
How Superman Changed: A Semiotic Perspective

By Jordan Bailey

Introduction

This paper is designed to investigate elements of the character “Superman” through different entertainment mediums, from a semiotic [[47]] perspective. Each section focuses on the semiotic components surrounding the character in a synchronic [[60]] fashion, besides the introduction and conclusion. Most sections will discuss Myth [[29]], Narrative [[30]], Code [[2]], and any necessary context or ideology change during the period.

The second section of the paper, titled “The Creation of Superman”, will focus on why the character “Superman” was created, any significant sign [[51]] creation during and around his creation in the 1930s and 1940s, and a description of the basic Triadic model created by Peirce, and how that connects to Superman. Hero Code will be heavily discussed, and the relevance of any historical happenings (World War 2).

The third section of this paper, titled “Superman in the 80s”, will focus on the four live action films released from 1978 to 1987. The history and context of the era will be discussed to understand any relevant signs [[55]] or symbols [[58]] that are pertinent to the period. Any relevant philosophical movements or ideologies like Modernism[[28]] and Post-Modernism[[39]] are discussed.

The fourth section of this paper, titled “Superman in Highschool”, discusses the semiotics of the live action television show titled “Smallville”, which was on air from 2001 to 2011. Although the show was on air for 10 years, there are many changes to both superman’s character and backstory by altering the lens of Superman towards an inexperienced adolescent.

The fifth section of this paper, titled “Can Superman Kill?”, discusses how superman’s character changed, thus changing the meaning of him and what he embodies. The changes occur specifically in Zack Snyder’s first rendition of the character in 2013’s Man of Steel, and any changes to his narrative [[30]] or symbol [[58]] will be discussed. Peircean theory on Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness will be explored.

The sixth section of this paper, titled “Superman: Man, or God?”, discusses Zack Snyder’s second and third film interpretations of superman, and how his symbol changes further through his narrative, and heavy changes . Allusions to other texts [[63]] are discussed in detail.

The seventh section of this paper, titled “Superman’s a communist now?” discusses the animated movie “Superman: Red Son” and how to effectively analyze an animated movie semiotically as opposed to a live action film. Ideas on Post-Modernism are flooded throughout the film and provides a significantly different conventional symbol for Superman.

The eighth section of this paper, titled “Superman: No longer the American way?” discusses the recent change to superman’s motto officially and any other recent announcements that will further change the character of Superman. What does Superman really symbolize?

The conclusion of this paper will summarize the semiotic ideas on Superman featured throughout the paper.

The Creation of Superman

I want to write about the creation of Superman from a cultural lens, and its origins in Cleveland Ohio, in the heart of the Great Depression, and the start of World War 2. **I plan to focus on** Superman's hero code, the idea of myth, and the overall need for a conventional symbol of hope. **I would like my reader** to understand *why* superman is the way that he is in the comics, and why he specifically symbolizes "The American Way".

I will write about the role of Code on Superman.

I will write about the role that myth plays on Superman.

I will write about the role of thirdness, and specifically what Superman 'means' in a conventional way.

I will write about the Denotative and Connotative meanings of Superman throughout the time period.

The Perfect Superman

I want to write about the 1978 Superman film from a cultural lens, and from a narrative standpoint. **I plan to focus on** the narrative choice, Superman's hero code, and allusions to other texts, specifically the Bible. **I would like my reader** to understand the connotative qualities Superman was given from these movies, and how his ideals changed.

I will write about the role of Superman's heroic code being transferred on screen.

I will write about allusions made to other texts, specifically the bible.

I will write about the role that myth plays on Superman on screen.

I will write about the Denotative and Connotative meanings of Superman throughout the time period.

Superman's a Kid?

I want to write about the 2001 TV show titled "Smallville", and the character/narrative changes made by the show, and how that changes the symbol of Superman. **I plan to focus on** changes to the character's code, changes to Superman's symbol, and the connotations created with a teenage Superman. **I would like my reader** to understand the changes made to the symbol of Superman by making him an adolescent without the suit or characteristics of the traditional Superman.

I will write about the role of how the character still follows the heroic code.

I will write about how Superman's symbol changed because of the show.

I will write about the importance of the narrative change to Superman's character

Can Superman Kill?

I want to write about the 2013 film titled “Man of Steel”, and the character/narrative changes made by Zack Snyder and how that changed the symbol of Superman. **I plan to focus on** Zack Snyders directorial style, Expressionism in Post-Modern Film, and how the traditional connotations of Superman change from this movie. **I would like the reader** to understand the tonal change from the traditional live action Superman to a morally grey and humanized Superman.

I will write about how Superman’s code is kept mostly the same, but slightly altered.

I will write about Zack Snyder’s directorial style and how it affects what Superman means symbolically.

I will write about Post-Modern Film and specifically expressionism used in film.

Superman: Man, or God?

I want to write about the 2016 film titled, “Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice”, and how it alters the symbol of Superman even further. **I plan to focus on** the specific narrative of the story, the filmmaking processes going into sign creation, and the biblical allusions and philosophical questions given to Superman throughout. **I would like the reader** to understand the changes made to Superman’s symbol and how he becomes a savior figure/symbol.

I will write about how the narrative of the film depicts Superman as a savior or Jesus-like figure.

I will write about Zack Snyder’s directorial style and how it affects Superman’s symbolism.

Superman’s a Communist Now?

I want to write about the 2020 film titled, “Superman: Red Son”, and how it completely changes Superman’s symbol and code. **I plan to focus on** the cultural background of the film, Postmodernism, and the narrative of the story. **I would like the reader** to obtain a feel for Postmodernism, and the importance of morally grey character development.

I will write about the cultural significance and context of the films creation

I will write about Postmodernism, and specifically the characteristics of Postmodern cinema.

I will write about the narrative of the story and how that affects Superman’s code.

Superman: No Longer the American Way?

Conclusion
