

English I Supplementary Assignments 4

Superman's Secret Identity

Superman is one of the most well-known characters in today's popular culture. He was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1933 and debuted in comic books in 1938. As you read about Superman's identities, write down your thoughts on the following: Why are we so fascinated by people, like Superman, who can transform?

Background

[1] Clark Kent was the secret civilian identity of the fictional superhero Superman. In the beginning of the comic book series, from the late 1930s to the mid 1980s, Clark Kent was seen as a disguise for Superman. When Superman wanted to mix with ordinary civilians, he turned into Clark Kent to help him blend in. However, in 1986, a different artist envisioned Clark as the actual character and Superman as his disguise. Different people have different takes on the debate. In the comic books, Superman/Clark lived in DC Universe with other superheroes and villains. Superman's secret identity as Clark Kent was one of the DC Universe's greatest secrets. Only a few trusted people, such as Batman, were aware of it.

Clark and Superman

When Superman was disguised as Clark, he worked as a journalist at *The Daily Planet* newspaper, which allowed him to gather information about crimes in the city without giving away his true identity as a superhero. In order to make other people truly believe that he was a "normal" civilian, Clark adopted a largely passive and introverted personality. He displayed conservative mannerisms, a higher-pitched voice, and a slight slouch.

While the people in the city loved Superman, they assumed that he couldn't possibly have a secret identity because he didn't wear a mask, and thus very few people suspected that he and Clark could be the same person. Even Superman's girlfriend, Lois Lane, didn't know the full truth, although she sometimes suspected that Superman was actually Clark.

Clark's transformation into Superman became iconic in popular culture. When crises arose in the city, Clark quickly changed into Superman. Originally during his appearances in Action Comics, Clark would strip to his costume and stand revealed as Superman, often with the transformation having already been completed. But within a short time, head artist Joe Shuster and his team began depicting Clark ripping open his shirt to reveal the "S" insignia on his chest — an image that became so popular that other superheroes would later copy the same type of transformations.

[5] Clark was depicted as clumsy, shy, mild-mannered and frail. Superman, by contrast, was described as "faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound" with significant powers including super-strength and x-ray vision.

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following statements best describes the evolution of Superman and Clark Kent's respective identities?
 - A. Superman gradually became more powerful in the comics, affirming his true identity as Superman, with Clark Kent as his disguise.
 - B. Once Clark discovered his Kryptonian heritage, Superman identified mostly as an alien superhero, not the human Kent.
 - C. This difference between his real self and his costume has changed over time; Superman used to be his true identity, but today he is considered the disguise.

2. PART B: What does this evolution in how we understand the identities of Superman suggest about how society's view of identity changed over time?
3. What is the significance of Superman as a disguise, rather than as a regular identity?
- A. Superman as a disguise implies that Clark Kent, as his first identity, can transform into something greater than he is normally considered.
 - B. Superman as a disguise implies that even an average person can become heroic.
 - C. Superman as a disguise implies that people can lead double lives, both inner and outer.
 - D. All of the above.
4. How are the phrases "disguise" and "secret identity" used in the text?
- A. They are used interchangeably.
 - B. They are used to describe a hidden part of Clark/Superman's character.
 - C. "Disguise" implies a falsification or covering up, while "secret identity" suggests a true character which must remain hidden for issues of safety.
 - D. "Disguise" implies a more physical difference (such as with a costume), while "secret identity" suggests a difference in status and personal presentation.
5. What is unique about how Superman maintains his secret identity?
- A. He convincingly acts as a meek human reporter, essentially the opposite of Superman.
 - B. He doesn't wear a mask as Superman, convincing civilians that he doesn't have a secret identity at all.
 - C. His secret identity as Clark Kent looks vastly different than his Superman identity.
6. Why are we so fascinated by people like Superman, who can transform?
7. What makes a person who they are—is it how others see them, how they see themselves, or how they behave? Or, is it something else entirely?

Why Are We Obsessed With Superheroes?

Superheroes have long been a part of popular culture – whether beloved by comic nerds in the 1930s or bringing millions in to mainstream box offices today. What makes these characters so riveting? As you read the article, take note of the ways superheroes have changed throughout the years, and what these changes reveal about American society.

[1] For decades, we have found comfort, even hope, in superheroes. Now they are the kings (and queens) of the box office. What explains their enduring appeal?

