HOW TO BE A HERO: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF SUPERMAN'S FIRST

APPEARANCE IN *ACTION COMICS*

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ABSTRACT

Through a combination of rhetorical heightening, idiom, and structure, Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster influenced their young American audience with the first appearance of Superman in 1938's *Action Comics* no. 1. Superman's lack of distinguishing characteristics, dual identity, and embodiment of American culture allowed the character to become a vehicle for Siegel and Shuster, persuading children to be a helper of those in need and champion of the oppressed.   Varying panel size and choosing what to show from what not to show allowed Siegel and Shuster to heighten specific moments within Superman's story. Through metaphor and symbolic modeling, children recognized the impact of helping others in their lives both as a child and later as an adult. The tools that Siegel and Shuster had available to them in this particular medium—such as being able to simultaneously heighten several different moments within the narrative in one panel—make it a unique form of rhetorical heightening in fiction.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Carolyn Wilson, who always left it up to her son to be whatever he wanted to be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

> Now, a staple of the superhero mythology is, here's the superhero and
> there's the alter ego. Batman is actually Bruce Wayne, Spider-Man is
> actually Peter Parker. When that character wakes up in the morning, he's
> Peter Parker. He has to put on a costume to become Spider-Man. And it
> is in that characteristic Superman stands alone.
> Superman didn't become Superman. Superman was born Superman.
> When Superman wakes up in the morning, he's Superman. His alter ego is
> Clark Kent. His outfit with the big red "S"—that's the blanket he was
> wrapped in as a baby when the Kents found him. Those are his clothes.
> What Kent wears—the glasses, the business suit—that's the costume.
> That's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how
> Superman views us.
>
> And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent? He's weak . . . he's unsure
> of himself . . . he's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the
> whole human race. (*Kill Bill, Vol. 2*)

No matter how many times I see this film, David Carradine's reflective Superman monologue always gives me pause. *Is that true?* I wonder. *Is this how the greatest superhero of all time actually views the people he protects?*

It certainly is a viable analysis. A personality shift occurs when Superman changes from one identity to the other. The meek personality of Clark Kent disappears once the character rips open the front of his shirt, exposing the iconic "S" underneath. He sheds the clothing—as easily as he sheds the persona—and becomes Superman, "Champion of the oppressed. The physical marvel who [has] sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need" (Siegel and Shuster 4). In 1938, this opening line in

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the first issue of *Action Comics* establishes the character of Superman and—more importantly—establishes the rhetoric of his creators, which "tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose" their "fictional world upon the reader (Booth xiii).

I am going to counter Bill's analysis, but not on the grounds of his being a fictional character. To do so would likewise counter the central argument of this thesis. Works such as *Kill Bill*, and the various media in which we find references to Superman, serve as an outlet for American popular culture; each one has the capacity to reflect the ideas, values, and even identities of their American audiences. American audiences that see fictional characters with similar problems, cultural values, and fears feel their existences have been given a voice or a sense of wider recognition. J.P. Williams argues, the very success of works such as these "depends . . . on the audience's ability to identify with the story's protagonists" (103). Bill, disappointed with Beatrice's leaving him for a normal life, uses his analysis of Superman to argue just how meaningless and weak her life became. Bill relates to Superman, just as Tarantino wants us to relate to Bill's cynical take on Superman. But is that how most people understand the Superman story?

Tom De Haven's book *Our Hero Superman on Earth* raises a question: After decades of comics, radio shows, television programs, movies, books, videogames, poetry, songs, and analysis . . . does Superman still matter? The successful sales of Superman merchandise indicates that he does, as does his mention in a movie filmed seventy years after his creation. But why and how does he matter? What is it about this character that allowed him to transcend the realm of fiction and become an icon of idealism, a representation of our inner and outer selves, a way to analyze decades of American culture, and a material worthy of allusion?

In this thesis, I will take De Haven's question a couple of steps further: Does the rhetoric of Siegel and Shuster—that one should be a social crusader and helper of those in need—still matter? Bill is both correct and incorrect in his analysis of Superman. By analyzing the appeals and motivations behind Superman's creation, I intend to show that he is a representation of dual identity, but the dichotomy is much more complicated than Bill tells us.

Furthermore, it's the exact opposite of what psychologist Dr. Fredrick Wertham argued. In 1954, he wrote *Seduction of the Innocent*, identifying violence in comics as a primary influence for juvenile delinquency. The work purported to be the result of years of research at his psychiatric clinic, where he specialized in treating adolescents. He criticizes the medium for teaching children false notions of physics, such as Superman having the ability to fly; he calls Batman and Robin the "wish dream of two homosexuals living together"; Wonder Woman is "the exact opposite of the way a woman should behave" (*Seduction* 34). Wertham even goes so far as to say comics "retarded literary development" (qtd. in Crist).

An article in a 1948 issue of *Collier's Magazine* called "Horror in the Nursery" by Judith Crist, Wertham claimed, "The purpose of his study was to find 'not what harm comic books do . . . but objectively what effect they have on children. So far we have determined the effect is definitely and completely harmful'" (2). Wertham reports that every juvenile delinquent under his care read comics and learned many of their delinquent behaviors from imitating scenes found in comics. The first page of the article portrays two children holding a third down and stabbing her in the arm with a fountain

pen. They stab her with so much force that ink puddles up from the wound. The children appear to be acting out a scene they read in a comic (Crist 4).

But, again, this situation is much more complicated than Wertham would have us believe. Many comics, such as *Action Comics* no. 1, were designed to influence children, but not the type of influence Wertham claims. Creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster didn't intend to teach children how to act negatively, but rather positively. They intended to teach their readers how to act like a hero and, more importantly, persuade them that this was the way people should act. Superman did exert a powerful influence on children: they looked up to him, they wanted to be him, and they even saw a piece of him in themselves. After discussing the early success of Superman, *Coronet* magazine notes the following:

> Naturally, Superman's greatest effect had been on children. Mothers, realizing the power of this third parent, have gotten into the habit of asking Superman to drop a line to Junior, urging him to eat egg yolk and stop biting his nails. Boys themselves write in, asking how to beat bullies. Superman—through a corps of secretaries in the New York offices of his publishers—advises ten hours' sleep, lots of vegetables and asserts that all bullies have yellow streaks. (qtd. in Mort Weisenger)

Because children admired and felt so close to Superman, his comics become a vehicle by which the creators promote their worldview—that one should be a "Champion of the oppressed" and helper of "those in need." By seeing how Superman stands up to bullies—and possibly exploiting their various "yellow streaks"—children learn how to help others stand up to bullies on the playground or stand up to their own particular bully. Children are not expected to rescue Lois Lane from kidnappers, but instead report to a teacher that another child is stealing lunch money. When Siegel and Shuster use a type of rhetorical heightening, children learn that they too can become heroes. By then

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imagining themselves as heroes, they learn values that will help them become eventually

good and decent adult citizens, possibly even growing up to, like Superman, fight for

their country in World War II.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth proves that influence such as this is both

possible and intentional. He begins by using Homer as an example:

> We are told directly that we are to care more about the Greeks than the
> Trojans. We are told that they were "heroes" with "strong souls." We are
> told that it was the will of Zeus that they should be "the delicate feasting
> of dogs." And we learn that the particular conflict between Agamemnon,
> "the lord of men," and "brilliant" Achilles was set on by Apollo. We
> could never be sure of any of this information in real life, yet we are sure
> as we move through the *Iliad* with Homer constantly at our elbow,
> controlling rigorously our beliefs, our interests, and our sympathies.
> Though his commentary is generally brief and often disguised as simile,
> we learn from it the precise quality of every heart; we know who dies
> innocent and who guilty, who foolish and who wise. And we know,
> whenever there is any reason for us to know, what the characters are
> thinking." (4-5)

It's what the author chooses to show and methods for showing that distinguishes hero

from villain. We see Superman at his strongest moments defeating villains at their

weakest. Because Siegel and Shuster firmly establish Superman as the hero, children

believe the character when he clearly states who the villain is and who isn't, as in the case

with *Action Comics* no. 1: Superman saves an innocent woman convicted of murder

minutes before her execution. Superman provides "proof here of her innocence—a

signed confession!" (6). Superman gives his audience none of the details such as how he

obtained the confession, who the real murderer is, motive for the murder, or even the

name of the wrongly convicted person—yet it does not matter. Children believe

Superman because—through the nature of their storytelling—Siegel and Shuster

persuade them to. Superman has decided to "turn his titanic strength into channel that would benefit mankind" (Siegel and Shuster 4).

In this thesis, I argue that superhero comics are fully capable of making rhetorical arguments by analyzing those found in *Action Comics* no. 1. I will use the ideas found in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* to demonstrate how Superman's creators accomplished the rhetorical heightening visually, and borrow from Wayne Booth, Joseph Campbell, and Bruno Bettelheim to discuss the purposes and effects. Chapter I will provide context for the character and his creation, along with his general rhetorical appeals. Chapter II will discuss the character's rhetoric—that one should be a "Champion of the oppressed" and helper of "those in need"— by offering specific examples. Chapter III will analyze Wertham's attacks on the comic industry and his general claims that comics such as Superman influences children to become juvenile delinquents. Finally, I will summarize my ideas by addressing the effectiveness of rhetoric through superhero comics. It is the nature of the medium—namely the panels the creators choose to use, the timing within each panel, and the appeal of these characters to their young American audiences in 1938—that make it a unique form of rhetoric, not easily categorized or understood on any type of meta level. In fact, as I hope to argue successfully, coaching or guiding Superman's young audience towards this understanding would circumvent the positive effects. That isn't to say children must make a metaconnection for the rhetoric to be effective, just that any such understanding must occur without assistance. Otherwise, the rhetoric may be resisted.

CHAPTER II

THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN MYTH

"Comics are an empty bottle that can be filled with anything" (Neil Gaiman).[1]

With his bottle metaphor, Gaiman identifies a common misconception about comics: Many people believe they exist not as a medium but as a genre, only capable of containing super powered beings wearing brightly colored clothing. A medium is the tools or means the artists or rhetor has of reaching his audience. A genre, on the other hand, is a set of patterns that distinguishes one category of art from another within a medium. For instance, *Star Wars* uses the medium of motion pictures and exists within the science fiction genre. Comics exist as a medium, and superheroes a genre within that medium. This popular misconception of perceiving the entire comic book medium as a superhero genre is due, in no small part, to the power of Superman.

His rhetorical impact was so enormous that the history of comics before his first appearance in 1938 has almost been entirely eclipsed. Creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster finally gave the industry something it hadn't expected: a substantial profit. The attention that American children gave Superman—and more importantly, the money— persuaded publishers and audiences that this would be the genre that defined American Comics. The success of his series is the result of a fortuitous combination of factors

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[1] Qtd. in *DC Origins*.

surrounding Superman's first appearance in 1938, including the low manufacturing costs of the medium and mob ties of publisher Harry Donenfeld.

The History of American Comics

American Comics didn't have their start with superheroes; they began as cartoon strips reprinted from newspapers by Eastern Color Printing Company. The first modern comic, in terms of size, format, and content, was a 1933 promotional giveaway that Eastern printed for Gulf Oil Company. Gulf, intrigued by the idea of using the comic book to entice more families to visit their service stations, advertised the promotion via radio. The campaign was a success, and other companies—both oil and merchandising—orchestrated similar campaigns through Eastern and other publishers (DeHaven 24-5).

Later in 1934, Eastern printed the first comic with an original story for the express purpose of a newsstand release. The comic, *Famous Funnies*, was a comedy containing stories similar to children's cartoons; it quickly sold out and inspired a round of imitators such as *Popular Comics*, *Tip Top Comics*, and *King Comics*. Reprints of titles such as *Mutt and Jeff* and *Dick Tracy* were found in these pages and eventually led to "unimaginative 'Dick Tracy' and 'Mutt and Jeff' knockoffs" (DeHaven 25). Even though the profits were negligible by the standards of the time, they were substantial enough to justify the business. Also, the risk was minimal. The audience—having already been accustomed to seeing the format and, in some cases the actual stories, in the daily strips—already existed. The work was already done, and the resources were relatively cheap. Original science fiction, horror, western, and crime comics went to the

newsstands shortly after. All of these genres experienced varying levels of financial success, but comic book profits never increased substantially until Superman's entrance into the medium.

<div align="center">The History of Superman's Publisher</div>

Born to a Jewish family in Romania in 1893, future publisher Harry Donenfeld immigrated to the United States with his family at age five. He spent his early years in New Jersey and New York, slowly developing relationships with various criminals, which later became ties to mobsters such as Lucky Luciano and Frank Costello.

