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## Making and Breaking the Superhero Quotidian: How All-Star Superman Embodies and Revises the Everyday

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## Making and Breaking the Superhero Quotidian: How *All-Star Superman* Embodies and Revises the Everyday

By Frank Bramlett

### Abstract

- 1 This essay explores the idea of the everyday in *All-Star Superman* by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely. Scholars identify the everyday, or the quotidian, as including routine behaviors and ingrained assumptions (e.g., Borland and Sutton), and the construct of the quotidian as culture has been explored in comics (Bramlett). Depending on circumstances, characters may navigate the Metropolis cityscape or the Kent farm, take trips to the moon, explore the *Daily Planet* office building, and meet otherworldly heroes and villains. Even though much of the world of the superhero is extraordinary and wondrous to readers, the characters themselves nevertheless have a day-to-day lived experience that qualifies as their own quotidian. This essay demonstrates how Morrison and Quitely use the extraordinary, the remarkable, and the unexpected to highlight yet ultimately overturn the story of Superman's day-to-day practices and expectations.

keywords: superhero, quotidian, everyday, Grant Morrison, *All-Star Superman*

### Introduction

- 2 The world inside of a comic articulates a conception of the quotidian, a sense of the everyday, which contains all those elements in daily life that are so common and predictable that they may go unnoticed. In their study of gender and economics in Argentina, Elizabeth Borland and Barbara Sutton define *quotidian* as everyday practices and expectations (701). In essence, the quotidian is very similar to the unremarkable. Within most any comic, readers find that characters create a culture by engaging in a range of social practices, what Erving Goffman describes as *performance* (15). Many of these social practices comprise meaningful symbolic interaction, often in the sense of the everyday or the quotidian (Bramlett 2-3). These social practices, especially social interaction between characters, are what help readers recognize conventions in comics, for example, those with well-known characters like Superman and Lois Lane. This essay examines *All-Star Superman* for

evidence of the quotidian as it exists within the comic, drawing in part on notions of interaction and routine (Goffman).

- 3 Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the character of Superman first appeared in 1938 in *Action Comics*, and for decades on end has exerted extraordinary influence on comic books as well as other media like television and film. Some scholars claim that it could be "the most important comic book in the industry's history" (Duncan and Smith 32). Marc Singer explores a range of works by Morrison and how they vary between realistic and fantastic. He argues that Morrison's Superman resists the 'realistic' Superman of earlier time periods. While Singer acknowledges Morrison's "gestures towards quotidian realism," especially in early comics like *Captain Clyde*, a Glasgow-based superhero (25), his discussion does suggest that his use of the term 'realistic' signals something about audience expectations and the extent that Superman's lived experience aligns with a believable lived experience in the audience's reality.
- 4 Audience expectation is an important element to consider because publishers sometimes make decisions about the story or the characters based on readership. In his essay on war-time Superman, Ian Gordon argues that because "Superman's immense power could readily defeat all challenges in the real world, ... DC curtailed his field of action" around the time of World War II (2). In fact, the range of behaviors that Superman can engage in is limited not just because DC wanted to maintain a sense of his moral character but also because DC "adhered to the [U.S.] government's view of the war as democracy in action" (Gordon 3). However, consideration of readers' quotidian lies outside the scope of this essay, so the analysis will focus on the world within the comic and the social practices and identities found therein.
- 5 To establish what the quotidian means for Superman, this essay will look at conventions of superheroes (Coogan; Reynolds) as they are instantiated in *All-Star Superman*, e.g., mission, powers, and identity. Then, using Goffman's notion of performance, the essay will explore various episodes of *All-Star Superman* to demonstrate the tension between Superman's quotidian on the one hand and a sense of the extraordinary and traumatic on the other. Even though Morrison and Quitely cover a lot of familiar territory in their telling of the Superman story, the framework they create is Superman's journey to the sun to save the crew of a scientific expedition. As a result of fatal exposure to solar radiation, Superman begins to die. Thus, Superman is portrayed as experiencing an extensive, life-changing trauma. This trauma shakes his everyday experience to its core and causes him to revise his understanding of his day-to-day living, as well as his interactions with a host of friends, enemies, and loved ones.

