



# Dissecting the Man of Steel:

## The Evolution of Superman as a Reflection of American Society

Marie Gould

Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY

Advisor: Dr. Aaron Hoffman

Readers: Dr. Casey Baugher and Dr. Kathryn West



### INTRODUCTION

With the massive resurgence in the popularity of superheroes within pop culture, comic books are being slowly integrated into academic literature. In previous decades, the belief that they were purely for childhood enjoyment had caused them to be seriously undervalued as a medium in scholastic studies. But there is much more to comics than the surface-level storyline of good versus evil. If one chooses to dive deeper into the narrative, they will find that comics reveal much more to the reader about that society's values and struggles. What one may see as an over-the-top, monologuing supervillain and a charismatic, strong-willed superhero could also be the author's representation of challenging ideas of power and politics that were threatening at the time. Though he has retained his title as the "champion of the oppressed" and has risen to become one of the most recognized cultural icons in the world, Superman as we know him now has not always been the same, both in his personality and in his political and social views. Having been through many events in history and having been written by authors of various backgrounds, Superman's identity and narrative has been influenced by different ideologies since his appearance in 1939. This thesis looks at how the changing attitudes and symbolism of Superman over the years lines up with the evolution of American society both socially and politically.



### OBJECTIVES

- Analyze 5 chosen era of influence: Superman's Creation (1938-1939), World War II (1939-1945), the 50s and 60s (1950s-1960s), the 70s and 80s (1970s-1980s), and the 90s and 2000s (1990s-2000s).
- Investigate connections between eras and Superman narratives with consistent viewpoints and ideas
- Determine whether Superman's evolution reflect the evolution of American Society throughout history since the Great Depression
- Build off of the work of Jeffery K. Johnson's *Super-History*

### METHODOLOGY

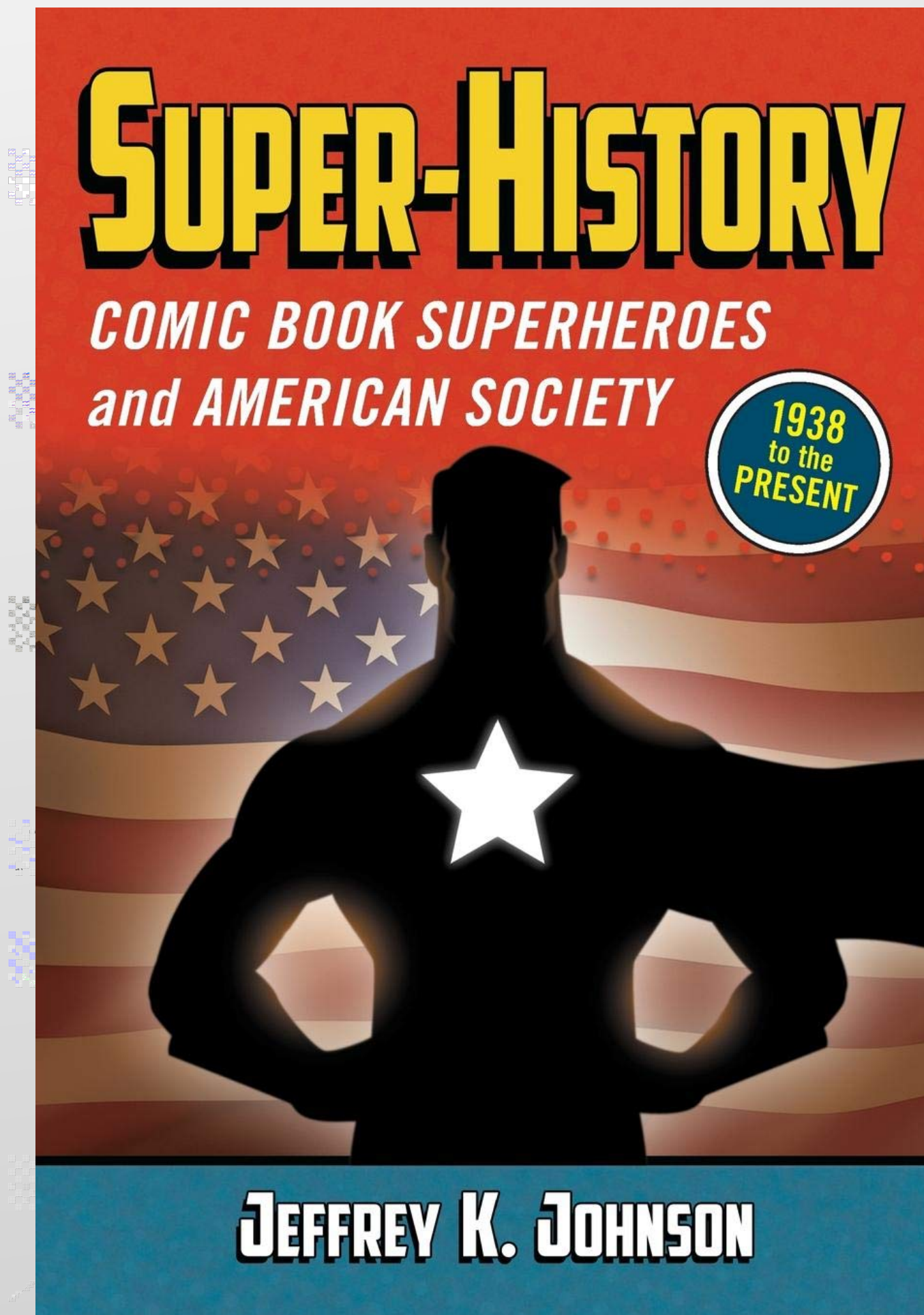
In order to achieve the objective given above, I will be analyzing Superman throughout his run in DC's *Action Comics*. These comic books will be analyzed based on when they were written in alignment with the target time periods: Superman's Creation (1938-1939), World War II (1939-1945), the 50s and 60s (1950s-1960s), the 70s and 80s (1970s-1980s), and the 90s and 2000s (1990s-2000s). In reading them, patterns are determined in how Superman interacts with his environment, in his relationships with other people, and his voiced views. These aspects will be measured with the history of the time period and the popular social and political views at the time to find connections. From this analysis of connections, it will be determined whether comic books (with emphasis on Superman's in this case) hold value as a reflection of the shifting culture and political climate of American society throughout history.