In his early 1930's, Donenfeld went to work for his oldest brother's printing company, Martin Press. His brother quickly made Donenfeld one of four partners (along with another older brother and one younger). Donenfeld used the position with Martin Press—and the charisma for which he was renowned—to launder prohibition money for his criminal associates. He also used supply shipments from Martin Press as a way to smuggle alcohol out of Canada. The illegal activities increased the company's profits substantially, and Donenfeld moved Martin Press to a nicer building, where he later changed the company name to National Allied Publications and shrewdly forced the two older brothers out of the business. The only brother he allowed to stay had a minority partnership and was the head printer. Donenfeld never found a way to make the company profitable without mob money until he hired Jack Liebowitz, who eventually became his partner (*DC Origins*).

As a favor to a business client, Donenfeld hired the client's son, Jack Liebowitz, as an accountant. Liebowitz quickly proved himself to be invaluable as an accountant

and, furthermore, his personality balanced Donenfeld's quite well. Donendfeld was loud, a risk taker, a partier, and full of charisma. Liebowitz, on the other hand, was a logical thinker, methodical, and extremely cautious. The two eventually developed a stable relationship and, more importantly, a profitable business that no longer needed to rely on the rapidly diminishing prohibition funds (*DC Origins*).

After the government once again legalized alcohol in 1933, Donenfeld and Liebowitz found a way to make money by printing pulp magazines[2] and "not just the pulps, but what would be called the spicy pulps: in other words, the lascivious pictures of half naked women on the cover" (Mark Waid).[3] Some of these magazines were considered pornography within the time period of the 30's and many publishers ended up in jail because of it. Donenfeld printed one such magazine, but managed to escape a jail sentence by having an employee assume responsibility for the issue's publication. The employee, in return, received a job for life (*DC Origins*). Feeling the pressure, Donenfeld decided it was time to find something else to print. He decided to publish comics.

Donenfeld had already enjoyed partial success from comics. One of his spicy pulps, *Spicy Detective,* had sold quite well because of a regular strip that ran in its pages (Rhoades 15). He and Liebowitz eventually partnered with Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, a pulp fiction writer who was one of the first creators to recognize comics as a potential medium for telling original stories. Wheeler-Nicholson published his first such comic,

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[2] Pulp magazines, also known as pulp fiction, were collections of stories, often a half to one inch thick. "Pulp" refers to the cheap wood pulp paper. The stories often contained gratuitous violence and other prurient content purely for the sake of shock value.

[3] Qtd. in *DC Origins*

Fun Comics, and it went to newsstands in 1935, attracting the attention of Donenfeld and Liebowitz. The parties begun to benefit from the relationship almost immediately: Wheeler-Nicholson needed backing, and Donenfeld and Liebowitz needed something to print that wouldn't get them into trouble. By 1937, they had created a business partnership and released *Detective Comics*, the title that eventually gave the publisher its new name: DC.[4] The title's success gave DC the opportunity to create another title in 1938 called *Action Comics*, the birthplace of Superman.

The sales of *Action Comics* convinced comic publishers that Superman was a successful archetype and, if they wanted the reap the benefits, they had to pay close attention to the reasons behind its success. In essence, it became a type of rhetoric: This is what a superhero is and this is what he must do.[5] If publishers wanted to sell more comics, they would have to create characters in his image.

Superman's introduction was more by chance than design. Desperate to find filler for the upcoming first issue of *Action Comics*, Nicholson's staff fished Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's pages out of the slush pile and put them into production. The rest is history. In less than two years, Superman went from an unknown character to one selling over 1,250,000 issues a month, more than eight times the sales volume of any other comic in 1939 (Hajdu 28-9). "There was never anything like it" says comic writer Mark

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[4] *Detective Comics* later became the title that debuted Batman in 1939.

[5] This becomes rhetoric if one defines the term as an intentional or unintentional set of ideas used to influence a set of the beliefs and desires of an audience.

Waid. "There was that Supermania that hit in 1939 and 1940—we have not seen

anything like it in American pop culture since. Beatlemania was not that big."[6]

To say that Superman spurred a series of imitations would be an understatement.

Hajdu states the following occurred directly after Superman's first appearance:

> Imitations and variants flourished in superabundance: Amazing Man,
> Wonder Man, Sandman, Doll Man, the Flash, Master Man, Hawkman, the
> Whip, Hourman, Roy the Superboy (no relation), Captain America,
> Captain Marvel, Bulletman, Johnny Quick, Aquaman, and Wonder
> Woman, all published by the end of 1941. (31)

Superman's Secret Origin

Both Siegel and Shuster were motivated by cultural and personal factors to create

Superman. Even though they appear to have been drawn to comics, the medium may

have been their only choice. Rampant anti-Semitism running through newspapers,

magazines, and ad agencies would have limited their creative possibilities. Comics

publishers, on the other hand, were Jewish (Weinstein 21-22). It's quite possible that

without the discrimination, Superman may have appeared in the pages of a pulp

magazine, possibly limiting his exposure and definitely limiting the effects of

superheroes upon comics.

In his exploration of *The Ten Cent Plague,* Daivd Hajdu quotes Bob Oskener, an

artist who worked in the industry during the same period as Superman creators Jerry

Siegel and Joe Shuster:

> There's no question in my mind that Jerry saw Superman as a kind of
> projection of his own self-image or his own fantasies about himself. Jerry
> was Jewish, like I am—like a lot of people in those days—and the rest
> were Italian. Superman was the story of an unfairly denigrated person

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[6] Qtd. in *DC Origins*.

who knows that he had the ability to prevail in the end, whoever that person may be. (30)

Siegel affectionately states, "I was quite meek and I was quite mild, and I thought gee wouldn't it be great if I was a mighty person and these girls didn't know that this clod here is really instead somebody special" (*DC Origins*). This "somebody special" could certainly be the person Oskener describes, especially when one considers the tragedy surrounding the death of Siegel's father, Mitchell Siegel, "a haberdasher, [who] died of a massive heart attack precipitated by a late-afternoon holdup of his shop in 1929" (De Haven 33). That the younger Siegel would create a hero who was impervious to bullets is, perhaps, not a surprise.

The science fiction origins of Superman aren't such a surprise either, given the nature of the pulps in print, film, and radio that appealed to Siegel.

> Superman was a mix of ideas swirling around the soup of junk culture in the 1930's: the super-strong protector of lesser creatures (Burrroughs's Tarzan, publishers Street and Smith's Doc Savage—the "Man of Bronze" with the first name Clark); the hero with the secret identity (Zorro in the movies, the Shadow and the Green Hornet on the radio, the Spider in the pulps); and the costumed crime fighter. (Hajdu 29)

Like Tarzan and the other heroes, Superman was a protector and helper of those in need. He hid his identity to protect those he cared about and to appeal to Siegel's personal sense of the "clod" who was "somebody special."

The central ideas and themes surrounding the character primarily were developed by Siegel. Credit for the character's appearance, particularly the physique, goes to Joe Shuster. He read the same pulp magazines as Siegel, along with a healthy dose of bodybuilding magazines. He states, "I was really small, and I was always pushed around by bullies and so forth so that was one of my dreams . . . I took courses in weightlifting

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and bodybuilding and I don't know if it helped, but I made an effort" (*DC Origins*). He often changed his eating habits to encourage muscle growth, "including things like fasting and wheat germ and the Milk Diet" (33). The character became a way to express not who he was, but who he wanted to be. It became his "somebody special" as well.

Like most people of the depression, Shuster was extremely poor. He often spent what little he had on an occasional art lesson. He used whatever he could find, including discarded wrapping paper or even paper from the butcher shop. Shuster preferred drawing in the more cartoony styles of the day, often found in comedy instead of the more realistic styles found in Superman's closer cousins: *Flash Gordon* or *Tarzan*. It wasn't that Shuster didn't like the realistic styles; using them was just beyond his artistic ability (De Haven 34).

Siegel and Shuster met at Glenville High School in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1931. Their common interests and frustrations caused the two to hit it off immediately. Siegel and Shuster were two of many eager hopefuls trying to break into the comic industry, which still fought to establish itself as a legitimate, financially viable medium. They met on a routine basis, putting together stories and sending them to various comic publishers, all of which were met with rejection. Simcha Weinstein's *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!* remembers Siegel's description of the exact moment the idea for Superman started to gel:

> Late one night, it was so hot that I had trouble falling asleep. I passed the time by trying to come up with dramatic story elements for the comic strip. One premise I had already conceived came back to me, but in even sharper focus.
> The story would begin with you as a child on far-off planet Krypton. Like the others of that world, you had super-powers. The child's scientist-father was mocked and denounced by the Science Council. They did not believe his claim that Krypton would soon explode from internal stress. Convinced that his prediction was valid, the boy's father had been

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constructing a model rocket ship. As the planet began to perish, the baby's parents knew its end was close. There was not enough space for three people in the small craft. They put the baby into it. The mother chose to remain on the doomed planet with the man she loved, and die with him. Tearfully, hoping that their baby boy would survive, they launched the craft toward the planet Earth. Shortly, Krypton exploded and its millions of inhabitants were destroyed. (22-3)

Superman's origin, as Oskener stated earlier, becomes a metaphor for Siegel and Shuster's position in a melting pot culture. As a land of immigrants, America becomes the perfect place for the ultimate immigrant from another planet. "Superman didn't just cross steppes and continents, borders and oceans to get here, he crossed the universe!" (De Haven 5). More importantly, he was an immigrant leaving a home that was tearing itself apart, much like what was occurring in Europe at the time. Krypton is a metaphor for Europe—and Superman is a metaphor for Siegel and Shuster.

Superman and the many characters modeled after him, in one way or another, borrow a combination of seven tropes identified in Richard Reynold's *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. The hero, an outcast from society, has the hero powers similar to those of earthbound gods or deities, devoted to justice—not to human law—the hero is not unwilling to serve the human legal system if its laws agree with his sense of justice. In the role of hero, he stands out from normal men, but the alter ego is mundane, at best. Finally, in the superhero stories, magic and science go hand in hand and the line between them is often blurred (Reynolds 16).

Reynolds refers to Superman's real parents, and not the adopted parents of Jonathan and Martha Kent. Since the character barely escaped the destruction of his home world and landed in the heartland of Kansas, he is often nicknamed the ultimate American immigrant. De Haven even refers to him as "The Patron Saint of immigrants"

(5). He becomes an individual who "prizes self-reliance, and lives self reliantly,"

suggesting the rhetoric of American idealism. Siegel gives the reader this information in

the first panel of *Action Comics* no. 1: "As a distant planet was destroyed by old age, a

scientist placed his infant son within a hastily devised space-ship, launching it toward

Earth!" (4).

As for other examples of this character's influence, Batman, created the following

year, loses his parents at a young age. Mobsters murder Robin's parents. Spider-Man

never knows his parents and, instead, is raised by his aunt and uncle. Wonder Woman

escapes her mother's island to live in "the world of man." Wolverine doesn't even know

his parents. Most of the X-Men are orphans.

This archetype certainly can be an earth bound god, but that is rarely the case.

More often than not, the hero has a resemblance instead, a power or skill set which

separates him from the rest of humanity. Superman's powers certainly separate him.

Siegel tells the reader that Superman's muscles, which are accustomed to the increased

gravity of Krypton, are capable of lifting far more weight on earth. The result: super

strength. Superman can "leap 1/8 of a mile; hurdle a twenty story building . . . raise

tremendous weights . . . run faster than an express train" (4). His other abilities, X-ray

vision, flight, etc, wouldn't come into play until much later.

Similarly, Spider-Man's powers separate him from humanity. Batman's

deductive skills make him the world's greatest detective; his fortune allows him to buy all

his amazing gadgets. Tony Stark (Iron Man) is an engineering genius and, likewise, his

fortune allows him to build a high tech suit of armor in which he can play hero.

Superheroes do not work within the confines of the law; they are vigilantes who comply only with their moral code. If that code should happen to coincide with that of the government, the hero will then work alongside the government, but never *for* the government. Siegel states that Superman is the "Champion of the oppressed. The physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!" (*Action Comics* 4). In no way does he state that the hero is to uphold the law. In fact, his first story actually has him in direct opposition to the police and the justice system that has wrongly convicted an innocent woman.

Spider-Man does not believe in the law per se but instead believes "with great power comes great responsibility." The Hulk runs from the United States military to prevent his massive power from falling their hands. Commissioner Gordon often calls upon Batman because the vigilante is motivated by justice, a pursuit of balance, instead of being constrained by police procedures.

It's not the abilities themselves which warrant notice here, but rather the reaction to those abilities. An abusive husband faints after witnessing Superman's invulnerability (Siegel and Shuster 9); Superman chases down a speeding car with its criminal driver screaming, "It's the devil himself!" (Siegel and Shuster 11); Superman frightens another man by grabbing him by the ankle and demonstrating just how high he can jump (15).

Spider-Man, likewise, amazes people by his web swinging, Nightcrawler with his teleporting, and the Hulk with his strength. Writers and artists position ordinary people to be amazed in these stories to establish a sense of individuality among the heroes. It helps the audience connect to these characters because, like Siegel, we all either feel or want to feel that inside us is "somebody special."

