

Historical and Visual Rhetorical Analysis of Superman Comic Books, 1938-1945

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Abstract/Description: Prior and during World War II comic books were among America's largest mass media. One of the most popular, if not the most popular, character to emerge from this time period was Superman, The Man of Tomorrow. Almost immediately after the character's first appearance in 1938, the country's newsstands were filled with brightly colored imitations. At the same time that the country's comic book industry came into being, the nation was undergoing a host of changes and controversy. The Great Depression had wrecked the country and President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal attempted to right the economic downturn. But as the country dealt with the lack of economic growth, it also came to question its role in foreign affairs. The outbreak of conflict in Europe led to a fight at home between isolationists and interventionists and whether the country should broach supporting the Allied Forces. After Pearl Harbor, the nation entered the European conflict with zeal, as did the comic book industry. This thesis is an historical and visual rhetorical analysis of Superman comic books from 1938 to 1945. Its goal is to

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examine how one of the nation's most recognizable fictional characters both reflected and reinforced popular public opinion from the time period. I use Cara Finnegan's concept of visual rhetoric, specifically composition, and David Zarefsky's "four senses" of rhetorical history to analysis the Man of Tomorrow's early adventures. I make three separate arguments. First, I argue that Superman comic books had New Deal sympathies by examining three issues and contextualizing these around popular public thought such as the need for improved workers rights, moral decay caused by slums, and admonishment of stockbrokers. Second, I detail how Superman comics presented isolationist messages and then interventionist messages. In showing this rhetorical trajectory I discuss the Nye Committee's investigation of the munitions industry and the Roosevelt administration's use of "guilt-by-association" to discredit aviator Charles Lindbergh. Finally, I argue that Superman during the war years came to represent the American people. This is done through the character's support of war bonds.

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We conducted a content-analysis on Modern Age American comic books recording the gender, race, and class of the main and background comic book characters. Our data shows that white males are the majority of overall characters, main characters, and aggressors in altercations. With regard to class, black characters were more likely to be represented as having lower socioeconomic status compared to white characters. Comic books offer a unique medium for modern storytelling, reflecting American culture and values in through both a visual and narrative aspect (Bainbridge, 2007; Reynolds & Henson, 2010). Historically, American comic books have tended to portray the reign of the SUPER MAN 1930 No. 1 JUNE, 1938 ACTON COMICS "SCIENCE FICTION NUMBER 3" FANZINE (1933) 1935 SUPERMAN MASQUERADES AS HUMAN REPORTER CLARK KENT (LEFT), OF THE DAILY STAR (LATER DAILY PLANET) Superman is said to have been rocketed to Earth The Golden Age After years of failure in trying to sell Superman to newspapers, Siegel and Shuster sell. Kirk Alyn (right) radio show in 1943, but would not appear in the comic books until 1949. stars Superman. On April 18, 1938, DC Comics (then National Allied Productions) debuted a new anthology title Action Comics, with the lead-cover story featuring a new superhero character called Superman. The rest, as they say, is history. Tags. Superman is DC's first super-hero and one of the most popular and most iconic heroes, both in and out of universe. The first Superman character created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster was not a hero, but a villain. Their short story "The Reign of the Superman" concerned a bald-headed villain bent on dominating the world. The story did not sell, forcing the two to reposition their character on the right side of the law. In 1935, their Superman story was again rejected by newspaper syndicates wanting to This is a great book of Superman comics. If you are a fan of Superman, or are buying for a fan, you can't go wrong. Unless you are a hard corps nerd, and have been collecting since the 40's, you probably don't have all of these stories. And if you do, they're rarely as nice or accessible as this. Thomas also appropriately divides this collection in five parts which are congruent with America's relation to the war, and includes his own editorial comments and historical facts as a background for the stories to follow. In this respect, Thomas's work is almost scholarly, and it is quite informative. Verified Purchase. Excellent book for all fans of the early Superman comics between the war years. Thoroughly recommend. Read more.