side, mimicking crucifixion imagery.



Kripke, Eric, creator. *The Boys*. Amazon Studios, 2019-present. *Featuring Homelander, portrayed by Antony Starr, floating in a “crucified” stance beside an image of a cross, demonstrating Homelander’s use of crucifixion imagery to legitimize himself among Christian believers.*

Homelander claiming to be “chosen to save you!” from a “God given purpose,” rejecting the wills of “congress” because he answers to a “higher law” functions as a way for Homelander to further legitimize himself as a valid citizen, not just of the American nation, but of the radical Christian nation. Utilizing the deaths he caused and covered-up, with the hatred of foreigners and the mistrust of the government, Homelander takes the fears he embodies of being an unempathetic destructive force, and projects it onto groups that are more susceptible of being targeted as malicious outsiders due to their race, foreign allegiance or opposing religious beliefs. Homelander states, “I believe that what God wants me to do is to get on over there, find the filthy bastards that masterminded this— whatever cave they’re in— and introduce them to a little thing called God’s judgment!” Homelander is particular with his use of language, using insulting remarks such as “filthy” and implying a spiritual and technological ignorance by finding “whatever cave they’re in” and introducing them to “God’s judgment!” However, he also implies

a remarkable attribute which is a mastermind for villainy, establishing the enemy as both below the notice of civilization and divinity, while simultaneously being an active dangerous threat to these esteemed standards. “The terrorists” being characterized as broadly but exceptionally backwards, malicious, disgusting and dangerous, affords them an exceptional status under the condition that they are the exceptionally villainous enemies to the Christian American nation. This particular effect of exceptionality is explored in Maruo-Schröder’s, “‘Justice Has a Bad Side’: Figurations of Law and Justice in 21st-Century Superhero Movies.” Maruo-Schröder discusses the effect of having exceptional threats that in turn justify extralegal responses, and how media portrayals of extralegal heroes have worked to justify this belief further in the public. The author, when comparing the broad alien threat often utilized by DC comics to the broad “terrorist” threat used in post-9/11 America, describes their similarities and how they act as an extralegal approval for unchecked vigilantism, “terrorists, likewise regularly characterized as absolute “others” that threaten the Western world in ways that supposedly cannot be dealt with by the usual (legal) means” (Maruo-Schröder 7). Homelander in this scene is utilizing this effect, by putting the blame of the fatal crash of “Flight 37” on the exceptional but vague terrorist threat, Homelander has established an extralegal status for himself that acts as a justification for him to defy demands from the government, use his destructive powers at his own judgment, and to solidify himself as a valid member and champion in the eyes of Christian nationalist Americans and those who share their views.

Homelander’s participation as a ‘follower’ of white Christian nationalism would morph as the series progressed. In the third season of *The Boys*, Homelander’s professional and romantic partner Stormfront ends up committing suicide. Stormfront was born in Berlin in 1919 and was a fairly prominent member of the 1930’s Nazi party before changing her name and

becoming the American hero Liberty. She would eventually have to disappear from the public eye after her image deteriorated from her frequent racism, leading her to eventually rebrand herself again in the 21st century as Stormfront. Stormfront and Homelander had been in a relationship both romantic and professional, as both utilized fear and anger against foreigners and immigrants in order to legitimize their own status as American citizens. Stormfront by season 3 of *The Boys* had been gravely disabled and was being kept on life support, receiving occasional visits from Homelander. In the first episode of season three of *The Boys* titled “Payback,” Homelander visits Stormfront and starts ranting about how he should be worshiped like the Christian God. Stormfront attempts to convince him, as he ultimately refuses to agree with her, that he will be worshiped once he fulfills her plan for him to create the ‘master race’ of superpowered Aryans:

Stormfront: Oh, they will. When you lead an army of Aryan *Übermensch* to their victory.

Homelander: What? No. No. No, No! How many times do I have to tell you? We don’t need a fucking master race. I’m the master race. That’s the point. That’s the whole point.

Stormfront: No, you have to. It took a hundred years, but we finally found you. It’s your destiny. (*The Boys*)

Homelander claims to not be interested in Stormfront’s plan to lead an army of Aryan *Übermensch*, positing that he himself is the entirety of the master race. This emphasizes Homelander’s mixed feelings that he experiences as an outsider in America, simultaneously desiring to embody ideals of American white Christian nationalism, while American individualism has left him with the desire to have these ideals benefit himself, instead of the institutions that were responsible for him desiring the ideals in the first place. Despite idolizing whiteness, he does not care about the “destiny” of the Aryan race. Homelander’s interest in the

“master race” goes only as far as what being part of the “master race” in society means for himself, or as he puts it, “We don’t need a fucking master race. I’m the master race. That’s the point.” To him, being part of the “master race” is getting to be in the center of society by defining himself as the ideal in contrast to the “others” who fall on the boundaries of this established ideal. However, having individuals attain a higher status by excluding other individuals from society does not necessarily have a beneficial feedback to systems established through means of extreme exclusion. In Homelander’s case these societal systems of extreme exclusion, such as ones used by the Nazi party in Germany and by white Christian nationalist groups in America, end up producing a follower unfaithful to the ‘cause’ who eventually will use the practice of extreme exclusion to exclude all of society, including approved and idolized groups, until he has placed his sole self at the center. However even as the sole individual in the center, Homelander still needs an “other” on the boundary so his position in the center can be defined, as seen in his initial desire to be worshiped like the Christian God.