## Defining the superhero quotidian

- 6 The quotidian of the superhero harmonizes with the very definition of superheroes (Reynolds; Coogan), and includes *mission*, *powers*, and *identity*, among other elements. Coogan points out that the superhero's mission is "prosocial and selfless, which means that his [or her] fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his [or her] own agenda" (77). Citing *Action Comics #1*, Coogan writes that "Superman's mission is to be a 'champion of the oppressed ... sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need'" (Siegel qtd. in Coogan 77). In the case of Superman, his day-to-day actions and behaviors involve helping others, to the point that he expects to be needed. While his mission may have remained more or less stable over time, Superman's powers have changed significantly over time. In *Action Comics #1*, "Superman displays super-strength, super-speed, super-leaping, and invulnerability" (Coogan 78). In the intervening decades, Superman's powers have increased in number and in intensity, and it seems to be the development and maturation of the continuity that

allows the increase (Reynolds 10). As more stories were told about Superman, as more details were built into the overarching narrative, readers encounter more strength and more speed but also additional abilities like flight and X-ray vision. Superman's *identity* is complex: he is an alien from another world; he grew up on a farm as Clark Kent and later became a newspaper reporter; and he performs his mission as a super-powered hero. What superheroes accomplish is seen as extraordinary and wondrous in the eyes of onlookers, the participants in the comic who observe the superhero's actions. But these same feats are often taken for granted and seen as ordinary by the superheroes themselves. They live their lives in two identities, their superhero guise and their alter-ego guise. In other words, they manage their mission, powers, and identities in such a way that it becomes a sort of routine, something that they expect from their lives on a regular basis.

- 7 In addition to mission, powers, and identity, however, we should add to this definition with the goal of understanding the ways that superheroes live their day-to-day lives. Bramlett argues that "[c]omics illustrate the quotidian to a high degree; in fact, the everydayness of social actions and the culture of any given comic exist in a reflexive relationship, each supporting the other and inextricably bound up in the presentation of characters, dialogues, settings and narratives" (2). In this sense, some comics may present quotidian realities that align very closely with the quotidian of readers while other comics may present worlds that differ in important ways from our own. Superhero comics seem to blend expectations and routines from the world of the reader with those that seem extraordinary, rare, or even alien. In the case of *All-Star Superman*, Morrison and Quitely draw on traditional elements of Superman stories, a choice which helps readers feel at home with what they're reading. But as Marc Singer notes, they do not "merely survey the most popular parts of the Superman franchise" (256). In fact, *All-Star Superman* "assembles an eclectic pastiche of every era of Superman history" but Singer adds that "Morrison contributes new characters like Leo Quintum and Zibarro, ensuring that the Superman story continues to grow in the twenty-first century" (Singer 258). It is the use of these traditional elements that helps establish and maintain the quotidian existence that Superman lives, and it is the introduction of new characters and novel situations that help readers see the revision of Superman's quotidian.
- 8 In the everyday, the unremarkable, Superman plays certain roles and engages in certain performances that occur with a high degree of regularity. Erving Goffman discusses the way that people present themselves in everyday life, using the metaphor of dramaturgy to theorize about identity and interaction, among other things. For Goffman, "a 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" in the context (15). He explains that a "pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or play through on other occasions may be called a 'part' or 'routine'" (16). Further, social relationships arise "[w]hen an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions" (Goffman 16). We can conclude that "social role" involves "one or more parts and that each of these parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or to an audience of the same persons" (16). These concepts help explain the continuity of the Superman franchise generally, but also, as will be shown below, they help illuminate the radical shift in the quotidian that Superman experiences in *All-Star Superman*.
- 9 In comics studies, a number of scholars have offered definitions of the superhero, positing characteristics that seem common in superhero comics. Richard Reynolds developed what he called a working definition of the superhero genre (Reynolds 16), constructing a list of seven motifs from the first ever superhero comic. Two of those seven principles are particularly germane here because they address the superhero and the everyday. One principle is that "[t]he extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings" (16). Goffman posits that participants carry out their performances in the "'front' ... which regularly functions in a general and

fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (22). Alternatively, the "front" is the conceptual/physical space where the performance occurs. Superman's front encompasses those locations and surroundings where he fights crime and saves people's lives, and Goffman locates those surroundings in the notion of *setting*:

involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it. A setting tends to stay put, geographically speaking, so that those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it. (22)

In his guise as a superhero, though, Superman's settings can be virtually any place where he is needed as an agent of justice or goodness: city streets, Lex Luthor's headquarters, the Underverse, among countless others. One exception to Reynold's motif that compares the extraordinary superhero and the mundane surroundings seems to be the Fortress of Solitude, as much of its contents are indeed otherworldly and extraordinary. Even the key to the door is "made of super-dense dwarf star material and weighs half a million tons" (Morrison 35). No matter what Superman wears or what his posture is, the Mirror of Truth shows him only one reflection: the 'true' Superman (44-45).