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Other characters will comment on the mundane or the fallible nature of the hero's alter ego. Clark Kent stutters and Lois Lane avoids him (9). Finally, Clark manages to convince Lois to dance, only to have someone cut in, shoving his face and yelling, "Fight . . . you weak livered pole-cat." Clark's response: "Really, I have no desire to do so!" (10).

Flash Thompson calls Spider-Man "Puny Parker" and people often criticize Bruce Wayne for his billionaire playboy attitude. Writers often have thugs threaten Bruce Banner, perceiving him to be an easy target—only to find out what happens when they make him angry.

Again, Superman steps outside the law to expose a corrupt senator on page fourteen of *Action Comics* no. 1. He eavesdrops while the senator tells lobbyist Alex Greer, "The bill will be passed before its full implications are realized. Before any remedial steps can be taken, our country will be embroiled with Europe." He kidnaps Greer and dangles him from the roof of the White House. While Greer screams, "Help! Help!," Superman comments on the "magnificent view" (16).

However, later in a 1941 issue of *Look Magazine* Superman works directly for the United States Government by kidnapping Hitler and Mussolini and then taking them to the United Nations to stand trial.[7] Later, every superhero in publication joins in the war effort including Batman, Robin, Wonder Woman, and Captain America.

Mythological heroes often fought or gained their abilities through magic. Science in comics becomes the new magic, contributing to Reynold's Modern Mythology phrase.

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[7] I will expand upon this comic during its analysis in Chapter Three.

Siegel and Shuster make an argument for Superman's abilities: "Incredible? No! For even today in our world exist creatures with super-strength! The lowly ant can support weights hundreds of times its own. The grasshopper leaps what to man would be the space of several city blocks" (4).

A radioactive spider bites Peter Parker, a gamma bomb transforms the Hulk, and the Fantastic Four receive their powers from cosmic radiation. These origins, though veiled in science, are no more fantastic than a magical horse with wings, a helmet that turns its wearer invisible, or someone holding up the sky. These false notions are one of the many things for which Fredrick Wertham later attacked the comic book industry for, and Superman specifically.

The Various Attacks of Frederick Wertham

Frederick Wertham wasn't the first person to attack comics, but he was the first person whose ideas gained prominence. Wertham's occupation as a psychologist and his experience treating juvenile delinquents gave him credibility and an added perception of legitimacy.

Wertham received degrees from the University of Würzburg in Germany in 1921 and served as an instructor at Johns Hopkins the next year. In 1929, Wertham began performing psychological evaluations of convicted felons for the Court of General Sessions in New York City, where his fascination with criminal behavior started (David Hajdu 98). After moving to New York, Wertham found that many of his peers refused to see black patients because of racial bias. Arguing that black people were in no less need of psychiatric care, Wertham made multiple attempts over several years to obtain funding

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for a psychiatric clinic in Harlem; Mayor Fiorello La Guardia either wasn't able or wasn't

interested. Wertham didn't give up. He contacted renowned members of the black

community such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Earl Brown. Together, they

raised enough funds to open a clinic in the basement of the parish house of St. Phillip's

Episcopal Church in Harlem.

It is important to consider Wertham's motives for establishing the clinic at this

point. He may have been fueled by a hatred or disgust for racial discrimination, but there

is also another possibility: Wertham may have been an attention seeker:

> Testifying on behalf of a defendant in a 1934 murder trial,
> Wertham said he believed that the accused had been
> temporarily insane, acting in a psychotic frenzy. While he
> was on the stand, Wertham interjected that he also believed
> that all psychiatric testimony to be specious. The next
> day's New York Times reported, "Alienists' Testimony is
> usually 'Bunk,' Psychiatrist Swears at Murder Trial."
> (Hajdu 98-9)

Wertham was called to testify for the sake of a defendant and, after doing so, essentially

stated that his own opinion surrounding the case should not be trusted—effectively

undermining his entire testimony. His motivations for doing so are ambiguous, but he

did use the defendant's case as a platform.

On the other hand, comic book author Stan Lee[8] states it was unequivocal glory

seeking that motivated Wertham to attack comics. Lee saw Wertham merely as a

"huckster" who saw attacking comics as way to get attention, furthering his popularity

and, as a result, his career (*Unmasked*).

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[8] Stan Lee is the creator of Spider-Man, Incredible Hulk, Fantastic Four, Iron Man, and
The X-Men.

Directly after World War II, another incident occurred which also calls Wertham's credibility into question. Wertham publically protested "the federal government's having confined Ezra Pound to a mental hospital under the diagnosis of insanity, instead of incarcerating him on charges of treason" for dodging the draft; however, Wertham also wrote a letter to the Selective Service Bureau which helped friend Ralph Ellison avoid the draft on psychiatric grounds (Hajdu 99).

Regardless of Wertham's motivations, the bottom line is the clinic did help people who wouldn't otherwise have received aid. Many juvenile delinquents came under Wertham's care at the clinic. Wertham noticed a pattern with these children: most of them read comics; therefore, comics must be seducing our innocent.

After the article in *Life,* Wertham was interviewed for in an article in a 1948 issue of *Collier's Magazine* called "Horror in the Nursery" by Judith Crist. He revealed the details of his study for the first time. He claims, "The purpose of the study was to find 'not what harm comic books do . . . but objectively what effect they have on children. So far we have determined the effect is definitely and completely harmful'" (2). Wertham reports that every juvenile delinquent under his care read comics and learned many of their delinquent behaviors from imitating scenes found in comics. The first page of the article portrays two children holding a third down and stabbing her in the arm with a fountain pen. They stab her with so much force that ink puddles up from the wound (See Figure 1). It's important to note the implication from the picture: The children appear to be acting out a scene they read in a comic. However, when one reads the article the story changes: "During the beating, they stabbed the lad with a fountain pen and tried to squirt

ink into the wound" (Crist 4). There is no mention of the children learning how to do this from a comic.

Figure 1 From "Horror in the Nursery" Page 1

Furthermore, out of all the reported cases of murder, violence, or other criminal behavior in the article, only one is directly connected to comics, pictured in Figure 2. This staged photo represents an instance of several children acting out a scene from a crime comic. The girl or "captive" may or may not have played along; the article doesn't specify. It also says nothing about her being gagged. Wertham actually discusses none of the other variables associated with the case of juvenile delinquency portrayed in the photo, such as the children's social, cultural, or economic background. In fact, the only detail that we do know about the children—that they were black—was changed in the pictures taken for the article. If white middle class housewives saw white middle class children acting out violent scenes from comics, it was far more likely to stir up

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controversy within *Collier's* audience. Furthermore, the location of Wertham's Harlem

clinic, the place where he found subjects for his research, isn't revealed. The article

opens by only stating the clinic is "in the basement of St. Phillip's Episcopal church

parish house in uptown New York."

Figure 2 From "Horror in the Nursery" Page 3

In the article, Wertham attempts to counter opposing viewpoints from

psychologists who believed comics provided children a healthy emotional or artistic

release: "The fact that some child psychologists endorse comic books does not prove the

healthy state of the comic books. It only proves the unhealthy state of child psychiatry"

(qtd. in Crist). Educators opposed Wertham saying that comics provided a method for

teaching difficult learners how to read. Again, Wertham attempts to counter:

> "'That,' Dr. Wertham says bitterly, 'shows how psychologically
> misguided they are—and how well the publishers are doing their work . . .
> they are psychologically bad, turning the child's interest from reading to
> picture gazing. No remedial reading clinic would resort to such a cheap,
> easy and dangerous substitute for qualified and trained teachers.' " (Crist)

Wertham later claims that this "picture gazing" leads to "delinquent youngsters [being] almost five years retarded in reading ability" (Crist 5).

The purpose of "Horror in the Nursery" was to sell magazines through sensationalism (something Wertham himself was fond of, as I examine in Chapter IV). The details Crist left out of her article, the composition of the photos, and even the name of the article (which was surrounded by a puddle of blood on its first page) indicates a clear message the writer hoped to convey about comics. The fact that Wertham used the popularity of the article to publish his book suggests it was also a success.

Superman's appearance undoubtedly changed the comic book industry and even influenced misconceptions: Many Americans would from then on think of it as a superhero genre rather than a medium. Siegel and Shuster's background and culture motivated them into creating Superman; profits motivated publishers to keep selling him and others like him. Siegel and Shuster then succeeded in influencing their audiences; this isn't the negative type of influence Wertham's rhetoric claims because it isn't created from the mere viewing of a comic book panel. In the next chapter, I will argue exactly what that influence was and how it did in fact work.

CHAPTER III

HOW *ACTION COMICS* NO. 1 WORKS RHETORICALLY

> Kids who are coming of age in the 1930's . . . have lived through an astounding moment of transition in society. The world is changing very, very rapidly. Amazing things are happening. It's a marvelous world in a very literal sense. (Levitz)[9]

Things were changing in the 1930's. Howard Hughes broke the record airspeed twice, the Summer Olympics were televised, Orson Welles panicked the nation with his radio version of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, and Waldo Waterman even delivered a flying car. New immigrants flooding into Ellis Island increased unemployment in a nation already suffering from the hardships of The Great Depression. Children, on the cusp of adolescence, were faced with a new paradigm: Unlike their parents' generation, they can't rely on the prospect of finding employment; instead, many stay in school, which takes up a lot, but not all, of their time. Comics provided a cheap distraction that appealed to many of them (*DC Origins*).

But it was more than that: American children shared Superman's sense of dual identity, or Siegel's sense of being or wanting to be "somebody special." For instance, Superman exists in two completely different worlds. In one world, he is Superman—a man who can fly, lift a car and stupefy people with heat vision—all similar to the fantasy

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[9] Qtd. in *DC Origins*

world in which children exist when they play cowboys and Indians in the back yard.

Cowboys and Indians don't have Superman's powers of course, but children and

Superman share this perception of duality. They both play hero until it's time to return to

their "real" identities. In Superman's case, it's a return to Clark Kent, who exists in a

world where he conceals his powers, can't get that date with Lois Lane, and can't stand

up to bullies. In the child's case, he now has to hang up his cap gun and wash up for

supper. Like Superman, the child returns to a world where nobody suspects he was

saving damsels in distress and defeating villains only moments before. This certainly

wouldn't have been the case for every child; some would have been too old. But Siegel

and Shuster were still imaginative enough to remember the ideas of dual identity.

Bettelheim's Metaphors

Reading about Superman's exploits can have consequence with the child's real

self. Seeing Superman save an innocent woman from the electric chair in *Action Comics*

becomes something the child may act out in his fantasy. It isn't the action itself that is

important, but rather the type of action. Superman saves the innocent; the child

fantasizes about saving the innocent. It is quite possible then to make the jump from

saving an innocent in a fantasy to saving an innocent in reality. Albert Bandura's

symbolic modeling explains the nature of this transference:

> Symbolic models maybe presented through oral or written instructions,
> pictorially, or through a combination of verbal and pictorial devices.
> Verbal responses that describe the correct responses and their sequencing
> constitute one widely prevalent means of providing symbolic models …
> Pictorial presented models are provided in films, television and other
> audiovisual displays, often without the accompaniment of any direct
> instructions to the observer. In fact, audiovisual mass media are, at the
> present time, extremely influential sources of social behavior patterns.
> Because of the amount of time during which children are exposed to

pictorially presented models … such models play a major part in shaping behavior and in modifying social norms and thus exert a strong influence on the behavior of children and adolescents. (49)

For example, Superman becomes a symbolic model for the child when he rescues an innocent; the child observes this behavior and the importance the other fictional characters in the comic place upon it. The importance of the event in the fantasy lets the child acknowledge the probable importance of such an event in reality. Through these observations, the Superman comic can shape and modify social norms already in place by the child's family or community, but it cannot create them. If a child is in an environment that places importance on helping those in need, the Superman comic reinforces those importances. However, if the child isn't in such an environment, the importance of the event in the comic may be recognized, just not reinforced.

According to Bettelheim, this type of metaphor "encourages the child to trust that his small real achievements are important" even if he doesn't fully recognize the full magnitude of his actions (73). It's important that this metaphor occurs on a subconscious level or, if the child makes the connection, it is a connection he makes without any sort of coaching: "The belief in such possibilities needs to be nurtured so that the child can accept his disillusionments without being utterly defeated; and beyond this, it can become a challenge to think with confidence about an existence beyond the parental home" (Bettelheim 73). A child must not realize that Superman influences his actions for them to have a lasting effect. The child may become aware of the influence and possibly resist it. Superman then becomes, not an influence, but another parent telling the child what he must or must not do.

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It's important to note that while children may not understand or recognize the metaphor, they don't actually believe they are Superman either. They can understand what is real and what isn't:

> The child intuitively comprehends that although these stories are *unreal*, they are not *untrue*; that while what these stories tell about does not happen in fact, it must happen as inner experience and personal development; that fairy tales depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence. (Bettelheim 73)

The true part of the story for them becomes the act of "helping those in need" and, through the Superman story, witnessing the end of such results. Good deeds equal real consequences. The pursuit of these consequences then play a prominent role in shaping the child as he passes through the "essential steps" of becoming an adult.

