The Secret of Superman’s Secret Identity: George Reeves as Clark Kent in the

*Adventures of Superman*

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Superman, in all its variations, may turn out to be the fundamental myth of modern America. Like all great myths, it tells a story fundamental to its civilization, reflecting and in some ways creating its mores and social definitions. In the diverse culture of twentieth and twenty-first century America, such a unifying mythological force might seem impossible to conceive, but two Cleveland high school students named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the Superman character in the 1930s, and over the past 70 years, in comic strips, comic books, television, and the movies, the Man of Steel has become a universally recognizable cultural icon. Superman defines the heroic individualist who immigrates from another planet, assimilates successfully, and saves his adopted homeland from threats both internal and external by means of super powers that he wields with a selfless generosity of spirit. Even without a scientific survey, one could pretty confidently assert that 90% or more of Americans could recognize an image of Superman and list some of his powers. A substantial majority would also know that Superman has a secret identity of newspaperman Clark Kent, who works with fellow reporters Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen and their editor, Perry White, on a newspaper called *The Daily Planet* in the great city of Metropolis.

Superman has inspired a culture of other superheroes, with specialized powers of their own. Superman even teams up with them on occasion in comic books and television cartoons, but all live action movies and television depictions of him have focused on his solo adventures. These live action presentations of Superman must inevitably confront how Superman melds into human society. After all, this alien from the planet Krypton has to be played by a human being, and thus a live action drama has an inherent responsibility to portray Superman’s relations with humanity. In the big-budget mainstream movies of
Superman, starting with the 1977 version starring Christopher Reeve, much is made of Superman’s fundamental difference from the physically and morally limited humans with whom he shares the planet Earth. He is quite literally alienated. The voice of his Krytonian father Jor-El, intoned with great portentousness by a very expensively acquired Marlon Brando, tells him that “You can never be one of them.” And the big-budget movie Superman never really is; in fact, at the start of the latest installment, *Superman Returns*, Superman has left humanity to its own faulty devices for five years while he searches for the shattered remnants of his home world. Needless to say, things go sour in his absence.

But there was once a much more human Superman. Sometime in 1951, a once promising 37-year-old Hollywood actor named George Reeves was offered the part of Superman for a projected television series that did not even have a sponsor yet. In the recent movie *Hollywoodland*, in which Reeves’ biography figures prominently, his agent tells him that there is a good chance that the show would never air, that he should just accept the role, and “take the money and run.” Gary Grossman’s *Superman: Serial to Cereal* gives a more mundane account, quoting Reeves from a 1954 interview: “I’ve played about every part you could think of, so why not Superman?” Reeves did twenty-six episodes on spec, and probably assumed that even if the series went on, it would sink as surely into oblivion as all the B-movies roles, like Sir Galahad, that he had been forced to play during the downhill career slide he had endured since his big star turn in *So Proudly We Hail* in 1943. Instead, after Kellogg’s cereals became its sponsor in 1953, *The Adventures of Superman* became one of the great successes of early television, putting millions of kids and their families solidly in front on their 19-inch oval cathode ray tubes every week. *Hollywoodland* poignantly portrays the exhilarating but ultimately tragic effect the role of television’s Superman had on Reeves. He became hopelessly typecast, and his last chance to break back into big-time movemaking was sabotaged by his seemingly perverse television popularity. Of course he was a hero to millions of kids, but industry insiders’ smirking chuckles during previews sent his promising role in the hit movie *From Here to Eternity* almost entirely onto the cutting room floor. In the late 1950s, Superman’s run came to a close, Reeves’ personal life deteriorated, and he died mysteriously of a gunshot wound on June 16, 1959.