- 10 Another motif proposed by Reynolds makes a comment on the everyday of superhero comics: "the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego" (Reynolds 16). As a mild-mannered reporter, Clark Kent works hard to fit in with the humans around him, at times appearing less than dexterous in order to keep up this guise. As the alter-ego, Clark Kent can visit most (all?) the same settings that Superman can, but the guise (the social roles) are differentiated because of the expectations Superman has of himself (to maintain his secret identity) and expectations other characters in the story have (they don't expect Superman to write stories for the *Daily Planet* and they don't expect Clark Kent to save the world). In other words, the nature of the alter-ego is made clear: when Clark Kent leaves a certain setting, he might terminate his performance and step into the social role of Superman instead.
- 11 A second part of the *front* that Goffman identifies has to do not with the settings the participant occupies but instead involves the characteristics that function together to point to the identity of the participant:

As part of the personal front we may include: insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like. Some of these vehicles for conveying signs, such as racial characteristics, are relatively fixed and over a span of time do not vary for the individual from one situation or another. On the other hand, some of these sign vehicles are relatively mobile or transitory, such as facial expression, and can vary during a performance from one moment to the next. (Goffman 24)

This notion of front of course is very complex in regard to superheroes because of the clear and needful distinction between the superhero identity and the alter-ego. In *All-Star Superman*, Morrison and Quitely successfully manage this mixture of settings and personal front, portraying the complexities of how Superman's and Clark Kent's identities are constituted.

- 12 Many scholars of discourse, culture, and identity argue that social identities are "discursively constituted" (Butler 3), and this would certainly be true of characters within the world of a comic. To a certain degree, however, the performed quotidian of Clark Kent is artifice. In the notes at the

end of the collected volume of *All-Star Superman*, Morrison explains the motivation that he and Quitely had for rendering Clark the way they did:

We wanted his disguise to seem plausible. Generally, Clark Kent is shown as a tall, well-built man whose only real difference from Superman is his slicked-back hair and bottle top glasses. We decided Superman could release his posture so that his shoulders slumped, his spine curved and his belly stuck out. He could give himself pigeon toes. Rather than a cowardly, sickly *milquetoast*, we decided to make Clark too BIG for his environment. He's playing the part of a hulking farm boy who's used to wide open spaces and can't help bumping into things or tripping over people in the big city. We also decided that each time Clark did something clumsy, he would actually be saving someone's life. Even as Kent, Superman is never off-duty.

The renderings of Superman and Clark Kent, then, demonstrate Reynold's principle of the difference between superhero and alter-ego, and they also demonstrate Goffman's notion of personal front.

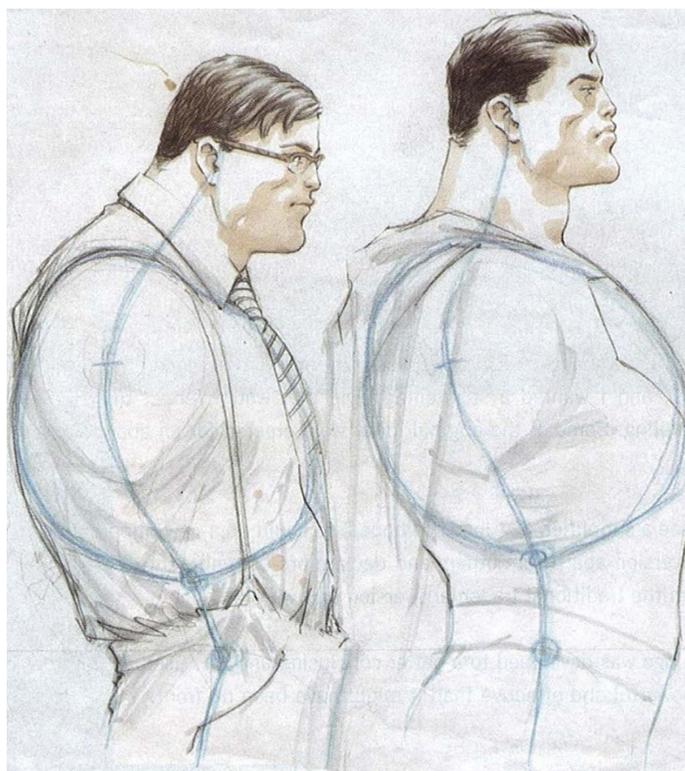


Figure 1 Frank Quitely's comparison sketch of Clark Kent and Superman.

- 13 In order to inhabit two different social roles, Superman has to differentiate his performance by using tools and other signs that set him apart from Clark Kent. This is an everyday task, a quotidian endeavor, and he succeeds nearly to perfection in *All-Star Superman*. However, in the scene when Clark enters the offices of the *Daily Planet* and ends up fighting Lex Luthor, Cat Grant notices how buff Clark looks (269). Later, when it is revealed that the man "dressed as Clark" is actually Superman, Cat Grant exclaims, "I knew it! Didn't I say he was way too buff to be Clark Kent? I give you the rear view!" (282). In a rare moment of subtle yet sexy humor, Superman acknowledges Cat's

compliment: "And thanks for noticing those extra hours on the stairmaster, Cat" (282).