Sharon Black's article "The Magic of Harry Potter: Symbols of Heroes and Fantasy" uses Bettelheim to make a similar argument about the Mirror of Esrid and the Boggart. When Harry stares into the Mirror, readers think about what they most desire. When Harry faces the Boggart, readers think about what they most fear. These metaphors can change with each reading, depending upon the mindset of the specific reader at that specific point (239). Likewise, children may make a connection to a metaphor within a Superman comic that changes for them as an adult. For instance, a corrupt politician that Superman fights may be a metaphor for something the child senses is wring within his life; the politician becomes a metaphor for something completely different once the child becomes an adult. It's Superman's interactions with the politician that carry weight with the person and allow the metaphor to travel with the child as he becomes an adult.

Joseph Campbell, in *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, explains the appeal of heroic characters in terms of the Monomyth, a pattern found in every facet of our lives: dreams, myths, religions, careers, puberty, etc:

> "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage … which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth … whether presented in the vast, almost oceanic images of the Orient, in the vigorous narratives of the Greeks, or in the majestic legends of the Bible, the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern of the nuclear unit … Everywhere, no matter the sphere of interest (whether religious, political, or personal), the really creative are represented as those deriving from some sort of dying to the world; and what happens in the interval of the hero's nonentity, so that he comes back as one reborn, made great and filled with creative power, mankind is also unanimous in declaring." (25, 27-8)

And because of this—because these patterns of the nuclear unit resonate so deeply within us from both our personal lives and our religions—we cannot help but transpose them into our fiction.

Campbell's hero begins with the Call to Adventure and ends with The Freedom to Live. There are fifteen steps in all and, like the example above, children connect to these metaphors on a subconscious level. The Call to Adventure "signifies that destiny has summoned the hero" in some way (*Faces* 48). Superman hears Lois Lane cry for help, a bank robbery in progress, etc. The connection, or rather subconscious recognition of this step, occurs when a child is told he has a test on Monday, his mother sends him to the store for milk, or sets his eyes on a new toy. Superman goes through the rest of the steps—such as Refusal of the Call, Belly of the Whale, or The Magic Flight—and the child connects to them similarly. By seeing Superman pass through these rites, children feel their experiences are given a voice. They feel what the character feels, whether if it's the suffering of Clark Kent or the gratitude of the people Superman helps.

McCloud's Comic Devices

Understanding the devices Siegel and Shuster used for their audience to determine hero from villain visually is required before examining the creators' various arguments. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud defines comics as "[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the reader" (20). He organizes the vocabulary of comics—icons consisting of mostly pictures and words—on a horizontal scale. The left side of McCloud's scale contains "received" information; the right side is "perceived" information. However, that isn't to say that the viewer will ignore the right side entirely. Comics are, for the most part, a combination of received and perceived information (images and words). To control our emotions, as Booth tells us storytellers want to do, creators Siegel and Shuster have to branch into the far sides of both ends. We receive the information that a person is villainous because Shuster draws him with more distinguishing characteristics, such as facial detail and dark clothing.

Figure 3 From McCloud Page 49

The less detail Shuster places within the artwork of a Superman comic, the more words Siegel may need to explain that particular panel. For instance, if Shuster draws a criminal with a mask, dark and dirty clothing, beard stubble, and a moneybag, his audience doesn't need Siegel's words to tell them he is a criminal. They receive the information through the artwork. If, on the other hand, a criminal wears a nice suit, has a

neat hair cut, and sits at an office desk, Siegel will need to include enough words to make sure the audience perceives him as a criminal (see Fig 12).

Figure 4 Siegel and Shuster Page 9

Prior to panel one, a colleague tells Clark Kent that there is a "wife-beating at 211 Court Avenue" (8). In the series of six panels in Figure 4, the viewer perceives the following: the address of the scene in panel one, the knife snapping in panel five, and the

husband fainting in panel six. The viewer receives the following information: Clark has

changed into Superman and the husband, whom we immediately don't like because of his

raised belt and disheveled appearance, is in the process of beating his wife in panel one.

Superman hits the husband and throws him against the wall in panels two through three,

and the husband is about to stab Superman with a knife in panel four. The other elements

of the story, though important in their own right, are not essential to understanding the

scene. These specific elements discussed—or rather their combination—is important. It

actually becomes holistic since perceiving the words immediately after receiving the

artwork would develop a lesser understanding than the combination of receiving and

perceiving simultaneously.

Additionally, because the face in the middle of McCloud's scale falls closer to the

perception side than the others, it lacks detail and "the more people it could be said to

describe" (31). A person sees a circle with two dots and a line drawn in a similar way, he

cannot help but see a face. Likewise, he cannot help but see a face in a power outlet or

the headlights and grill of a car (32-3). McCloud argues that part of this phenomenon is

because we are self-centered. Our sense of awareness (see Figure 5) influences this
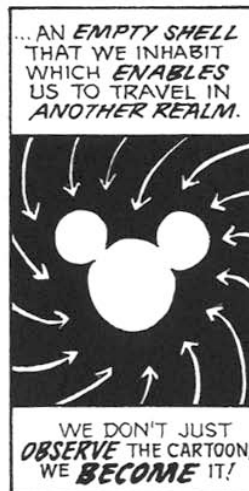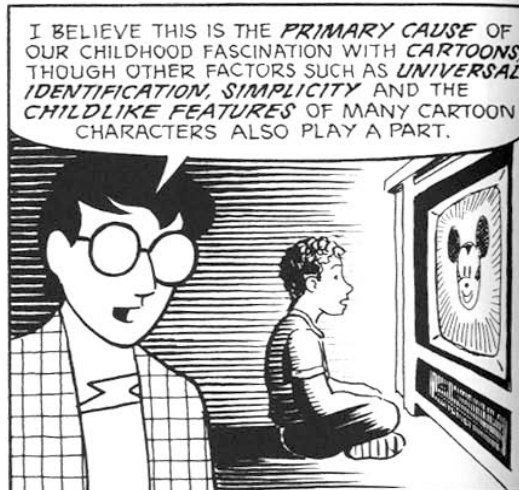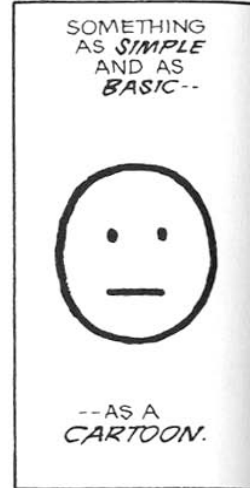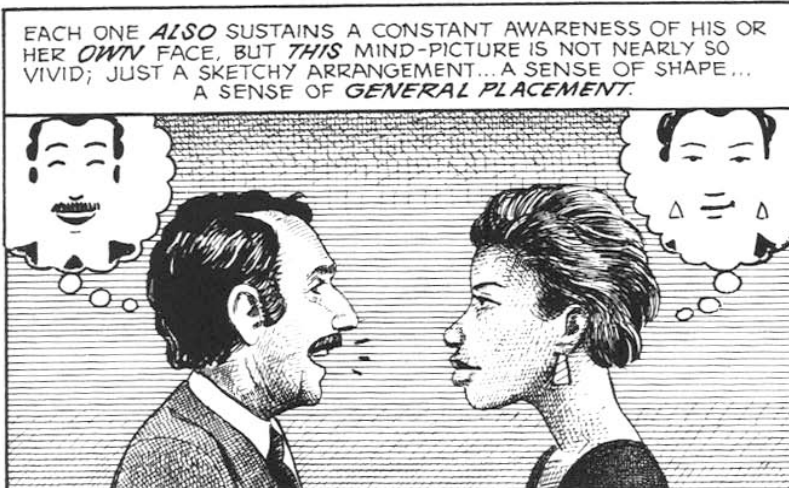
phenomenon as well.

Figure 5 McCloud Page 36

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Because of this lack of detail, the child reader's identity and awareness are pulled into Superman's. The husband's added detail of lines on the husband's cheeks and brow make a connection to him far less likely. As with the McCloud example on panels eight and nine of page thirty-six, Superman then becomes a far better candidate for children to listen to: "That's why I decided to draw myself in such a simple style. Would you have listened to me if I looked like this?" The jump from McCloud's panels is jarring. Less interpretation is required in panel nine and, instead, McCloud gives the viewer a disheveled narrator with detail in the face and clothing that is more realistic, but distancing. On the other hand, panel eight draws the eye of the viewer because there is less detail; viewers see more of what they want to see rather than what McCloud wants them to see in panel nine. Likewise, Superman has less detail. Children see more of what they want to see, allowing them to see more of themselves in him rather than the person standing opposite him. Both McCloud and Superman, with fewer features, become an image the audience finds more appealing. As McCloud argue in panel six of Figure 5, this is why children feel a closer connection to cartoons. The faces with fewer details serve as a type of template, onto which children can transpose their identities. Comic creators then have a very effective tool with which to communicate their arguments to readers.

These arguments that the creators make, even within fiction, are intentional. The path a creator makes from conception to actualization is too methodical for it not to be. McCloud states, "The creation of any work in any medium will always follow a certain path. A path consisting of six rhetorical steps" : idea/purpose, form, idiom, structure, craft, and surface (170). The idea/purpose is the start of it all, the idea that first begins to

swell within the artist's mind or the reason he simply must create this particular piece of art. Form is the medium or way in which the artist expresses himself, such as a comic, sculpture, or canvas. Idiom is the genre or category, if any, that particular piece of art will belong to (such as realistic or abstract). Structure is the composition of the piece; what will that artist use and what will he not use? Craft is the actual creation of the art. Surface is the cost value associated with the work and what many people first observe from "superficial exposure" to the work (170-1).

Step one requires the artist has something to say, as Siegel and Shuster obviously did in the three stories contained in *Action Comics* no. 1. Instead of rescuing Lois Lane from a random faceless enemy, such as a natural disaster or falling off a building, Superman rescues her from two kidnappers. He fights a clear enemy doing clearly bad things; he helps "someone in need"—someone who has been thrown into these circumstances by the fault of someone else and who has no control over the situation. In the second example, there is a clear threat to Americans oppressed by greedy politicians. Again, this isn't an oppression that occurs at random: A lobbyist approaches a senator with a morally questionable offer and the senator accepts (Figure 12). Superman is rescuing the woman from the electric chair becomes a defense of someone both in need and oppressed. She is oppressed by a justice system that has convicted her, despite her innocence. She needs to be saved from execution. Superman must prove her innocence in order to save her (Figures 14-15). All three of these situations are too specific and involve too many variables to be random ideas, cobbled together by Siegel and Shuster. In fact, each one demonstrates a clear rhetoric: Idea and purpose work together to speak against crime, corruption, and social injustice.

Comics, the chosen form, may have appealed to Siegel and Shuster because their talents, interests, and their Jewish culture may have made the only possible medium for them. Idiom, the vocabulary of comics, is the combination of received and perceived information. We know who the villains and heroes are because of the way Shuster draws them and the descriptions and dialogue Siegel places in the word balloons. The lines beside the head of the shocked assistant on panel four page six tells us he is shocked by Superman's strength (see Figure 14). The motion lines around the car on page eleven tells us time passes within the panel and it is not a static moment, frozen in time (Figure 11).

In Wayne Booth's terms, the structure of these three stories is a classic sense of heightening. (I will discuss this in greater detail in the next section.) Craft becomes the actual creation of the comic, but surface is the entire reason for the thesis (see Figure 6). Many Americans perceive comics purely on this superficial, or surface, level. Like panel five suggests, it becomes a "hollow" interpretation of art and assumes there are no motivations behind its creation. Unlike, Gaiman, they may not consider the medium an empty bottle, but rather a filled one clearly defined by its label. If we follow this metaphor, as McCloud does with his apple, we would rip off the label and discover the bottle is hollow, which—again like McCloud's apple—makes no sense. The very success of the Superman proves otherwise. For a fictional work to become as lasting as Superman, there simply must be something more to the character than a mere surface appeal. Those who never take the time to examine the character will think there is nothing underneath. They will falsely believe that Superman's creators are incapable of

making arguments through their character and, any arguments that are made, are only done so because of forced interpretations.

