What Makes Superman So Damned American?

Gary Engle

Since his initial appearance in a June 1938 comic book, Superman has remained one of the most iconic and enduring figures in American popular culture. As a symbol of American values and ideals, Superman has captured the imagination of audiences around the world, transcending cultural boundaries and becoming a global phenomenon. His story, spanning over eight decades, is a testament to the enduring popularity and influence of the character, as well as the evolving nature of American values and aspirations.

In this article, Gary Engle explores the intricate relationship between Superman and American culture, examining the ways in which the character has reflected and shaped national identity. Engle delves into the character's origins, tracing the development of Superman from his creation by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster to his modern iterations and adaptations. He highlights Superman's role as a cultural icon, analyzing the ways in which the character has been imbued with various nationalistic and ideological meanings.

Engle also considers the impact of Superman on popular culture, examining his influence on literature, film, television, and other forms of media. He discusses the ways in which Superman has been adapted and reimagined across generations, reflecting the changing historical and social contexts in which he has appeared. Through this analysis, Engle offers insights into the enduring appeal of Superman and the ways in which the character continues to resonate with audiences today.

In conclusion, Engle argues that Superman is a quintessential American hero, embodying the values and aspirations of the nation. By exploring the character's history and impact, he provides a rich and nuanced understanding of Superman's significance as a cultural icon and an emblem of American identity.
characteristics, and they protect and preserve the vitality of the foster community in which the child lives in the same way that immigrant ethnicity has sustained American culture linguistically, artistically, economically, politically, and spiritually. The myth of Superman is an American legend in part as a result of a perishing Apocryphal story that the child's every time he plays his spiritual offspring, the Modesto, a city in central California, is a refuge of the child's soul. Bumpo.John Wayne, the Man with No Name, the film star of the 20th century, is a symbol of the postmodern American experience.

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Even in the comics, a medium intimately connected with immigrant culture, there simply was no image that presented a blending of identities in the assimilation process in a way that stressed pride, self-confidence, integrity, and psychological well-being. None, that is, until Superman.

The brilliant stroke in the conception of Superman—the sine qua non that makes the whole myth work—is the fact that he has two identities. The myth simply wouldn’t work without Clark Kent, mild-mannered newspaper reporter and later, as the myth evolved, bland TV newsmen. Adopting the white-bread image of a wimp is first and foremost a moral act for the Man of Steel. He does it to protect his parents from nefarious sorts who might use them to gain an edge over the powerful alien. Moreover, Kent adds to Superman’s powers the moral guidance of a Smallville upbringing. It is Jonathan Kent, fans remember, who instructs the alien that his powers must always be used for good. Thus does the myth add a mainstream white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ingredient to the American stew. Clark Kent is the clearest stereotype of a self-effacing, hesitant, doubting, middle-class weakling ever invented. He is the epitome of visible invisibility, someone whose extraordinary ordinarieness makes him disappear in a crowd. In a phrase, he is the consummate figure of total cultural assimilation, and significantly, he is not real. Implicit in this is the notion that mainstream cultural norms, however useful, are illusions.

Though a disguise, Kent is necessary for the myth to work. This uniquely American hero has two identities, one based on where he comes from in life’s journey, one on where he is going. One is real, one an illusion, and both are necessary for the myth of balance in the assimilation process to be complete. Superman’s powers make the hero capable of saving humanity; Kent’s total immersion in the American heartland makes him want to do it. The result is an improvement on the Western: an optimistic myth of assimilation but with an urban, technocratic setting.

One must never underestimate the importance to a myth of the most minute elements which do not change over time and by which we recognize the story. Take Superman’s cape, for example. When Joe Shuster inked the first Superman stories, in the early thirties when he was still a student at Cleveland’s Glenville High School, Superman was strictly beefcake in tights, looking more like a circus acrobat than the ultimate Man of Steel. By June of 1938 when Action Comics no. 1 was issued, the image had been altered to include a cape, ostensibly to make flight easier to render in the pictures. But it wasn’t the cape of Victorian melodrama and adventure fiction, the kind worn with a clasp around the neck. In fact, one is hard-pressed to find any precedent in popular culture for the kind of cape Superman wears. His emerges in a seamless line from either side of the front yoke of his tunic. It is a veritable growth from behind his pectorals and hangs, when he stands at ease, in a line that doesn’t so much drape his shoulders as stand apart from them and echo their curve, like an angel’s wings.

In light of this graphic detail, it seems hardly coincidental that Super-

man’s real, Kryptonian name is Kal-El, an apparent neologism by George Lowther, the author who novelized the comic strip in 1942. In Hebrew, el can be both root and affix. As a root, it is the masculine singular word for God. Angels in Hebrew mythology are called benei Elohim (literally, sons of the Gods), or Elyonim (higher beings). As an affix, el is most often translated as “of God,” as in the plenitude of Old Testament given names: Isha-el, Daniel-el, Ezekiel-el, Samuel-el, etc. It is also a common form for named angels in most Semitic mythologies: Isra-el, Aza-el, Uri-el, Yo-el, Rapha-el, Gabril-el and — the one perhaps most like Superman — Micha-el, the warrior angel and Satan’s principal adversary.

The morpheme Kal bears a linguistic relation to two Hebrew roots. The first, kal, means “with lightness” or “swiftness” (faster than a speeding bullet in Hebrew?). It also bears a connection to the root hal, where h is the guttural ch of shutzpah. Hal translates roughly as “everything” or “all.” Kal-el, then, can be read as “all that is God,” or perhaps more in the spirit of the myth of Superman, “all that God is.” And while we’re at it, Kent is a form of the Hebrew kana. In its k-n-t form, the word appears in the Bible, meaning “I have found a son.”

I’m suggesting that Superman raises the American immigrant experience to the level of religious myth. And why not? He’s not just some immigrant from across the waters like all our ancestors, but a real alien, an extraterrestrial, a visitor from heaven if you will, which fact lends an element of the supernatural to the myth. America has no national religious icons nor any pilgrimage shrines. The idea of a patron saint is ludicrous in a nation whose Founding Fathers wrote into the founding documents the fundamental if not eternal separation of church and state. America, though, is pretty much as religious as other Industrialized countries. It’s just that our tradition of religious diversity precludes the nation’s religious character from being embodied in objects or persons recognizable religious, for such are immediately identified by their attachment to specific sectarian traditions and thus contradict the eclecticism of the American religious spirit.

In America, cultural icons that manage to tap the national religious spirit are of necessity secular on the surface and sufficiently generalized to incorporate the diversity of American religious traditions. Superman doesn’t have to be seen as an angel to be appreciated, but in the absence of a tradition of national religious iconography, he can serve as a safe, nonsectarian focus for essentially religious sentiments, particularly among the young.

In the last analysis, Superman is like nothing so much as an American boy’s fantasy of a messiah. He is the male, heroic match for the Statue of Liberty, come like an immigrant from heaven to deliver humankind by sacrificing himself in the service of others. He protects the weak and defends truth and justice and all the other moral virtues inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition, remaining ever vigilant and ever chaste. What purer or stronger vision could there possibly be for a child? Now that I put my mind to it, I see that John Wayne never had a chance.