- 14 This is not to say that all of Superman's and Clark Kent's actions and beliefs are entirely quotidian. One example to consider takes place in episodes seven and eight, when Superman has to engage with Bizarro World and the Underverse. Superman finds himself trapped on Bizarro World and is unable to escape because it begins to move into the Underverse, and he loses his powers because the light from the sun recedes "into the red end of the spectrum" and the "gravitational pull" increases (172). In some sense, the situation for Superman could be considered unremarkable because he very often finds himself at risk of losing his powers or at risk of being hurt or trapped. This is part of *All-Star Superman* but also of the overall Superman continuity as well: Superman faces challenges and has to overcome them.
- 15 In order to escape from Bizarro World, Superman has to enlist the help of the other Bizarro creatures who speak a kind of "backwards" English, meaning that they say the "opposite" of what they mean (see Figure 2). There is one exception to this, a creature who calls himself Zibarro: he feels isolated on Bizarro World because he is the only one who speaks "regular" English. One characteristic of note is that all the speech balloons produced by Bizarro creatures are black with white font, regardless of whether they speak "regular" or "opposite" English.

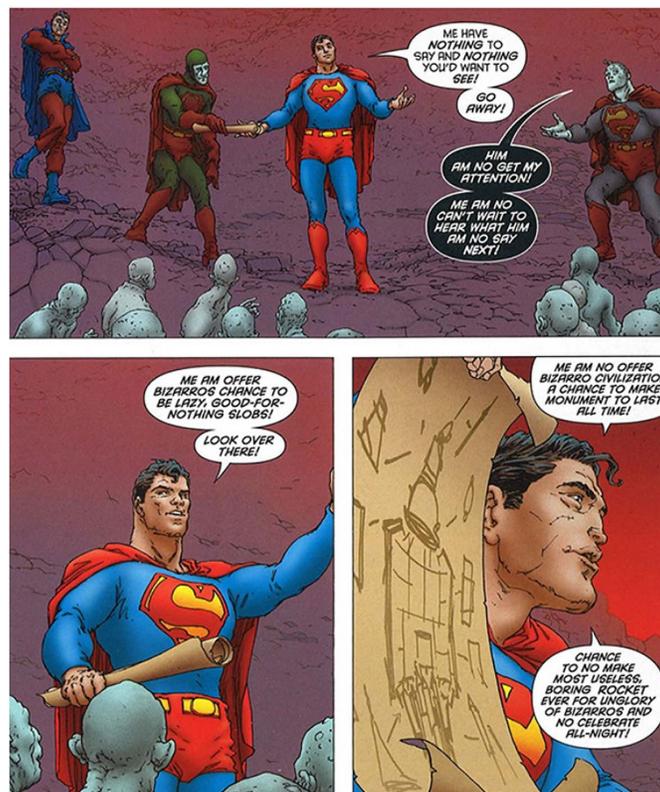


Figure 2 Superman learns to speak Bizarro English.

- 16 Superman tries to convince the Bizarro creatures to help him build a rocket, which will take him back to Earth. However, because he uses "incorrect" English, he cannot make himself understood. After some time, he realizes that he has to speak "opposite" English. Figure 2 shows Superman's successful communication with the Bizarro creatures, and they are convinced to help (186). At the

end of the episode, when Superman is too weak to move under his own power, he taunts Super-Bizarro using "opposite" English, making him so upset that he picks up the rocket Superman is tied to and throws it off the planet. On this trajectory, it rises out of the Underverse and back toward Earth, the yellow sun giving Superman his powers back. Whether learning to speak a different kind of English can be considered quotidian, this is not the only situation in which Superman encounters "different" English. In *All-Star Superman* Episode 10, Superman opens a time capsule to discover a communication device with a recorded message, spoken in English from the 24th century. He decodes the message to discover that Solaris is on its way to do battle with Superman.

- 17 To this point, the essay has discussed what it means for Superman to live a quotidian existence. It has explored definitions of the superhero and has extended this definition toward incorporating notions of social practice, both daily routines and social interaction. The second half of the essay broaches one of the key narrative elements of *All-Star Superman*: that his impending death brings about dramatic change in the way he lives his daily life and what that means for accomplishing the extraordinary feat of saving the human race after he dies.