### *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society* by Jeffery K. Johnson

This book by historian and comic book enthusiast Jeffrey K. Johnson serves as the main foundation of this thesis. In his study, he analyzes trends and patterns of America mirrored in comic books over the eight decades since the introduction of superheroes into the genre. He separates his time periods into nine chapters, from Superman's creation years to 2010. Similar to this thesis, each chapter describes how the social views and political ideals were reflected in the superhero comics written in that decade. Chapter One focuses on the years 1938-1940. This chapter focuses on how superheroes were written as "New Deal avengers" that shared Americans' distrust and loss of belief in the government because of its inability to fix society in the Great Depression. They reflected New Deal sentiments preached by FDR. In Chapter Two (1941-1945), Johnson investigated the genre during World War II, and how superheroes adjusted to meet the wartime needs as patriots for America. Dubbed the Nuclear Era from 1945-1989, Chapter Three analyzes how America's fear of nuclear warfare made superheroes feel less powerful, and because of this, their stories showed their attitudes towards atomic bombs. Chapter Four focuses on the 50s and how superhero narratives changed with society after WWII to promote the peace, conformity, and stability the period was known for. In Chapter Five, the 60s were a time where younger heroes arose that were geared towards the troubles facing adolescents and were influenced by the counterculture to the old 50s ideas. In the 70s, as shown in Chapter Six, there was once again great distrust in the government as well as social upheaval. Johnson speculates that this is why superheroes at the time began questioning their social roles and where they stood in these predicaments, therefore reflecting the uncertainty of society's own place in the world. The 80s in Chapter Seven saw a resurgence in conservatism and nationalism under Reagan's presidency. Heroes were transformed into harsh vigilantes that promoted Reagan's form of conservatism rather heroes that made decisions based on right and wrong. After the Cold War ends in the 90s, Chapter Eight argues that at this time both Americans and Superheroes were left unsure of what path they should follow. The superheroes' identity crisis in how to define themselves stemmed from Americans no longer having to base their identity on comparing themselves to the USSR for so long. Lastly, Chapter Nine calls the decade from 2000-2009 the "Decade of Fear". For most of this decade, superhero comics were written as a reactionary response to 9/11 and the War on Terror. Superheroes at this time were written to reflect society's fear and distrust of the world after that incident by becoming more fearful and less trusting, while their villains became more violent and prone to making actions that would be considered today as acts of terror. The difference between the analysis made in this book and this thesis is that Johnson briefly studies the influence of American society shown in the comic book narratives of multiple superheroes both Marvel and DC, while this thesis focuses on the representation of Superman specifically. Johnson also studies the more popular comic books storylines, such as *Identity Crisis* and *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, while I will be studying the subtle, more casual comic book storylines.