One of the saddest ironies of George Reeves’ all too short life was that he never lived to realize how much he was sincerely loved by his audience, an audience that would grow up on the ideals and image that he presented weekly on television. Out of the very
limitations of the new medium, George Reeves created a Superman who embraced humanity like no other Superman before or since. To start illustrating how Reeves achieved this distinction, let’s return to the final sentence of the immortal introduction to each show, which most of those who grew up during the fifties can recite by heart: “And who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way!” As the words intone, the image of Superman, standing resolutely onscreen, morphs into the relaxed, hands in pockets posture of Clark Kent, with his rakish fedora and horn-rimmed glasses, then back to Superman again. The message could not be clearer. Superman and Clark Kent both fight for truth, justice, and the American way. In the Adventures of Superman, Kent is portrayed as capable, aggressive, and articulate, and thereby the show manages to illuminate a crucial underlying theme in the Superman’s mythology. His greatest challenge is not saving Metropolis from criminals and rogue asteroids, but becoming a fully believable human being. As Reeves would play him, Clark Kent was not the last man you would expect to be Superman; instead, he’s the man, the human being, that Superman wishes to be. George Reeves as Superman/Clark Kent gave America a humane ideal who could be both touchingly vulnerable and morally courageous, and thus accessible and even believable.

The most obvious reason for portraying a more limited Superman on the Adventures of Superman had to do with shooting what amounted to a twenty-five minute B-movie for weekly broadcast on a shoestring budget. Superman could fly, stop bullets, break through walls, and employ x-ray vision, but he wasn’t going to be lifting buildings off their foundations, throwing cars around, or even “changing the course of mighty rivers,” as his introduction would have it. For these very practical production reasons, Superman has to get more done as Clark Kent. Superman’s repertoire of powers would be used up pretty quickly if he had to spend too much time onscreen. This rationing of Superman’s display of powers actually worked well psychologically with the youth audience, as I can personally attest. Superman’s timely appearance to save his friends and apprehend the evildoers had all the more thrill and impact.

There’s a more subtle and theoretical element involved in the enhanced role Clark Kent plays in the Adventures of Superman, and it has to do with the show’s participation in the establishment of what I call the domestic continuity of early television. In contrast to the movies or even to live plays, television drama reduced the scope and ambition of the diargetic
space observed by the viewer. Instead of the vicarious or exotic escape of films particularly, television became part of the domestic routine. Television thus enacted a transition from the self-contained dramatic continuity of films and plays to a show-to-show continuity that familiarized and domesticated the imagery presented to the audience. Television shows had to play on the same studio sets every week, but that was fine with the audience, who were sitting in the same room watching the show every week. As television became part of the domestic routine of the household, many successful television shows made the dramatization of domestic routine part of the entertainment content. Real-life show business couples, such as George Burns and Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, humanized their entertainment figure identities on shows that ironically starred them being the ordinary people behind the stars.

Thus television domesticated the outsized, mythic figure of Superman as well. Every week, there they were: the same two standard, drab offices of *The Daily Planet*—the smaller one alternately inhabited by Clark and Lois, as necessary; and the larger one, with its smoke-belching portrait of some ghastly factory in the background, serving as the office of editor Perry White. The iconic phone booth being utterly impractical, Clark had to duck out to change to Superman in the same “Store Room” or alley every time. Given this extraordinary domestic familiarity, Superman/Clark Kent’s maintenance of a “secret identity” becomes logically absurd. How can reasonably intelligent people, editors and reporters who seem intellectually sharp in every other way, not make the connection between Kent’s convenient disappearances and the appearance of Superman? The solution is simple, in keeping with the inherent simplicity of everything else about early television; the characters in the diagogetic space of the show believe in Clark Kent. Literally dozens of times throughout the run of the show, Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, and Perry White simply decide to believe, without the slightest rational basis, that Clark just can’t be Superman. They believe with all their hearts that Clark Kent is an ordinary human being, a capable and principled newspaperman who has a special relationship with Superman, to be sure, but then so do they. What they display is no more or less than faith, faith in the humanity that Superman displays as Clark.