## Revising the superhero quotidian

- 18 As defined earlier, the notion of the quotidian means the everyday, the unremarkable; the quotidian refers to everyday routines and expectations (Borland and Sutton 701). In the general *Superman* continuity, scripts contain stories in which the characters do what they usually do: Lois Lane and/or Jimmy Olsen get into some kind of trouble, and Superman gets them out of trouble. Lex Luthor creates trouble, and Superman has to undo it. In other words, these performers play their parts and engage in social interaction to the extent that they are commonplace and routine. But Morrison and Quitely go a step further than this: they also create a tension between the everyday routines and expectations that *Superman* stories share (this is the *Superman* continuity) and the extraordinary circumstances and feats we encounter within their story (these are the creative or unique elements of *All-Star Superman*).
- 19 With life being what it is, though, sometimes our day-to-day lived experience shifts because of a change in circumstances. This change could be making an important new friend; starting a new hobby; graduating from college and getting a job; changing jobs; moving to a new city; or getting married. What sets *All-Star Superman* apart is that it calls attention to Superman's quotidian existence by radically changing Superman's circumstances. After a highly condensed one-page Superman origin story told in four panels (7), Morrison begins the narrative with a scientist named Leo Quintum, who has journeyed with his crew to "steal fire from the sun" (21). But Quintum's scientific quest is doomed from the start because Lex Luthor sabotages it. Superman flies to the sun and rescues the crew, but his body absorbs so much solar energy that the cells in his body begin dying. Quintum explains to Superman that "Apoptosis has begun. Cell death. There can be only one outcome, even for you" (20). Essentially, Lex Luthor has succeeded in killing Superman with the very source of Superman's powers (21). When Superman finds out that he is dying, he realizes that his everyday existence has to change; in other words, his daily life—his quotidian—will shift because he knows the end of his life is coming. Superman's day-to-day living, his everyday life begins to shift as soon as he discovers his mortal wound. The expectations and routine practices of his quotidian experience shift to accommodate what Luthor did to kill him.
- 20 Abrupt changes in the quotidian have been traced by sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, and scholars in culture studies. In their study of gender and economics in Argentina, Borland and Sutton explore the economic crisis that spurred women into politics:

Activism became a new quotidian that shaped the lives of women ... and transformed women's experiences and perspectives about politics, gender relations, and themselves more generally. The [Argentine economic] crisis signifies a moment of both rupture and continuity, as many women drew on previous social frameworks (e.g., motherhood, activist experiences) while creating new ones, including new visions of women's roles in society. (702)

Borland and Sutton call this change "quotidian disruption," explaining that when it takes place, "both natural attitude and routine practices become problematic and confusing, and this is an impetus for mobilization" (703). Similarly, Ted Gornelios identifies an extreme form of change in the everyday and in his study ties it to trauma: "Trauma theory can allow us to understand those sets of discourses [resulting from instability] as maps guiding us toward possible locations of cultural agency and change" (524). In the context of death and dying, Yoshiko Matsumoto argues that people who engage in telling stories about a psychologically intense experience can soften the intensity by switching into a quotidian frame, "which includes and enhances those aspects of a scene that are reminiscent of everyday life and excludes aspects that signal heightened psychological intensity" (596).

- 21 Notions of trauma and shifts in the quotidian have been addressed in comics studies. Brandy Ball Blake explores the representation of trauma in *Watchmen*, exploring the interplay of the verbal and the visual and the expression of trauma in the "growing fear, the helplessness, and the isolation that mankind can experience during and after a traumatic event." Nina Mickwitz critiques media representations of transitions between the everyday and disaster, especially "implications of media and governmental responses to [Hurricane] Katrina" as represented in Josh Neufeld's *AD New Orleans: After the Deluge* (Mickwitz 87). Bramlett analyzes *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan to demonstrate that even though we often think of war as unusual or rare, people who live in the circumstance of war adjust their sense of expectation as well as their daily routines and behaviors. In other words, "[i]n the face of extraordinary change, actors adjust, and their day-to-day practices accommodate the new and bring about a different quotidian" (Bramlett 12).
- 22 Much of *All-Star Superman* relies on abrupt change to carry the story forward. As a result of Superman's exposure to solar radiation, some of the powers that he exhibits are new or are enhancements of powers he already has. In Episode 1, he protects Quintum's crew "by extending his own bioelectric field" (19). In laboratory tests, Quintum measures Superman's strength and estimates that it has at least tripled (20). In Episode 2, he discovers that he is immune to green kryptonite when Lois Lane shoots him with the kryptonite laser (50). Likewise in Episode 2, Superman says his strength was tripled but that his curiosity, imagination, and creativity have also been tripled, the combination of which Lois Lane refers to as his "super-intellect" (44). As evidence of his expanded mental powers, Superman explains to Lois Lane that he learned to sew and creates "traditional Kryptonian formal wear from the Fourth Age" (42). He also prepares a meal for Lois Lane and explains that "the menu is the actual one ... from the Titanic" (42). It is also suggested that Superman's vision improves because he reads his own DNA code, comprising six billion letters (51). In any case, he applies himself to making a birthday gift for Lois Lane, which includes a liquid to give her superpowers for 24 hours as well as a costume made from light, indestructible thread (51). How should Superman feel to learn that he has new superpowers and that at least some of his previous abilities have been improved dramatically? His day-to-day existence, his quotidian experience of his superpowers has shifted in *All-Star Superman*.
- 23 To get at the effects that Superman's trauma has on his quotidian experience, we will borrow once more from Goffman's dramaturgy metaphor. Earlier in this essay, the notion of the "front" was used to articulate the setting and the identity that is essential for understanding Superman, both the