"Superman made his position plain: he was a hero of the people. The original Superman was a bold humanist response to Depression-era fears of runaway scientific advance and soulless industrialism."

~Grant Morrison, famous comic book writer



### Chapter One: Creation (1938-1939)

In 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt's second presidential campaign centered on taxing and regulating the wealthy and big business, who had been profiting off of the little protections their workers had at the time before the New Deal. This anti-big business theme became popular for the time as unions and the disadvantaged rallied behind the idea. The Great Depression had left thousands of Americans poor and vulnerable. Out of desperation to survive, it became a time of being the predator or the prey. Crime rates rose as the tanking economy turned people to the life of crime in their need to make money. Businesses made deals with gangs to take advantage of those struggling and unable to keep afloat. Superman embodied the New Deal sentiments in his creation years as he took multiple stands against corrupt businesses that were "bullying the little guys". As the dubbed "champion of the oppressed", Superman in his initial years focused on domestic issues that plagued the poor and underprivileged citizens of Metropolis. These troubles ranged from reckless drivers to the vicious dealings of corrupt politicians and companies. At the time, these types of wrongdoings were what most citizens were concerned about in the 1930s. For example, Superman encounters a group of big taxi companies under the name of the Cab Protective League in *Action Comics* #13. The League uses threats and thugs to victimize other small independent taxi companies who refuse to join the League or stop their business altogether. To take this group down a peg, Superman saves an independent company owner and smashes the taxis belonging to the League. In his pursuit of the head of the League, Superman meets his first supervillain, Ultra-Humanite, who claims to be strong in brains as he is in brawn. Besides his smarts, this villain does not have superpowers, which may surprise modern readers. Ultra-Humanite reveals that he is the head of a large ring of "evil enterprises" like the League and though the businessmen may seem to hold the power, they are actually his henchmen. Seeking world domination through the growth of these enterprises, Ultra-Humanite serves as a challenge and foil to Superman's beliefs against big businesses. He represents everything that Superman and the New Deal movement is not in terms of what drives them and what they stands for, and his escape only ensures that he and Superman (respectively, the big businesses and FDR's New Deal) will continue to come into conflict with each other during these years.

Comic books are "a metaphorical way of discussing immigration, Americanization, urbanization, American identity, changing concepts of race and gender, individualism, capitalism, modernism, and so many other cultural concerns."

~Robin Rosenberg & Peter Coogan, *What is a Superhero?*

### CONCLUSION

It can be drawn from initial findings that Superman's narratives in his creation years are linked to the social and political culture of the Great Depression. The creation of superheroes, and of Superman in particular, was a response to the morality and troubles of the 1930s. Upon his creation in 1938, Superman served as the empowerment of the marginalized and the oppressed who suffered during these trying times. He represented their will to overcome a corrupt and failing system in a society who had seemingly abandoned them. In future chapters, if the hypothesis holds that Superman's evolving narrative indeed reflects the ever-changing attitudes of American society across time, then it should continue to be that Superman should reflect nationalist and patriotic views in the next chapter on World War II or the emphasis on family, home, and obedience to law and authority in the 50s during the Cold War in Chapter 3. Further research will show how comic books impacted and were influenced by these cultural and ideological changes and how much the findings correspond to the framework dressed by Jeffrey K. Johnson.