Over the years, superheroes have morphed to fit our social needs of the time. Whether it's *Iron Man*, the biggest superhero star at the moment, or Superman, about to renew his brand with *Man of Steel* or *The Dark Knight*, struggling to keep it together in Gotham City, we need superheroes to tackle problems that are too tough for mere mortals to handle.

"We look at Batman as being the ultimate policeman and Superman as the ultimate fireman," said Dan DiDio, the co-publisher for DC Entertainment, the comic book company that owns both franchises. "Superman is there to help people and save people. He is not passing judgment. He is not trying to push an agenda. When there are people in need, he is going to be there to help, no matter who they are."

Superheroes are the Greek gods of secular modern life – otherworldly figures able to tackle the problems of this human world. Like the gods of Greek mythology, they can be flawed. In fact, some argue that we need them to be flawed. Part of their appeal is that we can relate to them, despite their being superhuman.

[5] Hans Zimmer, who scored the music for *The Dark Knight* trilogy and the new Superman movie, *Man of Steel*, said that while working on the Wagnerian theme music for Batman, the variation of a single note could signal hope, fear or vulnerability.”

“I’m playing some sort of musical chess,” Zimmer said, noting that as the final installment of the Christopher Nolan trilogy began when Batman was wounded.

The superheroes themselves have changed their metaphorical tunes ever so slightly over the years in response to the challenges we need them to tackle throughout history.

Superman first arrived from the planet Krypton in the 1930s during the gathering storm before World War II. In the cartoons of those early days, he fought Nazis and avenged the attack on Pearl Harbor.

In some ways, Superman was a Jewish superhero. Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, the two men who created Superman, were Jews, according to former DC Comics editor and comics teacher Jim Higgins, who teaches the Creating Comics class at the Los Angeles-based Meltdown Comics shop.

[10] He called Superman “a metaphor for the Jewish immigrant experience.”

“He’s a strange visitor from another place,” Higgins said. “He’s a stranger in a strange land. He has to adapt to being there. He has to learn all the ways to be an American, the same way they did. You come to America, it’s the land of opportunity, so you can become anything, even Superman.”

Later, Vietnam and Watergate made us more cynical. Straight-arrow do-gooders suddenly seemed dated. That may explain why the Batman of the 1960s wouldn’t dare take this superhero stuff too seriously. The ’60s TV show was pure camp, an ironic take on the genre.

For die-hard fans in those years, admitting you like men in tights became about as cool as attending a *Star Trek* convention.

“For a long time, comics had this air of disrespectability,” Higgins said.

[15] That changed on Sept. 11, 2001, with the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The world was once again divided into good and evil, but was still morally complicated, flawed and vulnerable.

Suddenly, superheroes came back in a big way.

Captain America, a Marvel Comics character that originally debuted in the 1940s shortly after Superman, made a reemergence in the 2000s and the 2011 film, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, took on the 9/11 attacks.

“To see Captain America standing at Ground Zero, sort of being, not like Batman – ‘Rah, we’ll get ‘em’ – no,” Higgins said. “It was like he was there helping get people out of the debris and all that stuff, and then it was sort of the mourning period with Captain America, and Captain America was sort of like, ‘Let’s hold it all together.’”

The 2008 economic collapse doubled down on the chaos and uncertainty so that by the time *The Dark Knight Rises* was released in 2012, the story told of a troubled billionaire in a bat costume battling a villain who might as well be from Occupy Wall Street.

[20] Who do you root for in that scenario? Times have changed not only in terms of the challenges the new Superman faces in

Man of Steel, set to premiere on June 14, but also his day job.

“Clark Kent is actually a blogger at this moment in time,” DC’s DiDio said. “He left the Daily Planet and is really going to establish himself in a way that makes him feel like he’s in touch with the world today. He’s a digital journalist.”

Batman has moved on, too. Adam West, who starred as the classic Batman of the ’60s, is now the voice of Mayor West on TV’s *Family Guy*. To most folks, however, he will always be the Caped Crusader.

In fact, he said he spent years trying to escape being a superhero.

[25] “Because I was typecast extraordinarily,” West said. “It was difficult, but after five years of doing dumb films, I decided that people love Batman, so why the hell shouldn’t I love Batman? Why be an ingrate? So I became rather fascinated by it and how to keep that particular culture thing going.”