Despite Homelander believing he is utilizing these ideals for his sole gain, these ideals nonetheless leave an imprint on Homelander, as much of his ‘individual’ thought process is still filtered through a white Christian nationalist lens. In the third season of *The Boys* in the episode titled “The Only Man In The Sky,” Homelander is performing his ‘annual birthday save,’ a publicized event put together by Vought where Homelander will be filmed personally saving someone. Chelsea, a Jewish girl standing on the ridge of a building, is confronted by Homelander who warns her not to kill herself as it would offend Christian doctrine: “You’re my annual birthday save. Life is a precious gift. To throw yours away would be a real slap in the Lord’s face, don’t you think? You don’t want to go to hell for all eternity, do you” (*The Boys*). Homelander reasons here that Chelsea should not kill herself because she both owes her life to

God, and throwing away that life would lead to eternal punishment in hell. He says “life is a precious gift”, but as he says it alongside promises of punishment for failing to live a life that meets Christian standards, his use of “precious gift” is meant to imply that the right to live is conditional to meeting Christian standards. This ‘normal’ interaction for Homelander reveals the influence of asserting his own status by embodying Christian nationalism, as he filters even his typical heroic duties through Christian doctrine. Chelsea, in response to Homelander’s warnings of Christian punishment, tells Homelander that she is Jewish. Homelander’s face drops before he waves off her response and tells her to come back from the ledge, explaining it is futile to jump as he can simply stop her before she would die from the impact. However, Homelander’s dedication to stopping Chelsea from killing herself changes when he sees a news report that his romantic partner Stormfront had just killed herself. After seeing this, Homelander decides to force Chelsea to jump as recompense for the death of Stormfront: “How is it fair that you get saved, while a beautiful perfect god gets killed. You know what Chelsea, I think you should jump ... I’m not suggesting anymore. Jump” (*The Boys*). Homelander, after hearing his Nazi partner Stormfront has killed herself, decides he needs to force Chelsea, a Jewish girl, to also ‘kill herself’ as a sort of retribution for the death of a “perfect god” like Stormfront. Despite Homelander earlier refusing his interest in enacting Stormfront’s Aryan fantasies, he will still force a Jewish girl to kill herself as an act of ‘universal fairness,’ showing that no matter how self-serving Homelander gets, every attempt to define himself will be filtered through these extremist exclusionary systems that created him in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Superman, as a character and American icon, has had his morality and ideals shifted in the eyes of the American public. Some still know him as the unwaveringly idealistic hero, the red and blue boy scout who lives among humanity and fights for his adopted homeworld. Others feel it more appropriate for Superman to embody negative stereotypes of immigrants and outsiders, such as the dishonest invader, or the well-intentioned but incompatible outsider. Portrayals such as these are seen as more “realistic,” a reflection of a truer, more cynical society, that those with great power would inevitably abuse it, especially if they are not one of “us.” Recent portrayals of Superman and Batman together, such as *Zack Snyder’s Justice League Trilogy*, have featured the dichotomy where Batman represents humanity because of his “reasonable” pessimism.

Superman, on the other hand, does not represent humanity, as his optimism is in direct opposition to earthly values. This dichotomy again reflects a more cynical, xenophobic society that has labeled pessimistic American heroes as “realistic,” while optimistic outsider heroes are “unrealistic.” Homelander from *The Boys* would go on to embody the only role available to an outsider hero in a cynical and xenophobic society. That role is to be a hyper-violent and hyper-militaristic force in the name of American Christian nationalism, as Homelander will project fear and hatred onto the “other,” in order to further his own status as an accepted and cherished member of America. As portrayals like *Zack Snyder’s Justice League Trilogy* will also work to Christianize the Superman character, erasing his already faint Jewish roots, Superman becomes more isolated from the origins and ideals he was originally created with. By effectively erasing Superman’s Jewish roots and Christianizing the character, particularly during an era of xenophobic Christian nationalism, Superman is seemingly left with no choice but to either embody the radical and foreign invader, or to champion the cause of xenophobia himself by

appealing to xenophobic Christian nationalism. In either case, in a xenophobic lens, Superman must be an invader. Whether he is an invader against America and their view of ‘the world,’ as is the case of *Zack Snyder's Justice League Trilogy*, or he is an invader for America helping them ‘protect the world,’ as is the case with Homelander from *The Boys*. Although the good hearted Superman that remains true to his ideals and origins still thrives in the lives of fans and creators alike, Superman as a popular icon in post-9/11 America has unfortunately become a vessel for the extreme anxiety of immigrants, outsiders, and “others.”

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