



## The Superman Syndrome

### Chapter Four: The Meanings of Superman

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“There are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

--*Shakespeare's Hamlet*

“...traces left by our childhood...manifest themselves in the very fabric of human society...”

--*Alice Miller, Paths of Life*

For the sake of our inquiry, it's important to remember we're examining the Superman myth as widely known on the broad scale, above the myriad twists and turns the story has taken in sixty years of DC Comics or in the Lois and Clark TV series. When we discuss specific story material, we'll be referring to Superman, the Movie, from 1978 and its first sequel, Superman II from 1980, unless otherwise noted. There's good reason for this approach. First, these films were viewed by tens of millions of people of all ages in our country, as well as around the world—many of whom either never read a Superman comic book or hadn't read one in years. The breadth of the impact of these films is confirmed by the fact that they are still among current inventory at Blockbuster Video, our largest single purveyor of video rentals. In fact, the complete series of four is still actively being rented at this writing more than a dozen years after the release of IV. Second, film is the most powerful vehicle of our time for delivering mythic material into the public consciousness. The very size of the images on the screen puts us in the highly receptive state of mind characteristic of childhood. Third, the first two films represent a synthesis of the Superman biography, persona and adventures true to the spirit of the first few decades of his life in DC Comics. Raving fans certainly have the right to quibble but I doubt they will as they read more. In any case, that's the basis on which we're going to proceed.

#### Origins

The civilization of planet Krypton is dominated by elaborate crystal architecture—not a Silicon Valley, but an entire silicon world. For all its obvious ingenuity, it feels about as sterile as a hospital delivery room, an apparent metaphor for the ice-cold brilliance of the fact-and-figure minds that populate its culture. Though the darkest moment in the history of Krypton approaches, the Council of Five (appropriately reminiscent of the Council of Five of Ancient Greek Sparta) is busy with another matter in the Hall of Wisdom. The leaders of Krypton, despite their apparent genius, have been unable to create a society free of villainous individuals. The treacherous General Zod has barely been thwarted in his attempt to establish a new world order. He and his evil lieutenants are prosecuted by the highly respected citizen scientist, Jor-El. They are convicted and compressed into a kind of giant mirror or sheet of glass and cast out into space, prisoners of what is referred to as “The Phantom Zone.” We soon learn of another shortcoming of Krypton's elders. Jor-El has determined the planet is about to suffer a catastrophic series of earthquakes resulting in its complete destruction. He urges the Council to evacuate the entire population to another location in space. The Five, in a display of intellectual arrogance surpassing even that of the builders of the Titanic, reject his conclusions and forbid him to leave the planet himself or publish his opinion for fear of spreading panic.

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So, here we are only passing the threshold of our tale and we encounter some interesting messages concerning the deficiencies in the Kryptonian version of a techno-utopian Information Age. We might call its people raging materialists, in the sense that they are quite brilliant at mastering the visible, empirical world but not at perceiving and responding to trouble that is out of immediate sight, at the core of the planet, or at the core of their society or, even more to the point, "at the heart of the matter," as the often used phrase goes. They have the scientific knowledge to save their population by moving it to another planet, but not the vision. They also clearly cannot stop engendering evil-doers such as General Zod. Later, we'll also learn (in Superman II) they don't build very effective prisons, since Zod and his henchmen eventually escape from The Phantom Zone. What's more, having put their stock in intellect, the Kryptonians are unable to acknowledge its limitations. Their superiority complex blinds them to impending disaster and the possibility of saving their population of brainy billions. They seem exceptional in nearly all sciences save the science of the human soul. Sounds a lot like our world today. Fortunately, Jor-El has been savvy enough to avoid making any promises to the Five concerning his only child, Kal-El. The boy is a mere babe in his mother Lara's arms, but his parents will save him by sending him in a small rocket across the vastness of space to planet Earth. As they prepare him for the journey, Lara expresses her concerns to Jor-El. Their son is going to a planet whose inhabitants are "thousands of years" behind Krypton. He will stand out dangerously by dint of his ability to defy gravity. He'll be an oddity, isolated and alone. Jor-El assures her that Kal-El will have the advantage of looking like humans but possessing powers far beyond theirs. Ironically, and somewhat poignantly, Jor-El is not referring to his son's intellectual superiority—a quality that at the moment seems to be the very cause of his people's impending demise. No, Kal-El will not manifest on Earth as a great scientist or political leader. He will be "virtually invulnerable" on the physical level. What's more, he will not be alone, at least not in his father's mind. Turning to his baby boy, Jor-El sighs and tells him, "...we will never leave you, even in the face of our deaths. The richness of our lives shall be yours...you will carry me inside you all the days of your life. You will make my strength your own, see my life through your eyes as your life will be seen through mine. The son becomes the father and the father the son."