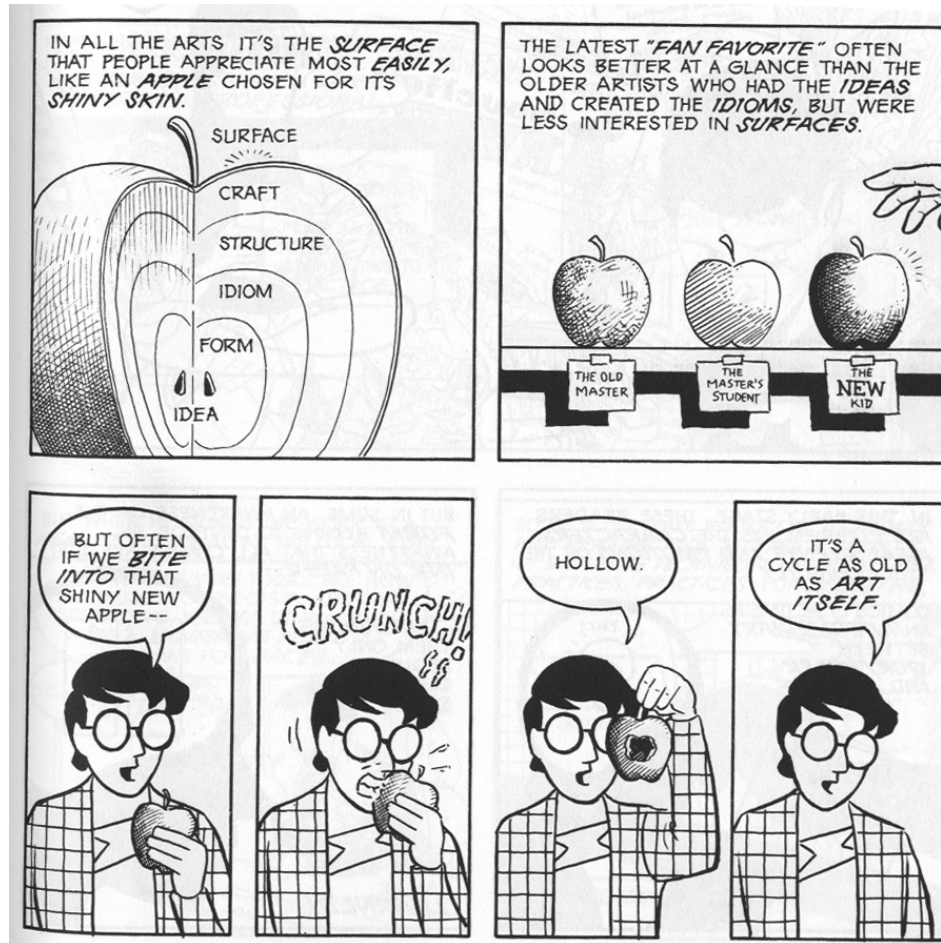Figure 6 McCloud Page 171

Booth Argues Rhetoric in Fiction

Many may contend that *Action Comics*, or fiction in general, is outside the realm of rhetoric. Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* takes these common misconceptions and debunks them one by one. Booth begins by arguing that a writer controls "rigorously our beliefs, our interests, and our sympathies." By simply choosing who to use in the

narrative, the author convinces us who to side with, who to feel sympathy for, and who to despise. For instance, the audience hates the abusive husband in *Action Comics* no. 1 because Siegel and Shuster want them to. Siegel and Shuster give us only the dramatic moments, the moments children want to experience, the moments that tell children exactly who the bad guy is, even if they don't know exactly what he has done—as in the case of the mysterious bill the senator wants to pass or exactly who the "murderess" killed and why.

Furthermore, it isn't a coincidence that we see Superman lift and toss the husband into the wall as if he presented no more of a threat than a child: Siegel and Shuster want us to interpret the husband as weak again when he faints in panel six. Siegel and Shuster could have told the story from a point of view more favorable to the husband. He could have lost his job, his wife could have cheated on him, etc. It is the absence of the husband's situation from the narrative that makes us despise him even more. Booth states, "we must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear" (20). We have already established Superman as a disguise for his Jewish creators, but this idea of never disappearing is also important. Booth frequently discusses the notion of showing versus telling and that it is commonly perceived that a writer should always tell and never show. But following Booth's ideas to their ultimate conclusion, a writer always tells by what he elects to show. By giving the audience a story from Superman's point of view—a character they already identify with visually—children know who to sympathize with, when they should feel proud, when they should feel sad, etc. They know what events are important because Superman places importance upon them. They know who the villain is because that is

who Superman fights. They accept Superman's perception of the events because, to

follow the story, they simply have no other choice.

CHAPTER IV

HELPING THOSE IN NEED

"There is a an assumption that there is an absolute standard of justice in the world. It was also very true to the immigrant experience at that point in their hope for justice. We have come here, we've come to this land, it will be okay here—it will be just here" (Levitz).[10]

Figure 7 Cover to Action Comics no.1

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[10] Qtd. in *DC Origins*

Action Comics no. 1 went to newsstands in 1938, and its audience had never seen anything quite like it. De Haven notes the power of the piece's structure: "once Shuster directs our attention to the figure of Superman, dead center; we look precisely where he wants us to, and see everything in a deftly predetermined narrative sequence" (29). The car leads the viewer's eye in, only to be rounded at the boulder and led back to Superman in the center. The cape leads us clockwise back to the car to complete the cycle all over again. We also have the creation of his iconic "S" and cape.

By placing Superman in the center of the composition, our attention is on him and his awesome power, rather than the man—presumably the villain—in the lower left corner. Siegel and Shuster want their audience to appreciate this artwork from Superman's point of view because he and his power are the most dominate part of the piece. It becomes a way to "make sure that [the] most important dramatic moments will be heightened rather than obscured by their surroundings" (Booth 64). The color yellow surrounding Superman draws attention to his power as well:

> Another property of flat colors is their tendency to emphasize the shape of objects, both animate and inanimate--as any child who has ever colored-by-numbers knows instinctively. These colors objectify their subjects. We become more aware of the physical form of objects than in black and white. A game in motion becomes a ball in the air. A face showing emotion becomes a head and two hands. (McCloud 189)

Figure 8 McCloud Page 189

The yellow background makes the viewer "more aware" of Superman's smashing the car into the boulder. Superman's red, yellow and blue costume counters "the dulling effects of newsprint . . . to stand out from the competition, costumed heroes were clad in bright, primary colors and fought in a bright primary world" (McCloud 188). This costume, or rather its colors, then becomes as iconic as the S, cape, and curl of hair touching Superman's forehead. McCloud argues that when people think of a particular hero, we often think of their colors too (i.e., black and yellow for Batman or Green for the Hulk). Possibly linking to Reynold's ideas, McCloud even states, "Many see the superhero as a modern mythology. If so, this aspect of color may play a part. Symbols are the stuff of which gods are made" (188). When we think of Superman's "S," the colors are as important to the icon as the shape. McCloud's "modern mythology" legitimizes Reynold's *Modern Mythology*. The colors of the S establish it in our memory as much as the shape. We can't think of the "S" without thinking of the red and yellow colors which compose it. Reynold's second rule—"heroes will be like earthbound gods"—then connects to the "S," establishing the symbol as the symbol of a god or being

similar to a god. Not one to be worshiped of course, but a fictional being that becomes as recognizable through his iconography as that of any modern religion found in Superman's audience. The colors of the Superman's costume grab our attention and help us remember him. They separate him from the black and white competition on the newsstands, lacking McCloud's immediate sense of awareness or completion. Children can perceive the same image of Superman in black and white, but—like Figure 8—the color allows children to receive the information far more quickly.

The color may also provide the audience with a sense of "rhetorical heightening." Booth states, "The author cannot choose whether to use rhetorical heightening. His only choice is of the kind he will use" (116). The yellow contrasting the red and blue of Superman's costume adds to the structure, making it even more important, more impressive, and more powerful. Decrease the amount of yellow or replace it with a less contrasting color and the heightening of the moment will likewise decrease. Rhetorically, the contrast assists the form in making the audience more aware of the moment. Rhetorical heightening also occurs within the panel-to-panel narrative, as noted in the analysis of the Figures 9 and 10. Throughout this narrative, Siegel and Shuster elect to only show us the more heightened dramatic moments of the scene. If the audience— instead of seeing Superman appear in front of the car, leap over, lift, shake, and then smash the vehicle into a rock, also observed all the unheightened connections between these moments—the impact would be lessened. Superman can't fly at this point in the character's history, so he would scramble down the rock face, walk in front of the car and stand. Superman would lift the back of the car and pull it to himself to obtain the needed leverage for lifting it over his head. Children would have to see the ludicrous amount of

shaking Superman would have to do to get three occupants out of the vehicle. And then

what happens to the smashed car? Does he throw it aside? Does he throw it miles into

the air? Does he smash it a few more times? Siegel and Shuster leave it up to the

audience because, in the grand scheme of the story, it simply does not matter. We see the

peak moments of the drama, instead of the little ones that lead up to it. The filler, the

space between the panels, is left up to the audience's imagination, which is fine. Unlike

the rest of the scene, the events that take place between the panels simply isn't important

enough for Siegel and Shuster to include. Without this heightening, the audience doesn't

realize what is important and what isn't. Everything has an equal importance, which

means nothing is then significantly important.

There are other methods of heightening these moments even further. McCloud

explains the idioms used to make these structures possible:

> Each panel of a comic shows a single moment in time. And between these
> frozen moments—between the panels—our minds fill in the intervening
> moments, creating the illusion of time and motion. Like a line drawn
> between two points. Right? Naah! Of course not! Time in comics is
> infinitely weirder than that. (McCloud 94)

Photos represent frozen moments in time and this may have led to the common

misconception that comic panels do the same thing. A closer examination of any panel

from pages eleven to twelve prove otherwise. The word balloons in panel one represent

the exchange between the driver and passenger. The moment Siegel and Shuster choose

to show us appears to be just the event right before Superman leaps over the car, but it's

more complicated than that. The passenger yells, "Hey—watch out! Someone's standing

in the road ahead of us!" The driver replies with laughter and "Watch me scare him out of

his wits!" (11). The time it would take for two people to exchange this dialogue is far

more than a frozen moment in time allows. Furthermore, the distance that a vehicle

would travel at a high speed during the amount of time required for this much dialogue is

far more than one might think when just considering the panel to be similar to a photo.

The motion lines help us perceive the passage of time, at least on a subconscious level.

We really have two moments in time within one panel, signified by two different idioms:

the word balloons and the car's motion lines. Superman stands in front of the car and the

car's occupants speed toward him while having a conversation. The only portion of the

panel that would work as a frozen moment is Superman: Each subject "is arranged left to

right in the sequence we will 'read' them, each occupying a distinct time slot" (McCloud

97). The same can be said for panels two through five. Each one portrays its individual

subjects and different moments, saying or doing different things at different speeds.

These idioms used to communicate time allow comics to heighten moments differently

than any other medium. In the panels described above, the audience simultaneously

witnesses several moments of significant importance, even though they occur at different

moments in time. Even within the context of one panel, such as panel 2 of Figure 9, a

significant amount of information is communicated quickly and in a relatively small

amount of space. It allows the audience to be influenced by the power of the moment

efficiently. For instance, to communicate the same moment in prose, a writer would have

to detail the actions, dialogue, and setting in a much larger amount of space, requiring

more time for the reader to absorb.

       Subconsciously, the viewers' minds close these time gaps, much as they close the

passage of time between panels five and six. Here we see two heightened moments:

Superman chasing the car and Superman lifting the car. As mentioned earlier, we don't

actually see the less exciting moments in which Superman catches up to the car and then

beginning to lift it. McCloud explains how the audience makes the connections from

panel to panel:

> Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you
> something must be there. Comic panels fracture both time and space,
> offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of connected moments. But closure
> allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous,
> unified reality. If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure
> is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the
> arrangement of elements—then is very real sense comics is closure! (67)

The rhetorical heightening of the scene occurs because of the closure that takes

place between panels. We can figure out that Superman catches up to the car and has, at

some point, been able to lift it by the middle of the underbody; we don't need to see it.

