

**History 98 - Superman as American Mythology (Fall 2007)**  
**The DeCal – Syllabus**

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Superman, created in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster is the oldest and most well known superhero in history. He is the Man of Steel and the last son of the doomed planet Krypton who fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way. How did this simple character evolve into one of the greatest icons of American pop culture history? Is there some innate connection between Superman and the American psyche that has allowed him to remain so popular after so long? What is Superman's connection to religion and philosophy? How have changes in the American political climate affected the Last Son of Krypton? How have different incarnations of the character affected American culture and popular consciousness? How exactly do the characters of Lois Lane and Lex Luthor contribute to the mythology of the character? These questions and many more will be answered as we explore Superman as American Mythology.

**Class meetings:** Tues/Thurs 5-6pm in 88 Dwinelle

Enrollment Instructions: Show up on Tuesday September 4, 2007, at 5pm in 88 Dwinelle to learn more about the course. We will take down names of people interested in registering and will e-mail out the course control number to all admitted students that evening. Please note, we are limited to 30 students, so be sure to attend on Monday. Regular class sessions begin on Wednesday as described on the syllabus.

**Class Description:**

On the Monday of each week we will have a discussion-style exploration of some aspect of the character and then on Wednesday will examine that aspect of the character in the context of an episode of television, a comic, or some other media in which Superman has appeared, that well illustrates the topic of the week.

The readings for the class will be:

- **The Superman Chronicles: Volume 1 (Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster)**
- **Superman, Man of Steel (John Byrne)**
- **Superman for All Seasons (Jeph Loeb/Tim Sale)**
- **Lex Luthor: Man of Steel (Brian Azzarello)**
- **DC Universe: The Stories of Alan Moore (stories: “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow” and “For the Man Who Has Everything”) (Alan Moore)**
- **Superman: Up Up and Away (Geoff Johns and Kurt Busiek)**
- **Superman/Batman: Public Enemies (Jeph Loeb/Ed McGuinness)**

All graphic novels will be available at a 20% discount to enrolled students at Comic-Relief, located on Shattuck Avenue.

Readings are required of all students and will be tested on at the end of the class.

Other possible readings may include select philosophical texts, historical documents such as a section of Wertham’s notorious 1960s book, *The Seduction of the Innocent*, and a selection of scholarly essays on comic book characters. These may be provided in class.

### **Assignments:**

Students will have two options for their final projects: either five one page responses due at the end of the semester about any of the topics or readings presented in the course, or as an alternative, a full Superman story in the form of a comic book/script incorporating the themes and ideals touched upon from the class lectures and readings. There may also be a true/false knowledge evaluation exam at the end of the course.

### **Attendance Policy:**

Attendance is extremely important to this course. Students may not miss more than three class sessions. If they need to miss more than three sessions they need to make special arrangements with the facilitators prior to missing class.

### **Week One (9/4 & 9/6):**

Monday: Introductions/Media Presentation

The first day of class will begin with an introduction of the class where we will briefly get to know each other and each student can introduce themselves and explain why they’re taking the Superman decal. We’ll then move into a fun slide show style multimedia presentation which will provide a fun, high energy look at the Man of Steel across his 70 year history.

Wednesday: Origin of Superman

Why did Siegel and Shuster create Superman? How did their lives and heritage as the sons children of Jewish immigrants growing up during the

Great Depression influence the creation of the character? How does Nietzsche's concept of the *ubermensch* relate to Superman.

**Week Two (9/11 & 9/13):**

Monday: Superman 30's – 40's

Week Three will introduce one of the themes for the class: Superman as an allegory for America. How do the values of Superman and his travails reflect the way America views itself throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century? Superman's role in the Great Depression, New Deal, and World War II will be used as a lens for America during these two decades. We will watch the short Fleischer Superman film, "Japoteurs."

Wednesday: Media Presentation

Our first look at Superman in the media will focus on the very first time Superman appeared in film, the short animated feature called "Superman" by Fleischer Studios as well as a sampling from the popular Superman radio dramas. We'll also discuss the first Superman comic, 1938's Action Comics #1.

**Required Readings: *The Superman Chronicles: Vol. 1***

**Week Three (9/18 & 9/20):**

Monday Superman 50's – 60's

The 1950s were an era of unparalleled prosperity of growth for America. The incredibly popular *Adventures of Superman* starring George Reeves as well as the 1960s Superman cartoons made the iconic superhero as much a part of the American psyche as apple pie and Norman Rockwell...but change was on the way...

Wednesday Superman 70s, 80s, and today

The 1970s and 80s were a time of great change for the Man of Steel and America. How did the Cold War reflect the type of stories being told about Superman? What factors led to the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* that prompted the complete relaunch of Superman as a character. How did he change? With the Cold War over and new threats on the horizon, how should Superman and America adapt to this changing world? How does Superman respond to the conflict between his ideals and the real world? Why didn't Superman stop Lex Luthor from winning the 2000 Presidential Election? What's Superman's place in the post-9/11 world?

**Required Readings: *Superman: Man of Steel Vol. 1***

**Week Four (9/25 & 9/27): Origin**

Monday: Beginning in Week five we will start taking a look at various thematic aspects of Superman and his mythology. Who is the real person Clark Kent or Superman? How and why has this changed? Why would a regular guy with exceptional powers decide to become Superman rather than make a lot of money? Is it significant that he grew up in Kansas or that he's an immigrant? How do John and Martha Kent and his origin story figure into his development?

Wednesday: Media Presentations

*Superman: the Movie*

**Required Reading: *Superman for All Seasons* (Jeph Loeb)**

**Week Five (10/2 & 10/4): What's not to like about the Man of Steel?**

Monday: Lex Luthor

Why exactly does Lex Luthor hate Superman? We'll discuss how Lex views Superman as a threat to the human potential. Is Lex perhaps the anti-Superman, a corruption of the American dream, or perhaps all that is bad about humanity elevated to its highest potential?