If we had any lingering reserve of doubt, the dialogue between Jor-El and Lara fully affirms we are, indeed, being told a human story, though surface details may continue to indicate the contrary. Among other things, we see that long before a book was written about it, men were from Mars and women from Venus— even if they both happened to be living on Krypton. Like so many millions of mothers, Lara speaks from the heart, fearing her son will be a freak, an oddity who will never know the joy of belonging. Jor-El, like so many millions of fathers, places his faith in material powers—physical strength and prowess. He also speaks from the head, showing far too much willingness to believe that the holographic version of himself he has built into the space ship's communication crystals will be an adequate replacement for his son's need for a real father. We can forgive him his own hubris and high-tech romantic delusion, given the gravity of the situation. But we shouldn't fail to notice that a lot of Information Age fathers in our country today who do not face such dire circumstances seem all too willing to substitute TV monitors and other ingenious gizmos for their actual presence. But, then, the Sony Play Station has three hundred games. What father can play three hundred games?

Back to the story. Baby Kal-El's rocket emerges from the exploding homeland. What is the meaning of this explosion? Is it a giant metaphor for the trauma of birth? Quite possibly. If this seems a stretch, remember the

gazing down at us in the opening scene from great high-slung screens. They are evocative of god-doctors hovering over us, stimulating the feeling of being small and at the mercy of great forces—perhaps the seminal sensation of nearly every new born child in our society. If the idea of the birth trauma is a bit much for you, you'd be harder pressed to avoid the general conclusion that we're examining a myth about those individuals whose early life experience is in some way characterized by cataclysm. Kal-El endures not only the loss of his obviously devoted parents. His culture and entire planet are utterly annihilated. This level of trauma is clearly sufficient in itself to engender a personality given to toughing it out by suppressing the capacity to feel. By the same token, a person emerging from such origins might well have aspirations to immortality and invulnerability.

Why be human if it means experiencing so much loss at such a tender age? Since no one on our planet has literally experienced the deprivation presented in the myth—the exploding planet part, specifically—what is the meaning here? The magnitude of the portrayal is designed to put the issue of our early vulnerability in our faces. It commands us, “Don't turn away. Don't deny. Look long and hard.” This forceful insistence is necessary for most of us. Our earliest wounds are exactly those we're most likely to deny out of hand, and quite understandably. When we are still in a kind of pre-operational system—pre-conceptual, pre-verbal, even pre-mobile—we have no way to “make sense” of what's happening to us because we have no “senses” in the adult meaning of the word—no ideas or explanations or contexting for what's occurring. The very big rub is that in this pristine state, we do have extraordinary physical and feeling senses. There is no distinction between the two. As infants, anything that negatively impacts our physical needs will simultaneously produce an experience of fear, frustration, helplessness, isolation or a variation on these “pre-emotional” themes. Our inherent fragility functions as a highly responsive early warning system to our caregivers whenever our needs for safety, nurturance and love are not being met. Why “highly responsive?” Remember, Nature/God has tried to err on the side of making sure we get what we need. A pretty clever design, given our total dependence during this time.

With one exception. There is a very real possibility that our caregivers, for whatever reason, will not act in a timely manner. An infant has few options. Its extraordinary vulnerability greatly raises the odds of its being easily overwhelmed by unanswered need to the point where consciousness, such as it exists in these first weeks and months of life, fragments and tucks away the agony in that back pocket of the brain, the unconscious.

