Mankind at Its Finest: Superman as Capitalist Tool
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Christopher Reeve once said of Superman, the character whom he portrayed in a series of films:

It's very hard for me to be silly about Superman because I've seen first hand how he actually transforms people's lives. I have seen children dying of brain tumors who wanted as their last request to be able to talk to me, and have gone to their graves with a peace brought on by knowing that their belief in this kind of character is intact. I've seen that Superman really matters. It's not Superman the tongue-in-cheek cartoon character they're connecting with; they're connecting with something very basic: the ability to overcome obstacles, the ability to persevere, the ability to understand difficulty and to turn your back on it. ("Superman Through the Ages")

The fact that a character carries such weight with our nation's youth makes him a worthwhile subject for discussion, regardless of his seemingly harmless or silly nature. Author Les Daniels notes that Superman has been "re-created for generation after generation" (9). Therefore, as he is so popular, and has been, until recently, solely a corporately owned and produced character, by understanding the various stages of Superman's existence, one can get an idea of the ways the bourgeoisie uses popular culture to subtly exert its influence and encourage its ideologies during different eras.

Superman was created with the best of intentions by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and his earliest adventures, as produced by the two, reflect that fact. Superman's creators "reached out to the audience... by dealing with the social problems of the day. [The first Superman story alone] includes episodes centered on unjust imprisonment, spousal abuse, and corrupt government officials" (Daniels 35). Siegel himself remarked that, "...[Superman] was very serious about helping people in distress because Joe and I felt that very intensely. We were young kids, and if we wanted to see a movie we had to sell milk bottles, so we sort of had the feeling that we were right there at the bottom and we could empathize with people" (35-36). Indeed, both the Siegel and Shuster households were comprised of lower-class families that found themselves painfully impacted by the Depression (Catron 25). Regardless of authorial intentions, however, even the stories created solely under the direction of Siegel and Shuster, those published between June of 1939 and sometime in early 1941 (65), were informed by the bourgeoisie and various capitalist ideologies. In fact, the character of Superman himself helps to reinforce those ideologies during this time period.

Author Harlan Ellison notes that Superman is "the 20th century archetype of mankind at its finest" (Catron 25). The character's name alone summarizes his being; he is the Superman, the Ubermensch, all the potential of humanity fulfilled. The danger in establishing a character as the ultimate person, however, is that readers can infer all other characters to be inadequate. Though Siegel and Shuster tackle a variety of social issues with the best of intentions, their efforts always fall short, as their ideal man embodies a number of characteristics that advance the cause of the bourgeoisie. As the readers are to perceive Superman as that which they should aspire to, the assertion of the authors is that these characteristics, despite the ideologies that
shape them, are admirable. By examining the differences and relationships between various characters and Superman, one can understand how Siegel and Shuster’s works encourage readers to conform to behaviors and expectations favored by, and supportive of, the bourgeoisie.

Much has been made of Siegel’s psychological state-of-mind and its influence on the creation of the Superman/Clark Kent/Lois Lane love triangle. Indeed, considering that as a young man Siegel was, by his own admission, a stereotypical effeminate intellectual who dreamed of a) being a journalist, and b) winning the affections of an attractive classmate named Lois (Catron 27), the implications of the triangle are undeniable. Superman again represents the ideal man, only now he is, specifically, the ideal Siegel. If only the real Lois and the fictional Lois could see past the feminine exteriors of Siegel and Kent respectively, they would inevitably fall for the Supermen beneath them. Yet in addition to the obvious psychological insights about Siegel one can gain from this triangle, the Superman/Kent/Lane dynamic is important for the insights it can give about the society from which it was spawned. As a product of a bourgeoisie-controlled capitalist society, this bizarre triangle, unsurprisingly, reflects and supports the status quo. The contrasts and relationships between Superman, Kent, and Lane help to reinforce traditional gender roles which serve the interests of the bourgeoisie.

By being in direct opposition to the ideals Superman embodies, Kent establishes what a man should not be. Unlike the Herculean Superman, Kent is weak and sickly. Superman faces all challenges with unreserved courage, while Kent’s cowardice is often a source of comic relief. Superman is a man of action, while Kent is an intellectual - a “thinker”. That Kent is a negative role-model is emphasized by the ways others react to his actions; people in general ridicule and chastise him when he behaves in an un-Supermanly manner, while they adore his costumed alter ego. Lane’s love for Superman borders on the obsessive, yet she mockingly rejects Kent’s romantic advances. In her words, the former is “a real he man”, while the latter is a “spineless worm” (Shuster 176). The message is clear; a man should be hearty, brave, and productive, or he will lose the approval of his peers and be unsuitable for marriage. It is surely no coincidence that such men make ideal soldier-pawns and puppet-workers for the bourgeoisie.