West has found that superheroes never grow old. They just change with the times.

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best states one of the central ideas of the article?

- A. Superheroes are constantly evolving to fit in with the culture and politics of the time.
- B. It is the flaws behind each superhero that makes him or her so popular and relatable to the average American
- C. As technology advances, superheroes are becoming more in-tune with the digital age.
- D. Comic creators, like those behind Superman, will often use their own life experiences to inform their superhero’s characters.

2. PART B: Which of the following paragraphs provides support for the answer to Part A?

- A. Paragraph 4
- B. Paragraph 11
- C. Paragraph 18
- D. Paragraph 22

3. According to the article, how did Vietnam and Watergate shape American perception?

4. PART A: What does the word “ingrate” mean as it is used in paragraph 25?

- A. One who is looked up to; a hero
- B. A scoundrel or minor criminal
- C. A person whose cynicism makes them disliked by others
- D. One who does not show sufficient appreciation for something

5. PART B: Which phrase provides the best evidence for the answer to Part A?

- A. “spent years trying to escape being a superhero” (Paragraph 24)
- B. “after five years of doing dumb films” (Paragraph 25)
- C. “people love Batman, so why the hell shouldn’t I” (Paragraph 25)
- D. “I became rather fascinated by it” (Paragraph 25)

- 6. According to the article, why do we find comfort in superheroes? Use evidence from this text and your own experience in your answer.
- 7. The author suggests that we invent superheroes in order to help us cope with the realities of the time. What are other ways we use coping mechanisms? How does art play a role?

Cultural Common Ground Gets Harder To Come By

In an earlier time, Americans had fewer choices of what to watch or listen to on television. But now, in a world with infinite choices, some believe that finding common ground with one's neighbor is becoming more and more difficult. As you read the article below, take notes on the benefits and drawbacks of cultural fragmentation.

[1] We live in a world of seemingly infinite choices: Press the remote control and you can watch documentaries, cartoons, dramas and talent shows. Click the mouse and you can play video games, listen to music, watch movies or chat with friends. Technology has given us access to many different forms of expression, and entire communities have formed around them. Americans live in a culture of multiple cultures no longer broken down simply by ethnicity, religion or age.

So is there a name for this? Casey Rae-Hunter of the Future of Music Coalition says the academic word for it is *disintermediation*, "but since that's a mouthful, 'fractured culture' works just fine."

Alyssa Rosenberg, a blogger for *The Atlantic*, says "'fractured' implies something is broken [or] wounded." Rosenberg prefers "fragmentation" and says, "When it comes to popular culture, fragmentation is a wonderful thing."

When Mark Lopez of the Pew Hispanic Research Center hears the term "fractured culture," he thinks about young Latinos. "[They're] straddling two different cultures," Lopez says. "They're straddling the culture of their immigrant roots, but an American culture as well."

[5] American culture is sliced up in so many different ways that what's popular with one group can go virtually unnoticed by another. Univision, for example, is watched by millions of Latinos in the U.S., but millions of other Americans couldn't tell you what channel it's on.

What makes us laugh on TV isn't as broad-based as it once was. At its peak in the mid-1980s, *The Cosby Show* had 30 million viewers. Today's top-rated sitcom, *Two and a Half Men*, gets more like 15 million.

Since we're not all watching the same shows, "water-cooler moments" are harder to come by. Dan Schneider, a TV veteran and executive producer for Nickelodeon, says a show like *Modern Family* is a perfect example. "[It's] a really great comedy that's popular and new that's on the air right now," he says, "but if you go walk around the mall and say, 'Did you see last week's *Modern Family*?' how many people out of 10 are going to say, 'Yeah, I saw it?'" Schneider believes not that many. "The TV markets are so nichey that even a popular show isn't watched by most people you're going to run into." In other words, there is no one, dominant cultural conversation.

The same is true for the music industry. Today's best-selling album is selling a lot less than its counterpart of 10 years ago. Rae-Hunter of the Future of Music Coalition says this fragmentation has opened up the world for creators and consumers alike.

"The arrival of the Internet to some degree leveled the playing field, and that allowed a plethora of folks who otherwise would've had no shot of getting on commercial radio to be heard," says Rae-Hunter.