character and the continuity. In contrast to the front, Goffman identifies back region or the "backstage":

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where ... the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Here stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters. ... Here the performer can relax: he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character." (111-112)

For Superman, there are two identities in play: the superhero and the alter-ego. Both of these identities operate in a front region and also in a back region. Because of the traumatic trip to the sun, Superman maintains his normal quotidian practice: he interacts with Lex Luthor, he saves the world from an attack by the Bizarro World, he saves Lois Lane, and he prevents the suicide of a young girl named Regan. However, Superman's quotidian now shifts because the tasks that he has to complete increase in number and complexity. His backstage, where he can drop his front and step out of character, is occupied by complications of his impending death.

- 24 Before he dies, Superman must complete "twelve legendary super challenges" (227): for example, answer the unanswerable question; overcome the tyrant sun, Solaris; and create life. Some of these twelve labors are a result of the trauma he suffers. The reason he creates life is to see what kind of world humans would live in if there were no Superman (230). This shift in his quotidian, then, this attempt to save planet Earth in the long run, arises because Superman knows his death approaches. Leading up to Episode 10, Superman had completed seven of the twelve challenges. Readers get a glimpse of his state of mind through his internal monologue as he writes his will:

There's so little time left now. The end is getting closer and there are still so many things I've yet to achieve. The time-traveler Samson told me I'd complete twelve legendary super challenges before my death. ... Each challenge, of course, brings me closer to my death. And by my reckoning I've accomplished seven so far. No time to lose. (227)

Superman identifies his final mission: fighting the tyrant sun, Solaris, and repairing the damage it did to the sun (257).

- 25 Within the context of the 12 challenges, it is important to remember that Superman's overarching mission is even more difficult. He wishes to find a way to continue helping the people of Earth even after he has gone. In this way, his goal meshes perfectly with that of Leo Quintum, who dedicates himself to "building a new race of superhumans in case ... anything ever happened to" Superman (22). The fatal dose of solar radiation has given Superman a new impetus, a new outlook on his life, and has initiated this quotidian disruption. What we find in *All-Star Superman* is that the quotidian existence that Superman expects has shifted, has evolved to accommodate a new focus that even Superman finds extraordinary and, quite possibly, terrifying.
- 26 Of all the front region and back region behaviors that Superman engages in, writing his will may be the most poignant. Although some characters know that he is dying (Leo Quintum, and later, Lois Lane), Superman labors to complete his last will and testament alone. The work is so intensive that he begins to perspire, with drops of sweat pouring off his brow, and he gazes intently at his finger tips, watching thousands of cells die each second (227). (See figure 3.) He also perspires from exertion when he is trapped in Bizarro World (187). Of course the exertion in Bizarro world is physical, yet the work of writing his will is emotional, psychological.