Wednesday: Media Presentation

We will watch a Smallville episode centered around Lex Luthor's fall to evil: "Lexmas"

**Required Readings: *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel***

**Week Six (10/9 & 10/11): How to Make a Great Superman Story**

Monday: Group Collaborations

We will have the students divide into groups to collaborate on a story and artwork for their potential end-of-year comic book projects. We will go over how comic books are made, and how one can adapt the themes from Superman mythology into their very own stories.

Wednesday: Media Presentation

We will watch the animated adaptation of Alan Moore's "For the Man Who Has Everything" from the *Justice League Unlimited* animated series, and discuss how good stories can be adapted into different forms successfully, while still retaining the strong thematic ideals of that mythology.

**Required Reading: "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow" and "For the Man Who Has Everything"**

**Week Seven (10/16 & 10/18): Role**

Monday: Superman's Role

What is Superman's role in the world? How did his villains and experiences shape him? What are his methods in "saving the world?" What are his morals? Is Superman an example of humanity at its best?

Wednesday: Media Presentation

We'll watch the *Justice League Unlimited* episode "A Better World" and learn how frightening it would be to live in a world where Superman had different morals.

**Required Reading: none**

**Week Eight (10/23 & 10/25): The Women in Superman's life**

Monday: Lois Lane

What was the inspiration for the character of Lois Lane? Is Lois the woman of tomorrow? We'll discuss her as a feminist hero. Why is Clark in love with her? We'll discuss how Lois originally was in love with Superman but

shunned Clark Kent. How is Lana Lang, Clark's original love, different from Lois? Why does he prefer Lois?

Wednesday: Media

*Lois and Clark* was a revolutionary retelling of the Superman story as a romantic drama between Clark Kent and Lois Lane, both played as intelligent likable, modern characters. We'll watch an episode of the series paying attention to the character of Lois.

**Required Readings: none**

### **Week Nine (10/30 & 11/1): Psychology of Superman**

Monday: Superman is quite an emotional hero with a lot of responsibility on his shoulders. We will discuss the possible motivations and thoughts that make the character multi-dimensional, as they are depicted in the comic book storylines and films, including ideas such as, what makes him moral, what is his state of mind, his true personality, etc. We will compare his mindset to that of more traditional heroes in pop culture, analyzing the character's emotional traits that make him unique from other heroes in mainstream media.

Wednesday: TBA

**Required Readings: *Superman: Up, Up, and Away***

### **Week Ten (11/6 & 11/8): Weaknesses**

Monday: Superman is pretty darn powerful...but he's weak to kryptonite, magic, and telepathy and we'll explore this from a story-telling and philosophical point of view. He may be all powerful, but he can't be in more than one place at a time, won't do certain things, and has people that he loves who can be put in danger. What does this say about how America, the sole superpower in the world, views its own weaknesses?

Wednesday: Media:

We'll watch the *Smallville* episode "Shattered," possibly the best episode of the series where Clark does his best and makes all of what seems to be the right choices throughout the episode yet finds at the tragic end of the episode that he has failed in every way.

**Required Readings: none**

### **Week Eleven (11/13 & 11/15): Presentation**

Monday: Superman has existed in some form or another for sixty-seven years. How does pretty square guy who wears red and blue tights and sports a spit curl still have one of the top selling comic books in the world? The answer is in his adaptability. This week we'll explore how different actors portrayed the character on screen and how different writers and artists have brought different angles to the character. We'll examine some of the creative decisions that have been both praised and panned by fans of the Man of Steel. Why were fans angry with the recent *Superman: Birthright* series? Should Superman be involved in politics or war? Does Superman have sex? These controversial topics have all been touched on in various ways in different adaptations of the character. We will discuss their implications for Superman.

Wednesday:

Animated Series – We'll watch an episode of the popular 90s animated series.  
Episode TBA.

**Required Readings:**

**Week Twelve (11/20 & 11/22): Superman vs. Traditional Myths**

Monday: The inspirations for Superman are wide and varied. We'll take a look at how certain elements of the Superman mythos stack up against traditional myths, and how certain myths are being retold through the Man of Steel. We'll also explore the deliberate use of Christian symbolism in various Superman media, and discuss whether or not Superman makes for a good Christian parable.

Wednesday: Media

TBA

**Week Thirteen (11/27 & 11/29): DCU (Batman/Superman)**

Monday: Superman and Batman are two of the most popular heroes in the world. When DC decided to create a "shared universe" where all of their superheroes could interact, it was only a matter of time until The Man of Steel and the Caped Crusader met up. Their relationship has evolved over time from being best friends to tacit allies. Superman and Batman share many of the same ideals, but their backgrounds and methods lead to them having many disagreements over how to tackle their missions on Earth. We'll examine how these characters are similar and different and how they both add a piece to the puzzle of understanding the American character. We'll also touch on some of the other heroes who make up the DC Universe.

Wednesday: Media

We'll watch the episode of the Superman Animated Series where Superman and Batman first meet.

**Required Reading: *Superman/Batman: Public Enemies***

**Week Fourteen (12/4 & 12/6): The Future and Retrospective**

With DCU-shattering *Infinite Crisis* that once again redefined Superman for a new era as well as the movie *Superman Returns* providing a new big screen interpretation of the character, 2006 was a big year for the Man of Steel. How has the character changed and is this indicative of changes in American society? We'll finish our course with a look forward to what we can expect from The Man of Steel in 2007 and beyond and will watch *Superman Returns*.

**Note: Schedule is subject to change.**