Moreover, George Reeves’ Clark justifies his colleagues’ faith in him. Quite in contrast to the bumbling nerd Clark played by Christopher Reeve in the 1977 *Superman* directed by Richard Donner, and the 2006 sequel *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer and starring Brandon Routh, George Reeves’ Clark Kent is cool, self-assured, and in most all
cases, handles his dual identity with wit and irony. What child who followed the show in the fifties can forget all those knowing winks to the camera at the end of one episode after another, creating a shared confidence and bond with his audience? Such a gesture bespeaks Reeves’ absolute inhabitation of his role, and his belief in the inherent strength and appeal of his character. He is a man playing a role who can let his audience know that he is playing a role. Certainly kids saw the wink as a special communication from Superman, but today as adults, watching the DVD versions of the shows, we can also see with hindsight the charming, mischievous joy of George Reeves himself twinkling through the horn rims.

Within the diagesis of the Adventures of Superman, the writers, under the supervision of producer Whitney Ellsworth, give Reeves’ Kent genuine status. From the very beginning, Clark works directly with Police Inspector Bill Henderson (a character created especially for the show to forestall any perception of vigilantism on the part of The Daily Planet or Superman) as a full peer. They work together on numerous cases, and even go to Hollywood together in one of the early episodes to consult on a film expose of organized crime based on Henderson’s investigations and Kent’s newspaper coverage. In another episode, Perry White is nearly driven mad by a con man who seems to appear to him as “Great Caesar’s Ghost,” the embodiment of Perry’s favorite epithet. While Perry is out of commission, Clark Kent takes over as temporary editor of The Daily Planet. When his colleagues Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen come to visit him, Jimmy exclaims, “I always knew you’d make good, Mr. Kent.” Of course, Clark’s being awash in the bureaucratic minutiae of running the paper has kept Superman off the case long enough to put Perry into further trouble.

Another, more emotionally significant, element in Clark Kent’s special status in the Adventures of Superman, is the way that Clark Kent serves as the human surrogate for Superman’s vulnerabilities. In “Panic in the Sky,” the highlight of the second season, and one of the most compelling of all the 104 Adventures of Superman episodes, Superman saves Metropolis by knocking a rogue asteroid off course. The trauma of the effort tests even Superman’s seeming invulnerability. He gets a super-concussion, and suffers amnesia as a result. To his friends, it’s Clark who is incapacitated, and Reeves’ sensitive performance as the confused and disturbed Clark/Superman, on the verge of giving everything away without knowing it, is still moving today. There is more at stake, though, than just Kent/Superman’s dual loss of identity. Earth is still threatened by gravitational disruptions caused by the asteroid, which Superman could only push into orbit. The fate of the world depends on
Superman’s regaining his identity and memory, but, ironically, it is his friends’ steadfast
determination to re-construct him as Clark first that lays the foundation for Clark to then
recover his Superman identity on his own.³ In the crucial scene, our hero sits in Clark’s
apartment, in his Superman uniform but still wearing Clark’s glasses, immersed in an agony
of doubt. He then brings his fist down onto the end table in very human frustration,
smashing it to pieces, thereby confirming that he does have super-strength. He then rushes
off to save the world.

The Clark Kent side of his identity also helps Superman out of emotional
disturbance and identity crisis in another excellent second season show, “The Face and the
Voice.” In this episode, Reeves plays a triple role: Superman, Clark Kent, and a thug who
impersonates Superman by means of plastic surgery and voice coaching. The impersonator
commits random crimes with the express purpose of making Superman believe he is going
crazy, that some dark element of his already split personality has taken over, causing him to
be a danger to the public without knowing it. The plot does start to have the planned effect.
Superman can’t consult a psychiatrist, but Clark Kent can and does. (The psychiatrist is
played by Hayden Rourke, who would be comic psychiatrist on I Dream of Jeannie, more than
10 years later.⁴) Once again, Reeves uses Clark’s integrity and humanity to explore the
pathological possibilities of the situation in far more depth than the psychiatrist, who does
little more than offer bland reassurances. The session ends when the thug makes the mistake
of trying to intimidate Perry White while Clark was in analysis, giving Clark/Superman
empirical proof that Superman is not responsible for the imposter’s crimes.