Just as Lane’s rejection of Kent helps establish him as a less-than-ideal man, Superman’s rejection of Lane shows her to be an example of an undesirable woman. Lane is a working woman who makes her living in an intellectual realm. She is more concerned with making that living, and a name for herself, than she is in adopting a traditional, feminine lifestyle. Indeed, she has no desire to marry, to produce infant workers, or to maintain a home. She is sarcastic and assertive instead of gentle and submissive. As she does not live up to the behaviors her society expects of women, Lane is unable to attract a “real” man. A “real” woman is docile, maintains a worker by caring for her husband, and produces future workers through her children. Not surprisingly, such a woman better serves the bourgeoisie than Lane. Once again, the character of Superman encourages readers to adopt accepted roles to further the controlling classes’ interests.

One of the earliest Siegel and Shuster stories, an untitled tale about dangerous conditions at a coal mine, is an excellent example of how Superman’s early adventures are more than they appear to be at first glance. On the surface, it seems to identify with the needs of the proletariat and condemn the bourgeoisie, while a closer examination reveals the opposite to be true. Once again, Superman, by contrast and interaction with other characters, reveals what the bourgeoisie expects of a good citizen. Specifically, though it does not initially appear so, the story encourages behavior in immigrants and workers that helps maintain the capitalist status quo.

Stanislaw Kober, the worker whose career is ended due to poor safety conditions at the coal mine in which he works, plays the "bad" immigrant-worker to Superman’s "good" immigrant-worker. Kober's English is broken, indicating that he is uneducated or, rather, that he lacks an American education. As a result, he is only able to get a menial job working in a coal mine. That position would have provided adequately for his family, yet Kober is now unable
to perform even that simple labor. Kober’s description of his troubles summarizes the plight of the worker: “Months ago we know mine is unsafe - - but when we tell boss’s foreman they say: ‘No like job, Stanislaw? Quit!’... But we no quit - - got wife, kids, bills! So back we go to mine an’ work long hours an’ little pay... an’ maybe to die!” (Shuster 46). The story seems to treat Kober sympathetically. After all, it was unsafe work conditions, not any fault of his own, that led to his injuries and subsequent dismissal. However, Superman reveals the true nature of the text by portraying the ideal immigrant. Unlike Kober, his English is flawless, and his appearance is unremarkable; there is nothing to even hint that Superman is not an American by birth. Nothing, that is, but the extraordinary powers of his Kryptonian heritage. These talents are routinely put to use in the defense of the current system, and are more than able to overcome the simple dangers of Kober’s former workplace. The ideal immigrant, then, adjusts indistinguishably into the mainstream, supports the system preferred by the ruling class, and does not allow the mistakes of the otherwise beneficial bourgeoisie to interfere in the completion of his work. There could be no more accurate depiction of what the bourgeoisie would desire from an immigrant.

An examination of Kober’s co-workers when compared to Superman also reveals the socially-created contradictions of the coal mine story. Again, as with the poor immigrant, it seems the worker is to be pitied. Yet the miners invariably fall short of the example set by Superman. Their efforts to implement changes in their work environment are fruitless. Despite their best attempts, Kober’s peers are unable to save him from a cave-in. Finally, they again fail in a rescue attempt, leaving Thornton Blakely, their employer, and his friends to face a certain death. Certain, that is, if not for Superman. In all of the early stories, Superman plays the part of the Superworker. His powers are routinely described in terms of their superiority over the instruments of the bourgeoisie, and his goals favor the cause of the proletariat. Thus, when he succeeds in all of the efforts in which the workers failed - rescuing Kober, saving Blakely and friends, and spearheading reform within the mine - Superman becomes what a worker should be, emphasizing the inadequacy of the other workers. A good worker does not attempt to improve his work environment, to assist his co-workers (which would diminish his employer’s responsibilities in the process), or to serve his employer’s needs. Instead, he succeeds in the preceding tasks through the merits of his actions, perpetuating the myth of the American Dream. Furthermore, the bourgeoisie could ask for no better worker than one whose efforts produce results, and who is interested in meeting with their wishes.