[10] iTunes, webcasts, Pandora: There are many more "pipes" delivering the goods than there used to be, Rae-Hunter says. "It's an amazing time to be a fan."

Fractured media is also turning the advertising industry upside down. Fay Ferguson is co-CEO of Burrell Communications, an ad agency that designs marketing campaigns aimed at African-American consumers. "It's ushering in a totally different era of communications," Ferguson says.

She says American culture has been fractured for a while. In fact, Burrell Communications was founded on "the principle that black people are not dark-skinned white people." She says the agency knew that African-Americans were a separate, viable

market. She says there have always been many American cultures. “But technology has been an enabler,” Ferguson says. “So now there’s a way to get to these smaller groups efficiently.”

Ferguson says targeted marketing is the name of the game now more than ever.

In such a fractured society, is America at risk of losing a common culture? Rosenberg of *The Atlantic* says maybe. But she also thinks it will make us appreciate the mass cultural events that do occur even more, like the end of the Harry Potter series or Michael Jackson’s death.

[15] Rosenberg cites Jackson’s death as one of the rare moments that affected millions of people: fans, former fans and those around the world who simply recognized his influence. “It was enormous because we were united in a way that we aren’t normally,” Rosenberg says. “It added significance to the event.”

If Jackson were coming of age now, could he become the King of Pop in such a fractured culture? Probably not. The once monolithic record companies have lost their power. The fractured media has made it easy for people to discover all kinds of new talent — and learn about artists from other cultures — just by changing the channel.

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Summarize the central ideas of the article on the lines below.
2. PART A: How does the comparison of “Two and a Half Men” to “The Cosby Show” in paragraph 6 contribute to the idea of cultural fragmentation?
 - A. It illustrates how divided our attention to different media has become as more options have become available.
 - B. It suggests that modern shows are more difficult for all ages to relate to due to more “adult” themes.
 - C. It reveals the lack of community felt among Americans as a result of having fewer cultural experiences in common.
 - D. It explains the reason behind the comedic sitcom’s decline, as cultural interests become more varied.
3. PART B: Which of the following paragraphs contributes to the idea of cultural fragmentation in the same way as the example in Part A?
 - A. Paragraph 4
 - B. Paragraph 8
 - C. Paragraph 11
 - D. Paragraph 15
4. PART A: What does the word “nichey” mean as it is used in paragraph 7?
 - A. Broadly appealing to a wide variety
 - B. Not relatable to most people
 - C. Given to popularity
 - D. Pertaining to particular segments of a wider market
5. PART B: Which detail from paragraph 7 provides the best clue to the meaning of the word “nichey”?
 - A. “we’re not all watching the same shows”
 - B. “really great comedy that’s popular and new”
 - C. “most people you’re going to run into”
 - D. “one, dominant cultural conversation”
6. Fay Ferguson argues that American culture has been fractured for a while. Do you agree or disagree with this assertion? Explain your answer.
7. Do you believe that it’s important to preserve “cultural common ground”? Explain your answer.

Anti-Social Networks? We're Just As Cliquesy Online

For some people, online social networking sites help them make new friends and keep in touch with old ones. For others, social networking sites may be reinforcing existing biases and limits new social experiences. As you read, identify the author's claims about the influence of social media.

[1] Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are helping people keep in touch with friends and family. But just how social are those networks? Are Internet communities simply “real-world” cliques moved online?

Dwayne Aikens uses Facebook to stay in touch with people he already knows — friends and family who, for the most part, share his political views. Aikens lives in Oakland, Calif., and runs a nonprofit that focuses on health and fitness.

“A lot of my friends are Democrats and liberals,” Aikens says — and his Facebook newsfeed reflects that. He doesn’t see many posts from conservatives, he admits.

Facebook’s software may be reinforcing his tendency to only see links from people he agrees with. When Facebook displays your “Top News,” it’s guessing what you’re interested in seeing based on how often you have clicked on a particular friend’s entries in the past.

[5] Most people don’t click on posts that they disagree with, explains Dean Eckles, a Stanford Ph.D. candidate studying social networks. And if you don’t interact with content — meaning you don’t click on it or comment on it — services like Facebook have no way of knowing that you are still interested in seeing it, Eckles says.