The enhanced Clark Kent of the Adventures of Superman gains his greatest stature,
though, when he combats legal and moral injustice in the first two episodes of the second
season, “Five Minutes to Doom,” and “The Big Squeeze.” In both of these episodes,
Superman himself gets less than two minutes of screen time, with Clark taking the lead the
rest of the way. In “Five Minutes to Doom,” an innocent man faces execution after being
framed for a murder. After grasping the man’s wrist and performing an impromptu lie-
detector test while he and Lois conduct a pre-execution interview, Clark leads The Daily
Planet staff through a resourceful, high speed investigation in which they must, in less than a
day, follow a complex trail of evidence to establish a clear motive for the frame-up. All four
members of The Daily Planet staff work together as a focused, highly professional team, and
at no time does Clark fall back on super powers. Once the evidence has been assembled,
Superman steps in to effect the last second rescue of the innocent man from execution, and then his services are only needed because a storm has disrupted the phone lines. Superman’s smashing through the shadow on the prison wall of the victim strapped to the electric chair only punctuates what Clark Kent as a human being has done to reveal unequivocally the potential injustice of the death penalty.

In “The Big Squeeze,” Clark has convinced Perry White that The Daily Planet should give a “citizen of the year” award. The man chosen, however, has a criminal past that he has been keeping from his family and the community for over ten years. The perfectly cast character actor in the role of the flawed model citizen is Hugh Beaumont, who would go on to become the wise and humble father of the Cleaver family in the popular comedy, Leave It To Beaver. In the midst of Clark’s attempt to honor him, the Beaumont character is subjected to both blackmail and a robbery frame-up by a former fellow inmate. After some melodramatic scrapes and Superman’s timely intervention, Beaumont’s character’s innocence is established and he can receive the honor after all. Kent’s award presentation speech, though, provides one the most courageous and idealistic moments in early television drama. At the height of the McCarthy era, when red-baiting paranoia about people’s pasts had driven the entertainment industry into fearful submission, Clark Kent speaks out passionately that a good man’s past should not be held against him. Granted, Kent speaks specifically of ex-convicts, but the overall message of forgiveness and tolerance could not have been missed by the contemporary audience, and it still sounds pretty eloquent today.

Over its next four seasons, the Adventures of Superman lost some of its humanistic edge, becoming much more of a live action comic book for children. The villains got campy, the scripts lost their tauntness, and the whole enterprise became more routine, but Clark Kent and Superman still morphed in that wonderful introduction, and the show’s enduring popularity still offers up the possibility that a super being could love humanity enough to become a man himself, and a really worthy and believable one at that.
Notes

1Lou Koza offers an extensive analysis of the factual accuracy of the dramatized version of Reeves’ life and death presented by Hollywoodland in his article, “The Flight of the Innocent.” The article appears in the Website compiled by Koza and Jim Nolt, The Adventures Continue.

2This story is also covered in the Biography Channel account of George Reeves’ life, which aired September 28, 2006.

3Clark finds his way back to his apartment, largely by instinct, and Jimmy Olsen is there waiting for him. Jimmy goes out for sandwiches, and just as he returns, Clark/Superman faints in the shower, falling through the glass shower stall. By the time Perry and Lois arrive, Jimmy has gotten Clark into bed, exclaiming to the others, “He must weigh a ton.” Lois then notes that Clark hasn’t been hurt by the broken glass, to which Jimmy replies, “He must be the luckiest guy who ever lived!” When Clark doesn’t know who Superman is, they recognize his amnesia is serious, and embark on a determined campaign to restore Clark’s memory, once again firm in their faith that Clark Kent is all he is.

4Rourke’s role is uncredited, for some reason, in the acting credits at the end of the show.

5In response to the popular comic book expose, The Seduction of the Innocent, and perhaps also reflecting the paranoia induced by the McCarthy hearings, the comic book industry introduced its own self-censorship mechanism, The Comics Code, which made it almost impossible for comics to feature any adult themes. The Adventures of Superman’s plots, from its third season to the show’s end in 1958, were largely interchangeable with the now exclusively juvenile material in the National Comics titles which featured Superman.
Works Cited