This type of transition McCloud refers to as an "action-to-action" transition (70), in

which action that takes place in one panel segues to action taking place in the next panel.
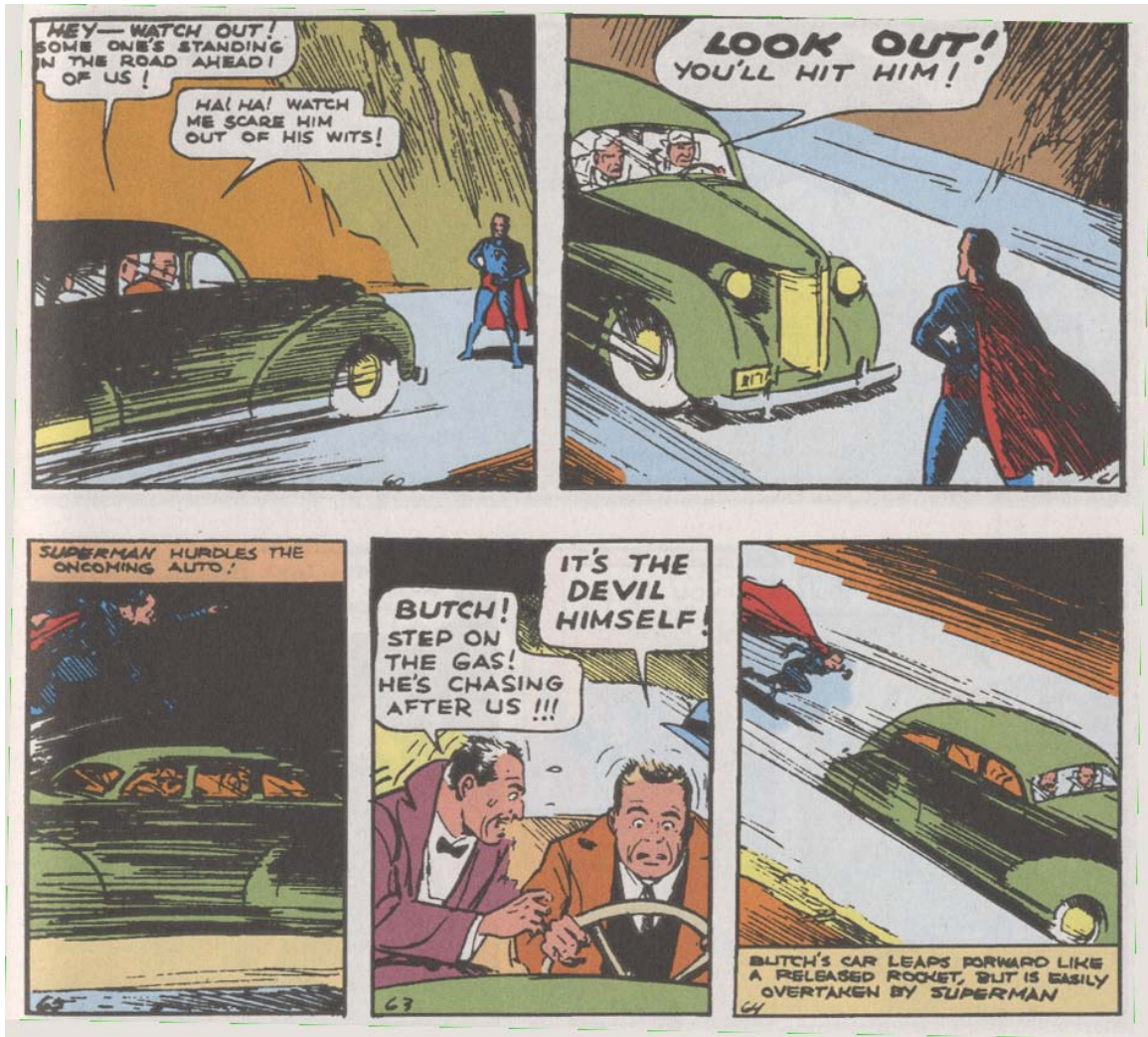
Figure 9 Siegel and Shuster Page 11
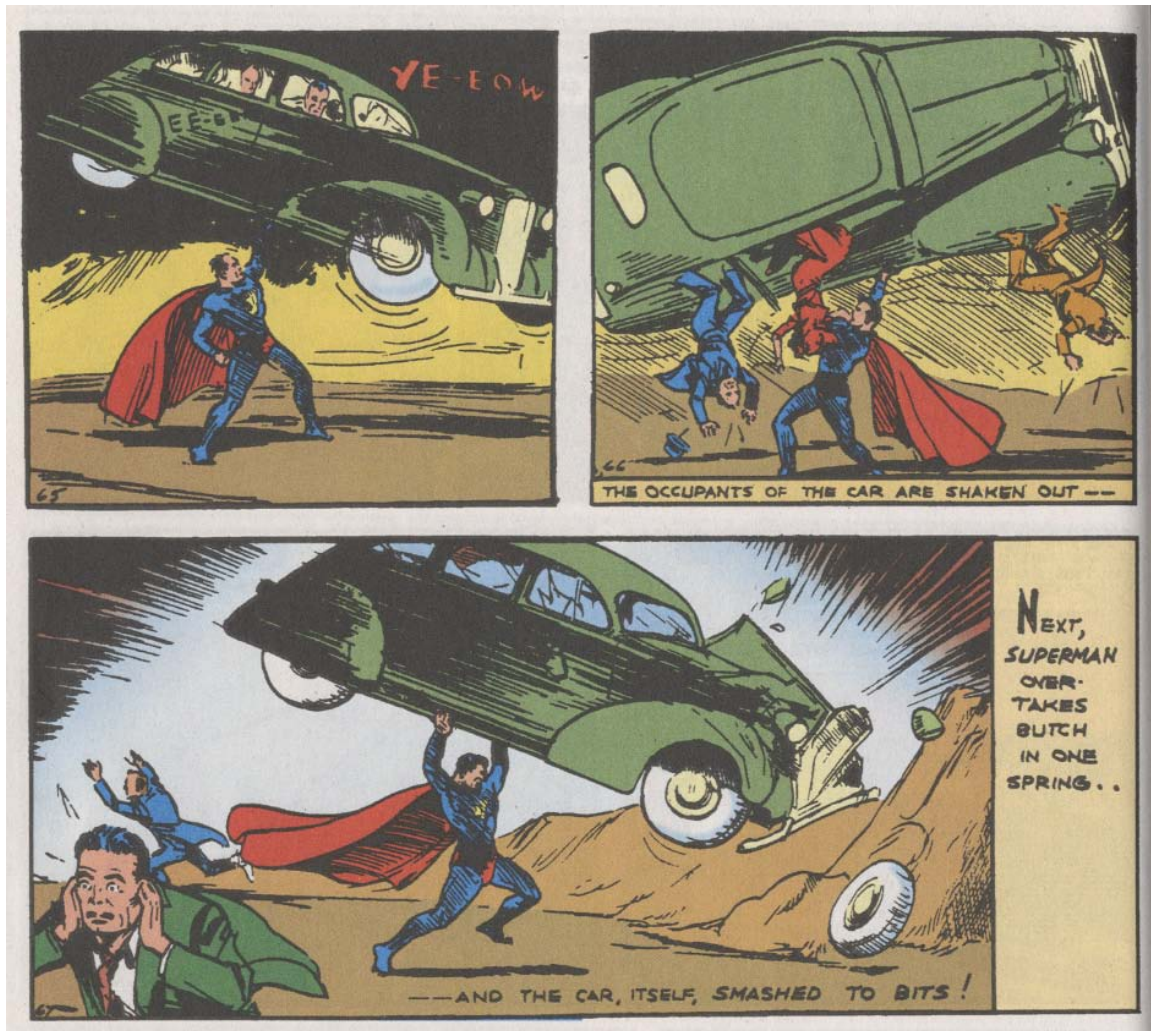
Figure 10 Siegel and Shuster Page 12

Panel length also plays a part in rhetorical timing. In Booth's terms, Siegel and Shuster show us only the heightened moments, but some of these moments are even greater than others. They show us these moments in a way that conveys more time. In other words, they simply make certain panels larger than others.

McCloud argues that, since time takes place in the gutter, increasing the gutter width then increases the amount of time between panels. But to actually focus on one moment for a longer amount of time requires the writer and artist to increase the panel

size: "As unlikely as it sounds, the panel shape can actually make a difference in our perception of time. Even though this longer panel has the same basic "meaning" as its shorter versions, still it has the feeling of greater length" (101). Notice the timing difference between the two sequences of panels in Figure 11. The greater length of panel two in the second sequence conveys a sense of pause. The viewer obviously knows the person is depressed in the first sequence, but the author's narrative choice to extend the panel persuades the viewer to focus on the depression longer.

Figure 11 McCloud Pages 100-2

Likewise, Siegel and Shuster want their viewers to focus on some moments longer than others. On page eleven, the larger size of panels one and two holds our eye longer than the smaller panels of three, four, and five. On page twelve, the panels increase in size again because the action has ramped up. The dramatic moments have intensified from Superman chasing the car to Superman actually lifting and shaking the car. The grand finale, the largest panel of all, receives even more of our attention as Superman smashes the car "to bits!" (12).

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Within the context of the important moments Siegel and Shuster have elected to show, these become even more important and more powerful. Like the yellow on the cover, the larger panels tell children these are the moments they should focus the majority of their attention. The greater the size of the panel, the more attention it requires, and—as a result—the greater the moment. The action then takes the forefront. Superman is at his mightiest the moment he defeats the villains in the last panel. The size of the panel communicates the rhetorical significance even more so than the act.

The only other panel that is comparable in size throughout the entire issue is on panel three of Figure 13. This panel, the one in which Superman states, "Your foot will do just as well!" is the exact same size as the panel in which Superman smashes the car on page twelve. Siegel and Shuster want us to spend just as much time focusing on both panels because they represent the climax of the action in both stories.

Like the previous transition, this one is action-to-action, but most of the other panel transitions fall under McCloud's "scene-to-scene" category. They are "transitions which transport us across significant time and space" (71). In this particular story, Superman confronts a lobbyist who is paying a senator to pass a bill "before its full implications are realized" (14). The transition between panels one and two takes viewers from a session of congress to the hall outside; from there viewers return to the Dailey Planet; panel four has us outside the senator's office and so on. It isn't until the action-to-action transition on page four that we see a shift in panel-to-panel transition. Like the action-to-action transitions from before, these serve to heighten key moments within the story. The omission of details convinces us that we have all we need to know about the senator and his lobbyist. Surprisingly, they never even reveal the nature of the bill or

what the lobbyist is pushing for. Like the events that take place in the gutter, the nature

of the bill is unimportant.

We may perceive the elements in this story as another one of Bettelheim's

metaphors and it certainly would be right to do so. While the actions between the senator

and lobbyist certainly appear wrong, they are not illegal. Laws prevent politicians from

receiving certain types of lobbyist monies and amounts, but they are not prevented all

together. Reynold's sixth law comes into play here: "Although ultimately above the law,

superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state,

though not necessarily to the letter of its laws" (16). Because Siegel and Shuster have

already established Superman as a hero on the previous pages (including page one in

which they specifically state he is "champion of the oppressed . . . sworn to devote his

existence to helping those in need") his audience knows that he will be doing something

that is considered heroic and morally just—they have no expectations regarding the

legality of those actions. Siegel and Shuster have convinced their audiences so

completely that Superman is the hero, it, again, isn't even necessary to reveal the nature

of the bill or what the lobbyist is pushing for.

So while the actions of the senator and lobbyist are not illegal *per se*, Siegel and

Shuster persuade us to believe they are immoral. To use McCloud's terms, we perceive

them as the villains through idiom: they simply have more detail. Unlike Superman, who

has fewer distinguishing facial characteristics, the lobbyist has a pencil thin mustache, a

dark brown suit with a front that is often in the shadows, and a black hat. Siegel tells us

in panel two the man is "furtive." The senator's greed is represented by his overweight

frame, flashy attire, and the pompous—and one might argue "upper class" way in which

he holds his lapel in panel seven. The panels are small compared to the panels containing Superman. Even the one in which Superman does nothing but eavesdrop on the two receives more attention than the panels containing the senator and lobbyist. The particular moment isn't it itself heroic, but the structure of the scene—Superman clinging onto the side of a building high above Metropolis—convinces us it is important. The hero receives more storytelling space because his audience is meant to side with him, not the villains who only give the audience what it needs "to know" (Booth 5); that is, they are the villains and the hero must stop them.

This importance then becomes—not the exposing of something illegal—but the exposing of something immoral or an immoral influence. There is a more direct argument here as well. Because Siegel and Shuster never reveal the details of the bill, they remain unimportant. The focus is on the politics surrounding the event and how Superman needs to step in to prevent what the law doesn't prevent. Since the reader knows Superman to be a hero, he knows his actions must be heroic. Therefore, dangling lobbyists from telephone wires as Superman does must also be heroic. Resisting the corruption of lobbyists is heroic, even though a child may not yet have a firm understanding of what a lobbyist is. Booth also supports these ideas:

> Subjectivism . . . can ruin a novel; the weaker the novel, on the whole, the more likely we are to be able to make simple and accurate inferences about the real author's problems based on our experience of the implied author. There is much truth to the demand for objectivity in the author: signs of the real author's untransformed loves and hates are almost always fatal. But clear recognition of this truth cannot lead us to doctrines about technique, and it should not lead us to demand of the author that he eliminate love and hate, and the judgments on which they are based, from his novels. The emotions and judgments of the implied author are . . . the very stuff out of which great fiction is made. (86)

Even though we have reason to believe Siegel and Shuster don't respect the nature of certain elements within politics or the politicians who participate in that particular behavior, we don't have a comeuppance for the senator. After his meeting with the lobbyist, Siegel and Shuster never show him to their audience again. To have Superman attack both the lobbyist and the senator would cause the audience to make "simple and accurate inferences about the real author's problems" with politics (Booth 86). Likewise, to not do anything to the lobbyist or not give Superman this particular reason to go after him would leave the work devoid of "emotions and judgments of the implied author are . . . the very stuff out of which great fiction is made." If Superman just rescued people from clear, immediate danger instead of perceived oppression that takes place because of greed, the work would be dry. Even if the child is aware of what the lobbyist is and his actions and does not disagree with those actions and, furthermore, disagrees with those that do—it gives the reader something to think about. "To pretend that we read otherwise, to claim that we can make ourselves into objective, dispassionate, thoroughly tolerant readers is in the final analysis nonsense" (Booth 147). Even if the audience disagrees with Siegel and Shuster's political views, they are still moved by it because the heightening and perceiving of events and characters persuades them to be.