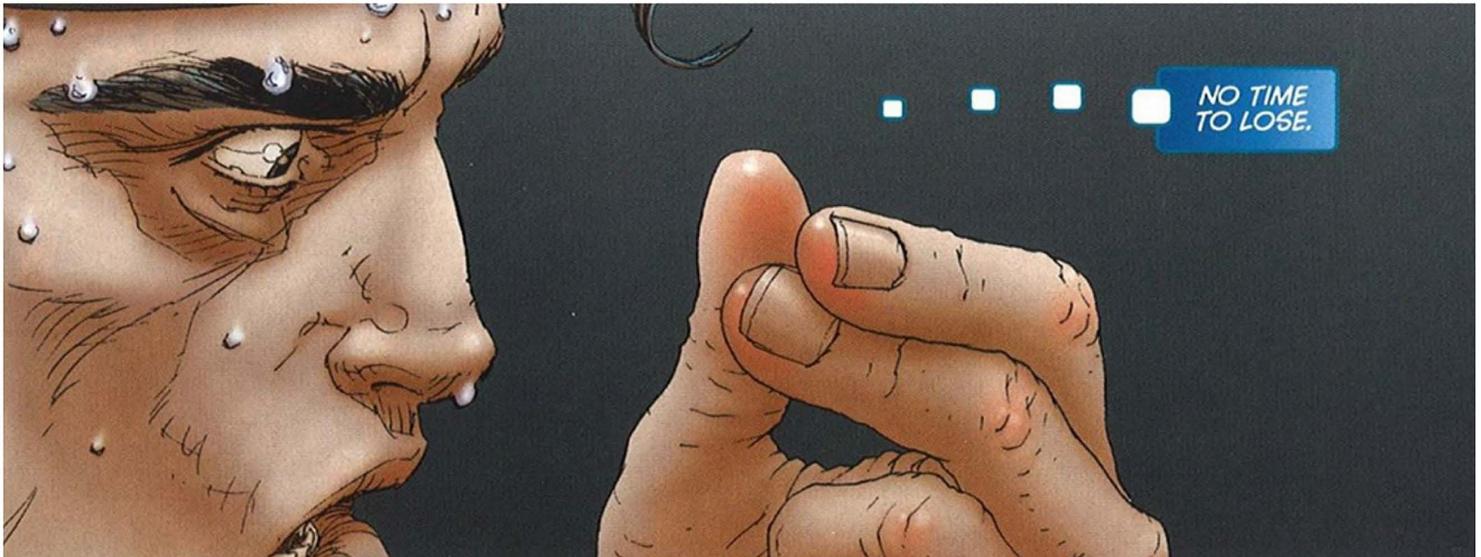


Figure 3 Superman feels an intense urgency to complete his work.

27 Although there are many social practices that shed light on Superman's revised quotidian, we can look to one symbol in particular which represents this shift. Coogan goes into some detail about the role of primary colors in Superman's costume (80-81). But Morrison complicates this formula with changes to the costume. Superman taught himself to sew, and he made traditional Kryptonian clothing for himself. He also made a suit for Lois Lane for her day as Superwoman. Importantly, Superman parlays his sewing ability into a strategy for defeating Solaris, explaining it during their fight: "This solarsuit I made will protect me from red sun radiation long enough to even the odds" (260). The solarsuit is a very light-colored suit with a bright yellow Sol emblazoned on the chest and a dark red letter S superimposed on it. In this case, the costume functions as a visual symbol of Superman's superhero status but it also functions as protective armor, allowing Superman time to win the fight against Solaris. As part of his quotidian existence, Superman wears the costume that readers are most familiar with. However, because his quotidian existence has shifted and he now has to figure out a way to beat Solaris, he adapts to his new reality by temporarily wearing a different costume, and this new reality is symbolized by the solarsuit. After the fight with Solaris, Superman again dons Clark Kent's business suit and later his traditional Superman costume. The final shift into a new quotidian is symbolized at the end of Superman's fight with Lex Luthor: Superman has been dragged across the pavement by his red cape. When Luthor lets go of the cape, Superman pulls it off and finishes the fight without it. After a short speech, Superman says goodbye to Lois Lane and flies to the sun.

28 In the epilogue to his book on super heroes, Reynolds relates the early 1990s battle between Doomsday and Superman, describing the fight and even Superman's "classic 'extra effort' speech" as normal:

The superhero steels himself to make the extra effort that goes beyond what can normally be achieved. Superman even adduces totems of normality as the motivation for his battle: Lois, Jimmy, Metropolis. Both Superman and Doomsday unleash one final, explosive blow, and we turn the page expecting to see Superman tested to the very limit of his strength and emerging once again triumphant ... except that the end of this battle is different. ... [T]urning over the back flap of the comic to reach the final, hidden panel, we see Superman collapsed and clearly dead. (120)

Reynolds relies on expectations here for his reading: readers expect certain events and characters and outcomes in superhero narratives. But he also relies on Superman's expectations, mentioning those elements that Superman expects and finds normal: Lois, Jimmy, and Metropolis. In other words, even Superman has a normal, day-to-day lived experience that he not only expects but relies on. Although Reynolds does not use the concept of the quotidian in his epilogue, he communicates the vision quite convincingly.