And so begins the accumulation of the nightmare within us, for along with many potential delights, life offers us an astounding catalogue of possible raw deals during the tender years from conception to seven. Here's a quick take on the most obvious, any one of which could happen today and readily qualify as the kind of experience symbolically referred to by the story of Kal-El's explosive escape from Krypton.



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#### Life's Raw Deals: The Early Years

1. An inhospitable womb. That is to say, a mother who is undernourished, or not very physically fit, who smokes, drinks, does coke, crack, caffeine, is abused or neglected or under-supported or is just plain immature...in other words, a person experiencing some form of violation of her own need for safety, nurturance and love.
2. A difficult birth—too long, too hard, too rough, too swift, too soon, too loud, too bright, too hot, too cold, weeks in an incubator with tubes in the nose.
3. Inattentive parents.
4. Ill-equipped parents.
5. Two stressed-out parents.
6. One stressed-out parent.
7. No stressed-out parents.
8. Over anxious, uncertain, permissive parent(s).
9. Overly controlling parent(s)—the subtle, incessant Chinese water torture directing us into this or that endeavor at the expense of our hearts.
10. Downright abusive parent(s) who mishandle, hit, yell or molest.
11. Great parents going through a terribly rough time.
12. The full range of deprivations due to poverty.
13. The horrors of political, religious or ethnic upheaval, terror and war.
14. The suffering wrought by natural disasters—everything from earthquakes to hurricanes, from famines to floods.
15. Trauma due to a serious accident or disease.
16. Add whatever I've left out, your version of Shakespeare's "thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to."



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It's in the catastrophic origins of Kal-El's life that we discover why kryptonite will be the one substance to haunt his adult years. Kryptonite is a radioactive chunk of the home planet hurled through space to eventually enter Earth's atmosphere as a meteorite. It is the dark totem of early destruction, an unwelcome reminder of the holocaust of his origins—Freud's return of the repressed. It is the embodiment of a memory of staggering emotional force. No wonder it renders him helpless.

Unfortunately, baby Kal-El's travail does not end with the launch of his space ship. We must remember he is completely alone in this capsule for the next few years, crossing the universe towards his new home. Again, a stark symbol of seemingly endless solitude. Of course, he has a nifty entertainment center complete with a holographic representation of his father—an highly advanced Gameboy. But babies need to be touched, cuddled, bussed on the belly, nursed at the breast, tossed in the air, carried on the hips and shoulders. They need to gaze into the live adoring eyes of their parents, crawl and toddle their way to ever-wider explorations under their loving protection. Safety, nurturance, love. What they certainly do not need is a major data dump, but that's exactly what Kal-El gets.

As he travels towards Earth, Holographic Dad tells him, "Embedded in the crystals before you is the total accumulation of all literature and scientific fact of dozens of other worlds spanning the twenty-eight known galaxies." Oh, what fun, daddy! More data! More data! Please, more data! It shouldn't surprise us that Jor-El has loaded the capsule's communication module with such a plethora of facts. Being a scientist, information is his book and trade. What is the meaning of this? Is it a presaging of the full intensity to come as the Information Age comes into dominance? Is that what Kryptonian life symbolizes?

Seems credible enough. The American faith in inventive and scientific skills has been with us since the inception of the nation. Thomas Jefferson's ingenuity across a spectrum of activities is an excellent example of this. We are also being served up a metaphor for one of our most popular strategies of denial and detachment. We popularly call this "escaping into your head." It entails an intense engagement of the ideational areas of the brain for the purpose of avoiding difficult feelings—in this case, the overwhelming emotional and physical deprivation of isolation. Jor-El's intergalactic schooling of his son invites us to view the Superman myth from an even higher altitude. It not only urges us to look at our early personal history, but the darkest episodes of mankind's history. It suggests that, as a race, we are carrying around the curse of age-old cataclysms. These have brought us to the point of longing to be something stronger, smarter and tougher than our humanity can provide.