The role of the good worker is given greater emphasis through Superman’s interactions with Blakely and his friends, who clearly represent the upper class. Furthermore, these interactions also reveal the alleged good intentions and benevolence of the bourgeoisie. It cannot be denied that Blakely is the story’s antagonist, and much that he says and does implies he is little more than a heartless villain. Of Kober, Blakely comments, “[he] can thank his own carelessness for his plight! However, the company will be generous enough to pay a reasonable portion of his hospital bills and may even consider offering him a $50 dollar retirement bonus” (46-47). Blakely again seems less than concerned about his workers’ welfare when he says, “There are no safety-hazards in my mine. But if there were,-- what of it? I’m a business man not a humanitarian!” (47). Later, believing a disguised Superman is simply a mere worker, instead of the Superworker that he truly is, Blakely refers to him as, “Just a sap” and, “My dull-witted friend” (48-49), very real depictions of classism. Guests at a party thrown by Blakely further this seemingly accurate representation of the selfish, uncaring bourgeoisie. While Kober, one of the men responsible for their wealth, is severely injured in a hospital, Superman discovers them engaged in “laughter, music, and revelry... a gay party [is] in progress” (47). Despite their conspicuous consumption, Superman’s plot reveals that there is something more sensitive beneath the thick skins of Blakely and his guests and, therefore, more to the bourgeoisie than might appear at first glance.

After being led down into the mine by Superman, the party-goers’ attitudes quickly change. “Ugh! What a horrid-looking place!”
comments one. “Don’t tell me people actually work down here!” adds another. “I - I don’t like this - - this filthy mine!” says a third (50). Once Superman traps them all within the mine, they completely recognize the error of their ways. One guest addresses Blakely, saying, “You blasted skin-flint! If you’d have had the mine equipped with proper safety precautions, we might have gotten out alive!” (53). Blakely himself concedes, “Oh, if I only had this all to do over again! - I never knew - really knew - what the men down here have to face!” (54). Finally, after being rescued by Superman, Blakely tells Kent: “You can announce that henceforth my mine will be the safest in the country, and my workers the best treated. My experience in the mine brought their problems closer to my understanding!” (55). The bourgeoisie, then, is not comprised of heartless, wealthy leaches indifferently feeding off of the proletariat’s work. Instead, they simply do not understand the workers’ plight, and, if their employees were only industrious enough in their efforts, the bourgeoisie would quickly show just how generous they truly are. The story is an example of false consciousness in action, as it furthers the interests of those in power, while allegedly supporting the cause of the exploited.

Unfortunately, the era of Siegel and Shuster would be the high-water mark in the character's history for over forty years. Daniels notes that, “Superman’s social conscience was... less in evidence by 1941... Shuster said that as time went by the partners were more ‘restricted’ in terms of their material, and by 1941 Siegel was submitting his scripts for [editorial approval]” (65). Afterwards, from 1941 to the end of World War II, the character would become just another military pawn, and could routinely be seen threatening racially stereotypical Japanese soldiers or shilling war bonds. Following the patriotic fervor of that time, Superman’s stories became increasingly silly, as more and more emphasis was placed on his powers. His enemies changed from corrupt politicians and arms manufacturers to bizarre aliens and absurd sorcerers. The good intentions of Siegel and Shuster were gone, and anything that attracted attention to the flaws of the status quo was forbidden. Finally, in 1988, declining sales led to the creation of a “new” Superman. This one, which appears in various monthly publications today, is much closer to, and in most ways superior to, the Superman created by Siegel and Shuster. Nonetheless, the character is now owned by Time-Warner, Inc., and close inspections still reveal the capitalist ideologies favored by the system that produces Superman.

It can be disheartening to think of a character so universally associated with compassion and decency as just another tool of the bourgeoisie, but there is reason to be hopeful about the future of Superman. In 1948, Siegel and Shuster, dismayed over the lack of profit their creation earned them and over the way control of Superman’s direction had been taken from them, sued the company to whom they had sold the character. Though they had a number of legal issues on their side, the creators found their quest to regain ownership of Superman stymied by the deep pockets of their opponent. Eventually, after drawing out the legal battle over years, National Periodicals, Inc., Superman’s owners at the time, drove Siegel and Shuster so far into debt that they dropped their suit. The two found themselves blackballed from the comics industry and penniless, a state they endured for close to three decades, as their brainchild survived only as a spokesperson for the company and system that had ruined them. However, recently passed copyright laws may do much to rectify these injustices, and improve Superman’s future. While Shuster passed away in 1992, leaving no heirs, Siegel’s widow, Joanne Siegel, and their daughter, Nancy Siegel Larson, were recently awarded fifty percent ownership of Superman, and may produce stories featuring the character independently of Time-Warner. Furthermore, the Siegels are now pursuing legal action that may force Time-Warner to part with a sum equal to half of the revenue generated by Superman products since 1948 (O’Neill 6). Only time will tell what kind of Superman will be created by the Siegels of 1999, but at least fans of the first super-hero can now adhere to the hope that victims of the bourgeoisie will produce a character that better reflects the evils of capitalism instead of one that encourages the status quo.
Works Cited