- 29 How different that story is from *All-Star Superman*. During his final battle with Lex Luthor, Superman removes his red cape and finishes the fight without it. After a short speech, Superman says goodbye to Lois Lane and flies to the sun. The final image of Superman is a single panel that takes up an entire page (292). He stands on a kind of transparent platform, bathed in yellow light, presumably at the heart of Sol, the sun of our solar system. He holds a long pole which seems to be wedged into a mechanical device of some kind, like a cog in a machine. Although there are no motion lines (Potsch and Williams 34), there is a clear suggestion of movement because of Superman's posture. He grasps the pole with outstretched arms, and he leans back, with his left leg out in front of him and his right leg back behind him, indicating that he is using a great amount of force to try to pull the pole backward and, in turn, ostensibly move a part of the machinery that he has constructed in the heart of the sun. The lack of motion lines also suggest, however, that this may be a "still" image, one that readers should interpret as a outside of time and as representing a long-term or perhaps eternal state for the Man of Steel.

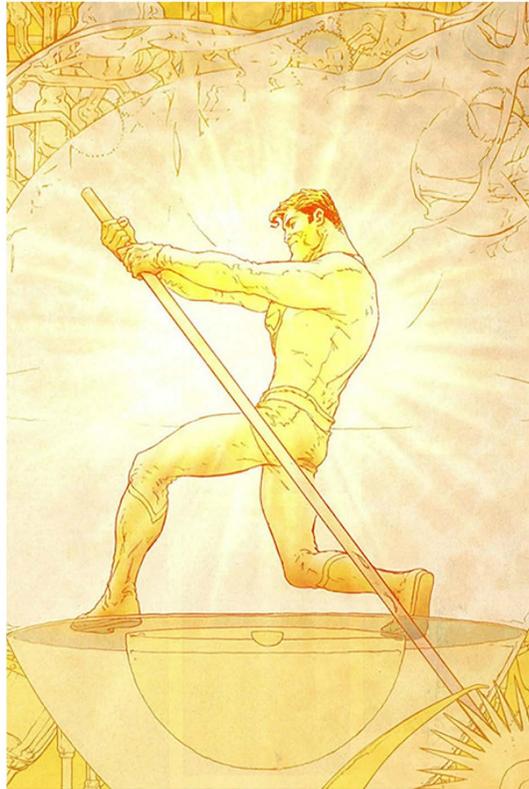


Figure 4 Superman working inside the sun.

- 30 This image, if it is taken to be representative of a year in Superman's life, evinces an extraordinarily radical shift in the quotidian. Superman's everyday life—his constant attention to Metropolis, his regular and predictable rescue of Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, and countless others, and his battles with villains like Lex Luthor, Bizarro Superman, and Solaris—has evaporated in the context of a dying star. His day-to-day experience, his lived quotidian, has been translated because Lex Luthor succeeded in creating a world without a Superman.
- 31 In the final scenes of episode 12 of *All-Star Superman*, Jimmy Olsen and Lois Lane talk about Superman, and readers learn that "it's been a whole year since he disappeared" (291). In other words, Superman has been living in the sun for a year, working on some sort of heart to keep the sun alive, which in turn keeps the planet Earth alive and keeps all the people on it warm and fed. Lois denies that Superman is dead, claiming that "he's up there, building an artificial heart to keep the sun alive," and that "he'll be back when he's done" (291). The expression on Jimmy's face suggests his doubt, but the ambiguity of the ending is strong.

## Conclusion

- 32 In their discussion of the quotidian, Borland and Sutton note that "some responses to disruption may be conservative attempts to reestablish the preexisting status quo" (704). While Superman may have made some attempt at keeping the status quo, he clearly planned for the end of his life and made significant changes to his daily life to achieve those goals. Grant Morrison presents a world-view of superheroes in general and Superman specifically which allows for a deep and meaningful

understanding of how a superhero can live out a daily grind of saving people and fighting injustice, but also how that same superhero can experience a shift, a translation of a quotidian existence into something alien and extraordinary. If Coogan is right, that Superman is a super man who represents the best achievements of humanity (79), then *All-Star Superman* both reinforces that lesson and makes it even more profound. After he experiences a life-altering traumatic event and finds out that he is dying, Superman chooses not to despair but to redouble his efforts to achieve his mission. His everyday experience—his regular actions and behaviors as well as his beliefs and expectations—is revised when he gains new superpowers and he is able to achieve far more than ever before. Several times in the episodes, readers encounter the phrase "There's always a way." Superman repeats it several times, and it becomes a kind of mantra, both a lesson for the people whom he serves as well as a reminder for Superman himself.

## Acknowledgements

- 33 Much of the research for this essay was conducted while I was a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University (2012-2014), and I presented some preliminary ideas at the *Joint Conference on Comics, Graphic Novels, and Bande Dessinée*, held June 2013 at the University of Glasgow. I would especially like to thank Adnan Mahmutovic and Francesco-Alessio Ursini for valuable comments on earlier drafts, though any remaining errors are mine. Lastly, I'd like to thank Darin Jensen, who put *All-Star Superman* on my reading list to begin with.

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