Facebook and Twitter can act as echo chambers where you interact primarily with others who have similar interests and politics. But both services can also connect you with people you don’t know — fans of the same sport, movie or TV show.

If you look at trending topics on Tuesday nights you might see hashtag — #TheGame. It’s a drama on BET about the lives of African-American pro-football players. Aikens watches and tweets *The Game*. He loves the show, he explains, because it looks beyond stereotypes of African-American athletes. That the show is still on the air today is thanks in part to its fans on Twitter. Back in 2009, when the CW network canceled *The Game*, angry tweets went out from the show’s loyal audience. Kyra Gaunt, a professor at the City University of New York’s Baruch College, says the Twitter conversation focused on the lack of good programming about African-American life — even on BET. Gaunt says BET heard the complaints and picked the show up.

“I think there’s a little bit of wishful, hopeful thinking,” Gaunt explains, “that something might turn a corner with the way that BET mediates images of black people. We don’t want a black version of MTV.”

According to a study by Edison Research, 25 percent of Twitter’s users are African-American. African-American teens and young adults are using cell phones to communicate with friends, says Craig Watkins, a communications professor at the University of Texas. Cell phones serve as the main entryway to the Internet for teens in low-income families without home computers or broadband.

[10] “That mobile device becomes a... reliable way to do the kinds of things that they want to do online,” Watkins says, whether that’s watching videos, updating Facebook or using Twitter.

But while many Facebook interactions remain private — visible only to friends and friends of friends — Twitter conversations are much more public. “It becomes about listening,” Gaunt says, ““Oh my God, I can listen in to what black people are talking about.””

Gaunt, who is African-American, says having conversations about race on Twitter has been a freeing experience. People feel they can be honest, she says.

“You can really have a conversation and not worry about getting punched in the nose,” Gaunt says. “There’s debate, there’s engagement, there’s learning.” Some of the friendships Gaunt has forged on Twitter have even spilled over into the “real” world. “I’m meeting strangers,” she says — two in the last two weeks, in fact. “I met them and I felt like, ‘This is my tribe.’”

Though Gaunt is using social networking tools to reach out to people she wouldn’t normally meet, she may be the exception to the rule. Many other users interacting online are content to stay within the confines of their familiar social networks — which may not look so different from their real-world social networks.

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text?
 - A. The majority of people actively seek out others with different or opposing views because they want to be challenged about their ideas.
 - B. Social media sites should be given more credit for the power they hold, especially in the entertainment industry.
 - C. Due to the design of many social media platforms, people are more likely to stay within their “real life” social cliques and interest circles while online.
 - D. Internet users should make a daily effort to reach out to people outside of social media and meet in person.
2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. “Most people don’t click on posts that they disagree with, explains Dean Eckles, a Stanford Ph.D. candidate studying social networks.” (Paragraph 5)
 - B. “Facebook and Twitter can act as echo chambers where you interact primarily with others who have similar interests and politics.” (Paragraph 6)
 - C. “That the show is still on the air today is thanks in part to its fans on Twitter.” (Paragraph 7)
3. What connection does the author draw between Facebook and one’s personal views in the article?
 - A. The author points out that Facebook allows people to explore new ideas and engage in discussions with strangers.
 - B. The author discusses how someone’s personal Facebook profile is shaped by their ability to “like” a post.
 - C. The author talks about how Facebook fails to actually grow one’s social circle because most people are “friends” with people whom they know in real life.
 - D. The author explains how Facebook caters towards a person’s interests and social circles, reinforcing their established views.
4. “Cell phones serve as the main entryway to the Internet for teens in low-income families without home computers or broadband.” How does this quote from paragraph 9 contribute to the development of ideas in the article?
 - A. Young people are more likely to communicate on their phones rather than talk to people face-to-face, which limits them from having “real world” experiences.
 - B. Mobile devices allow more people from different backgrounds, such as teens from low-income families, access to the Internet and the ability to join online discussions.
 - C. Teens from lower-income families are less likely to be spending time on the Internet and thus gain more valuable experiences with a wider range of people.
 - D. The Internet is not as accessible as we think it is and therefore should be free to everyone, regardless of income or status.
5. How does the author use the final paragraph of the text to refine her ideas?
6. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “Facebook and Twitter can act as echo chambers where you interact primarily with others who have similar interests and politics.” Why or why not?