Figure 12 Siegel and Shuster Page 14

Figure 13 Siegel and Shuster Page 15

We take Superman's side again when he saves an innocent woman from the electric chair. After discovering evidence of the woman's innocence, Superman travels to the governor's house, seeking a pardon on her behalf. Instead, the governor's assistant greets him and refuses to let Superman see the governor. The assistant tells Superman the door to "the governor's sleeping room" is "made of steel! Try and knock this door down!" The transition from panels two to three on page six belongs to another of McCloud's categories: He refers to it as moment-to-moment and it "requires very little closure." McCloud's provides a two-panel example: In the first, a woman has her eyes open; in the second, her eyes are shut. In the space between, the viewer makes the assumption that she went through the simple process of closing her eyes (McCloud 70). Likewise in the gutter between panels two and three, the viewer makes the assumption that Superman has walked to the door, grabbed it, and begun to tear it from the frame.

Another moment-to-moment transition occurs in panel five; we switch from scene-to-scene in panel five as Superman has left the hallway and stands at the governor's bedside. Moment-to-moment then resumes until the gutter between panels eight of page six and panel one of page seven: This becomes action-to-action. The assistant fires the gun on page six; Superman takes the gun away on page seven, yelling, "This is no time for horseplay!" The ticking clock in the bottom of panels one and two of page seven tell the reader exactly how much time has passed in the gutter, from one heightened moment to the next.

The segues from panels three to four on page seven are scene-to-scene; we leave the governor's home to the room with the electric chair, only to do the exact opposite in another transition from panels four to five. The assistant reads Superman's letter to the

governor: "You'll find the real murderess bound and delivered on the lawn of your estate" (7). The transition to the next panel is another scene-to-scene, as we rejoin Superman, now disguised as Clark Kent. He asks the gentleman for the paper and in a moment-to-moment, Clark whispers, "Good! I'm not mentioned!" (7).

The dotted lines around the word balloon tell the viewer that Clark whispers, despite the use of exclamation points. It's this panel that seals Siegel and Shuster's argument for this particular story. Children shouldn't seek a reward or even recognition for good deeds. Knowing that they were the ones who performed the deeds and knowing they were actually performed is enough. People might marvel at them the same way that the assistant does in panel four of page six. People will still be thankful as the governor is in the closing panel of page seven, even if they have nobody to be specifically grateful to.

The moments Siegel and Shuster choose to heighten all have Superman portrayed heroically, while any other person in a panel with him is portrayed as menacing, cowardly, or feeble. Superman bashes the door in panel two, surprises the assistant in panel three, grabs him in panel four, etc. The assistant, on the other hand, is carried up the stairs as if she were a doll; the governor is older, in bed, and hunched over when he stands. The moments they chose to leave out—the ones taking place in the gutter—are the less interesting moments when Superman isn't portrayed heroically or, at least, less heroically than the other panels. For instance, the moment-to-moment from panels three and four in Figure 14 would have been Superman walking into the room and dropping the door. Instead, the audience receives the far more interesting panels of his ripping the door down and standing triumphantly in panel four. Instead of walking to Governor's

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bedside, we have three heightened moments communicated in one panel: the Governor turns on the light in surprise, speaks to Superman, and Superman speaks to the Governor. Three moments have been given equal importance in one panel. Siegel and Shuster only leave the less interesting moments up to the audience's imagination because it doesn't make the hero appear interesting. Their argument then—that people should be help those in need—becomes more interesting. Children feel closer to Superman because—unlike the assistant and the governor—he has fewer distinguishing characteristics. Children want to feel closer to Superman because he is the hero. Children then want to be the hero because of the awe in these specific moments. Superman's audience isn't expected to tear apart doors, but the door is a metaphor. It's an obstacle for what a child must pass through help a friend in need, or even one of Campbell's rites of passage. Either way, the audience sees Superman stand triumphantly on the other side of the door; they also want to stand triumphantly on the other side of their own particular doors.

Figure 14 Siegel and Shuster Page 5

Figure 15 Siegel and Shuster Page 6

Figure 16 Siegel and Shuster Page 7

Much like Superman's transformation into Clark Kent, Siegel and Shuster can, to use Booth's phrases, choose their "disguises" but "never choose to disappear (20). Otherwise, their rhetoric wouldn't exist. Any messages or beliefs conveyed to their audience would be accidental. To simply think that nothing drives these stories, that there isn't a specific rhetorical purpose and structure is ludicrous. A more obvious

example is found in an examination of a strip Siegel and Shuster created for *Look Magazine* six years after *Action Comics* no. 1.

Again, children feel close to Superman because they "perceive" who he is and "receive" the images of Hitler and Stalin. The moment-to-moment transition between panels one and two leave the less interesting moment of Superman crossing the room to Hitler to the audience's imagination. The audience receives the more interesting or heightened moments of Superman punching Nazis and lifting Hitler as if he were a child. Superman carries him by the collar in panel three and gives Stalin the same treatment in panel four. The hero—with whom children are meant to side—is clear in each of these panels. Siegel and Shuster portray the hero as powerful; the villains are weak. Superman, who has already been argued as the ultimate American immigrant, defeats the greatest threats to his idealism, which transforms into American idealism. Children then have an icon that is a superhero, an American, a defender of those in need, and—most importantly—a profound influence.
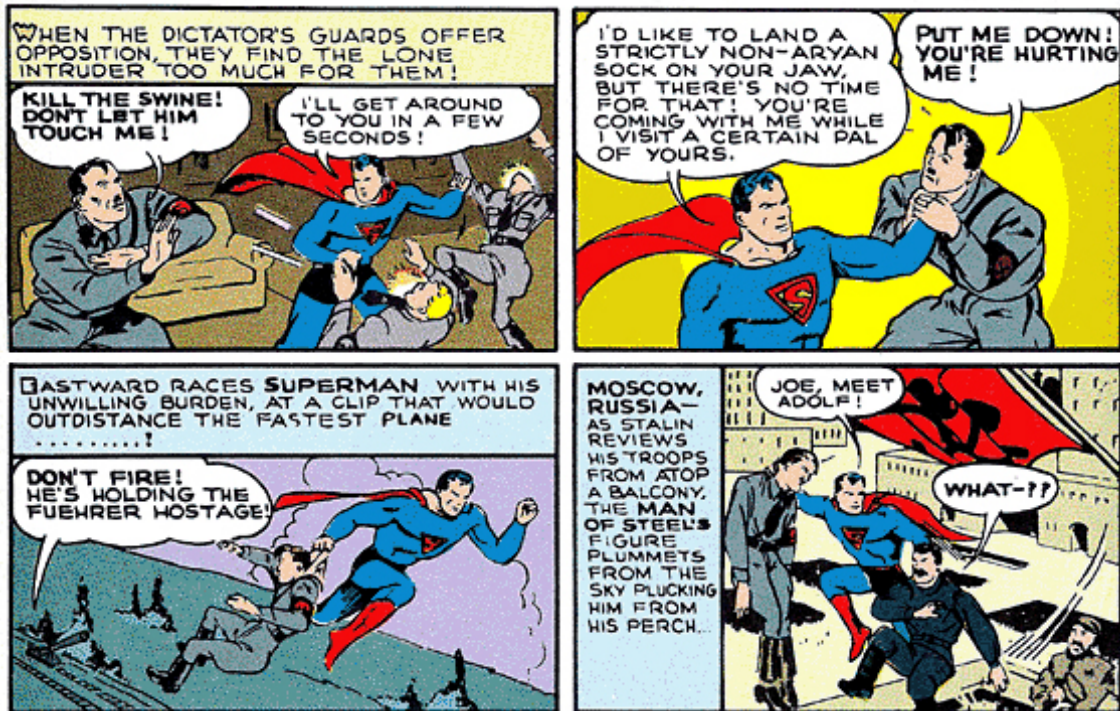
Figure 17 *Look Magazine*

This strip for *Look Magazine* infuriated Hitler. He immediately put his chief propagandist, Joeseph Goebbels, on an anti-Superman campaign. After discovering Siegel and Shuster's Jewish heritage, Goebbels marked Superman a Jew and called Shuster and Siegel both "physically and intellectually circumcised" (*Unmasked*).

American children on the other hand loved it. As before, Superman's success influenced a series of imitations—such as Human Torch, Sub Mariner, and Batman—to join the war effort. When asked if putting the heroes in the war was a gimmick just to sell comic books, comic creator Stan Lee replied, "We could just all see what a menace Hitler was. It was more than what he was doing to the Jews, it was what he was doing to the whole world: He was gobbling up countries" (*Unmasked*).

As a direct response to the war in 1941 in 1941, writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby created Captain America. The image below is from Captain America number one. The issue's powerful cover of Captain America giving Hitler a right hook helped the comic sell out on its first day.

Figure 18 Simon and Kirby

When the military did enter the war, comics found their way over seas as well. The government included comics in the care packages sent to G.I.'s. In addition to having entertainment value, it showed the soldiers that their country backed them. It also helped expand the audience from kids to adults (*Unmasked*).

Comic book sales plummeted after the war ended. The country no longer needed these heroes and grew tired of reading about them. Titles that sold in the millions suddenly became lucky to break two hundred thousand. Once again, publishers returned to the old favorites prior to Superman: crime, science fiction, horror, and western comics.

Comics provided an excellent medium for these genres for several reasons. First and foremost, they were the same genres that television, theater, and radio already had made widely popular. However, these mediums suffered from money related limitations such as budgets, special effects, and actors. Comics faced no such problems. It didn't cost a publisher any more money to hire an artist to draw a car explosion or starship rocketing through space than it did to simply draw two people having a conversation (Reynolds 17).

The success of Superman paved the way for other heroes. The heightening used by Siegel and Shuster allowed the hero to become so influential, he actually transformed an entire medium. After his success, other superheroes came along. After he went to war, those same heroes and many more followed. Comics also appealed to a wide range of age groups because of the ease in which nearly illiterate people could follow the stories. Frederick Wertham eventually argued that these situations encouraged a person to remain a poor reader instead of actually increasing, or at the very least, encouraging the development of his reading skills (*Seduction of the Innocent* 121). His rhetoric,

combined with Superman's previous influences on the industry, is the primary reason

why American comics are perceived as a child's medium, consisting only of superheroes.

CHAPTER V

SEDUCING THE INNOCENT

Figure 19 Frederick Wertham from seductionoftheinnocent.org

> "Superman (with the big S on his uniform—we should, I suppose, be
> thankful that it is not an S.S.) needs an endless stream of ever new
> submen, criminals, and 'foreign-looking' people not only to justify his
> existence but even to make it possible" (*Seduction* 34).

If a hero is going to fight crime on a monthly basis, Wertham is correct in that

Superman does, of course, need someone to fight. What is so puzzling about Wertham's

statement is the racial overtones. Wertham sees Superman's lack of detail differently

than does McCloud. Instead of a template, Wertham argues, "the hero is nearly always

'regular featured and 'an athletic, pure American white man. The villains, on the other hand, are foreign born, Jews, Orientals, Slavs, Italians, and dark-skinned races' " Beaty 125). The background of Siegel and Shuster, as well as their publishers, makes Wertham's blanket statement suspect. This and other such statements did provide a degree of sensationalism, possibly making the rhetoric of *Seduction of the Innocent* more engaging for its audience.

Seduction of the Innocent was a full-fledged attack on comics, which sent concerned parents and politicians in an uproar. The controversy instigated a U.S. Senate investigation into the effects of comics on teens. Wertham, other juvenile psychologist experts, and comic book publishers were all called to testify. The publishers had very little to do with the actual creation of their comics. They were merely businessmen. That, plus Wertham's extensive experience in politics, helped the psychologist "come out on top" (Jamie Coville).

In this chapter, I will identify Wertham's possible motivations, audience appeals, and tests that he detailed in *Seduction of the Innocent*. The inconsistent data and poor documentation is not the reason his ideas don't work. He simply didn't understand the way a child responds to literature. Furthermore, the support he later gained in the Senate demonstrates that a large number of policy makers didn't understand either.

Wertham's Motivation

As noted in Chapter II, Wertham's attacks on comics may have been more about publicity than concern. In addition to the 1934 murder trial and the matter of Ezra

Pound, Wertham uses an opportunity in the Delaware Segregation case when called to

testify by Jack Greenberg, lead counsel for the NAACP:

> One point of tension was Wertham's view of comic books, particularly
> those that depicted sadism, violence, and racism, had a very harmful
> influence on children. As we discussed his testimony Wertham kept
> veering off into denouncing the malignant influence of comic books, and I
> kept trying to steer him back to the case at hand, thinking the comic book
> issue irrelevant and distracting. (Beaty 129)

Wertham's use of these platforms for his own agendas suggests his motivations

weren't as selfless as they appear, especially when one considers the interests of those

involved with the murder defendant and the segregation case.

Wertham states comics are harming both the literacy and very innocence of

adolescents. Crime comics glorify the actions of murderers and rapists. Superhero

comics encourage racist behavior and lead children to believe that a man can actually fly.

After introducing his audience to the concerns which have brought him to publish the

book, Wertham outlines the questions he hopes to answer within the following pages:

> It is not scientifically sound to narrow down the problem to whether the
> influence of comics is just "good" or "bad." That cannot be a sound
> starting-point. The question is, do they have a discernable influence, and
> if they have how does it work, how intense and lasting is it, and in what
> fields and regions of the child's mind does is manifest itself. This is
> exactly how I started. (*Seduction* 48)

Wertham's Appeals

Regarding the structure of *Seduction of the Innocent*, Bart Beaty states the

following:

> That *Seduction of the Innocent* was written for a lay audience rather than a
> scientific readership is evidenced by its loose structure: it touches on
> topics in one section and returns to them later. The book's first chapter,
> for instance, introduced the theme of comic books and juvenile

delinquency but the topic was not dealt with concretely until the sixth chapter. (133)

The vocabulary and sentence structure also suggests a lay audience, one that would respond better to sensationalistic rhetoric than would an academic audience. His prose often ends with exclamation points, such as his analysis of the superhero The Blue Beetle: "Kafka for the Kiddies!" (106). After gaining a substantial following from the book's release, Wertham even went so far as to compare comics to Hitler: "Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry. They get the children much younger. They teach them race hatred at the age of 4 before they can read" (Beaty 157).

Wertham's Tests

For his audience, Wertham goes into extensive detail regarding his methods and reasons for selecting them; there just isn't a lot of information regarding the results. For instance, he believes Rorschach tests to be a valuable tool for psychologists. Where the test would fail wasn't in regards to the test itself, but rather the interpretation of the results. Wertham claims to have been one of the first psychologists to have used the test. He believes many psychologists would interpret a child seeing a ghost in an image as a sign of environmental anxiety. Wertham, however, connects similar recognitions directly to horror comics. Most of the children detailed in his results saw images that reminded them of comic panels, but Wertham didn't specify the number of total kids or the percentages (*Seduction* 54-56).

Wertham also utilized a Thematic Apperception Test. In this test, researchers show subjects a series of images, and then the subjects create stories based on those images. Wertham found that some of his subjects often told stories of "blood-letting and

violence" (*Seduction* 57). These stories occurred more with kids that read crime comics, but—again—Wertham fails to give any numbers.

The purpose of Wertham's Mosaic Test wasn't to prove any links with delinquency and crime, but rather to prove his subjects weren't psychotic. The test involves subjects arranging different colored tiles together to form a pattern. Wertham says the tests, for the most part, revealed nothing abnormal about children "addicted to reading crime-comics" (*Seduction* 57). Again, there were no numbers.

Wertham placed a lot of importance in intelligence and aptitude tests. He wanted to prove his theories on comics stunting academic growth or readers being "almost five years retarded in reading ability" (qtd. in Crist 5). Wertham lists seven pages of results that include the subjects' sex, age, grade level, reading grade level, number of comics read per day, and general comments about comics. He doesn't mention any subjects whose reading level is on par with their grade level, implying there was no control group. He does not provide any background regarding the children or their parents.

SEX	AGE	SCHOOL GRADE	READING GRADE	COMIC BOOKS
boy	13	8th	3rd	A few comic books once in a while. Looks at pictures.
boy	12	6th	2nd	About 15 comic books a week. "Reads" most of them.
boy	12	5th	3rd	About 25-30 comic books a week. Looks at pictures; reads "sometimes."
boy	12	6th	primer; below 1st	About 15 comic books a week. Looks at pictures.
boy	12	7th	2nd	About 6 comic books a week. Looks at pictures; tries to read.
boy	11	6th	1st	50 to 75 comic books a week, 10 to 15 at a time. Looks at pictures.
boy	11	3rd	2nd	5 to 8 comic books a week. Looks at pictures. Tries to read.
girl	11	ungraded	2nd	2 to 6 comic books a week. Reads and looks at pictures.
boy	10	5th	2nd	20 comic books a week. Looks at pictures.
boy	10	4th	2nd	About 3 comic books a week. Looks at pictures. Now trying to read.
girl	9	3rd	2nd	About 5 comic books a week. Looks at pictures.

Figure 20 Wertham Page 129

Wertham used a Word Association Test when a ten-year-old patient was sent to him for pushing a boy into a body of water. The boy drowned. Wertham asked his patient—who of course was an avid reader of crime-comics—to tell him the first words that came to mind following "drowning, water, little boy, and pushing" (*Seduction* 58-9). The boy demonstrated no guilt over what he had done. Wertham determined the patient "would not have been pushed to murder if his mind had not been imbued with a readiness for violence and murder by his comic book reading" (*Seduction* 59). Wertham doesn't mention any percentages for the Word Association Test or even another instance of his using it.

Wertham used the Duess Test, a test where a researcher tells his patient the beginnings to ten fable-like stories. The patients then supply an ending they create. Surprisingly, the one patient Wertham details in the book has negative answers not connected to comics. This patient, a young girl, already had psychological problems which allowed her to build up a barrier to the influence of comics (59).

Wertham's compares playroom observations he did before and after comics' rising popularity. He essentially compares observations he did in 1935 at the Child Neurology Research Foundation to observation in 1945 at an undisclosed location. He found the later ones more violent; a factor he relates to the increasing influence of comics. Furthermore, he notes several instances of children who stopped playing and started reading a comic during his observations, drawing attention to the seductive nature of the medium (*Seduction* 62-63).

As mentioned earlier, Wertham is inconsistent when detailing the location or subjects of his research. Since the point of his research is to prove comics are a determining factor in juvenile delinquency, it's reasonable to assume most of his subjects were juvenile delinquents. There is one section of his book, however, where he goes into great detail: A group of adolescents, mostly boys and ranging from thirteen to sixteen, that he nicknamed the Hookey Club. The group met regularly at the Mental Hygiene Clinic in the Queens Central Hospital for group therapy. The teens had a variety of problems, but they all had truancy issues, hence the name Hookey Club. After giving the reader transcripts of multiple sessions, Wertham points out that several teens learned how to break into a house and rob stores from comics. Others suffered from a general desensitization of sex and violence due to comics (68-76).

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Wertham never details methods used to record his data, but some of it is inconsistent. He uses the same research for both "Horror in the Nursery" and *Seduction of the Innocent*. In "Horror in the Nursery", he tells the story of a lawyer who has a son stealing from both him and his mother to buy comics. The son says he knows it's wrong, but he just can't stop himself. His grades suffer and the boy apparently suffers from malnutrition due to his reading comics at the dinner table instead of eating. The father says his son even told the mother that if she would take her top off, she would be as pretty as a girl in a comic book (Crist 6). Wertham details the same story in *Seduction of the Innocent*, but the father is no longer a lawyer and, instead, a physician. The stories are otherwise identical (51). Curiously enough, this is one of the few instances where Wertham details the economic background of the child's family, one assumes to appeal to his audience as with the pictures for "Horror in the Nursery."

After the success of *Seduction of the Innocent*, and the attention of the U.S. Senate hearings, the comic industry feared some sort of government regulation was imminent; they collectively panicked. The leading comic publishers, including DC, mutually agreed to create the Comics Code of Authority Seal.

Figure 21 Coville

From that point on, no comic could go to the stands without the seal. To receive it, a comic couldn't be too sexy, violent, or gory; police and parents had to be portrayed in a positive manner. The industry's bread and butter of the time—crime comics and horror comics—didn't stand a chance with these limitations. Publishers returned to their WWII roots: superhero comics.

Wertham also attacked superhero comics. He criticized them for teaching kids false notions of physics, such as Superman having the ability to fly. He called Batman and Robin "a wish dream of two homosexuals living together," and Wonder Woman "the exact opposite of the what girls are suppose to want to be" (*Seduction* 34).

Comics that weren't intended for kids already had "adults only" written on the cover, but it didn't matter. The Senate, Dr. Wertham, and parents thought these Adults Only comics were simply too easy for kids to get a hold of. So, all horror and crime comics—adults only or not—were canned.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Contrary to Wertham's claims found in "Horror in the Nursery" or *Seduction of the Innocent*, the artwork and stories found in comics don't lead children to do horrible things. Seeing criminals tie someone up, one person stab one another, or a man fly will not lead a children to do or think they can do similar acts. That isn't to say a child should read a comic inappropriate to his age level, but to say it is a primary cause of negative behavior is ludicrous. After completing a study on the effects of television on children, Marina KrcMaar states the following:

> Therefore, just as it is inappropriate to conceptualize children's television viewing without considering family structure, it is inappropriate to measure children's exposure to television variables without considering and measuring the structure of the family. Is all this to say that exposure to television alone is unimportant? No, clearly a significant effect still exists. However, family structure is a variable that needs to be included in the equation, both figuratively, and literally. (Marina KrcMaar)

An adolescent becomes a juvenile delinquent because of numerous factors including—but not limited to—background, social status, and psychology. The attempt to link something so complicated, with so many variables, to *any* one particular thing should raise a red flag because of its generality alone. That isn't to say that a crime comic couldn't reinforce negative behaviors through symbolic modeling. Like other forms of media, comics don't construct behavioral patterns; they merely reinforce or create a sense

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of their awareness. The responsibility for these interpretations—even with children from

positive environments—falls somewhere else:

> "The problem with negative modeling is that, in an attempting to deter
> their children from socially undesirable activities, the parents are forced to
> focus on, and sometimes to elaborate, on deviant behavior which
> otherwise may have received little attention from their children."
> (Bandura 50)

With respect to comics, children aren't influenced by mere "picture gazing."

They are influenced by rhetorical heightening accomplished through panel length and

timing; they are drawn to characters like Superman because of the character's lack of

detail—it provides a sort of template into which they can transpose themselves and their

experiences, making the metaphors even more poignant; these metaphors can allow

children to recognize the importance of helping those in need.

Delivering this rhetoric and persuading their audience of its importance is much

easier for Siegel and Shuster to accomplish in fiction because their audience has to make

certain acceptances along the way. To follow the plot, children have to accept Superman

as a reliable narrator, which means they have to accept his perception of the events. They

believe the people he fights are villains because, through Superman's actions or dialogue,

Siegel and Shuster communicate these ideas to the reader. The very fact that he fights a

person is enough to convince children who the villain is.

J.R.R. Tolkien states that fantasy allows children to experience a "joy more

poignant than grief" –a joy that is deeply moving or penetrates more profoundly in its

effects that grief. It often brings about great changes emotionally and physically more

profoundly than a person. It is in this particular situation—where an individual is moved

into action—that it becomes poignant.

Fiction, fantasy, and Superman comics in particular, then become *more* poignant than grief as well. They move us in ways that reality usually doesn't. We generally experience goose bumps quite often while watching a film or reading a book—but the same is rarely said in our day-to-day lives.

The point of Siegel and Shuster's fiction is to persuade their audiences that the heroic actions of Superman are the right actions, influential actions, and needed actions in society. It's this same level of poignancy in fiction that allows these arguments to carry so much weight, to be delivered so efficiently in each panel, and to resonate within us so deeply. It impresses us, moves us, and persuades us, in these profound ways because, as Campbell argues, our minds simply seem to be built for it. We want this delivery and, more importantly, we don't want to realize there is a delivery occurring. That is why McCloud and Booth's frameworks work so well for *Action Comics* no. 1. They took common misconceptions or subconscious understandings and forced a meta approach to the medium. Time works in McCloud's "crazy ways" because our mind wants it to work. Booth tells us a character convinces us to follow him on his journey because we want to hear the story. The rhetoric of Superman—to be "champion of the oppressed" and "defender of those in need" works for his audience because, quite simply, they want it to work.

So . . . back to Bill's question at the beginning of the thesis. Is the weaker Clark Kent really Superman's critique of the entire human race? An analysis of Siegel and Shuster's arguments says no. Clark Kent is, instead, who we could *allow* ourselves to be: a person that is never moved to action, never receives any gratitude, and never helps others. The heightened moments in the Superman panels clearly influences his audience

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to act like a hero—not act like Clark Kent, who is even weaker than the criminals

Superman fights and—with his glasses, suit, tie, and neat hair—we are far more likely to

"perceive" him and "receive" the less detailed Superman. Bill is correct, however, in that

Superman is the true identity and Clark Kent the alter ego. But Clark Kent's rhetorical

purpose is to provide the audience with a dichotomy to Superman. Siegel and Shuster

persuade their audience to act even more like a hero through providing polar opposite to

the hero.

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