

**The Adventures of Overman:
Nietzsche's Übermensch and the U.S.-American Comic-Book Superhero**

By

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This dissertation is dedicated to Ian and Kip.
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ABBREVIATIONS

Nietzsche's Works

Abbreviations for Nietzsche's works are not italicized when used in footnotes. Works with multiple volumes or important subdivisions have a capitalized Roman numeral attached to the title abbreviation (e.g. *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I* becomes MA-I, Part III of *Also sprach Zarathustra* becomes Z-III, etc.). Aphorism numbers follow the title abbreviation and are denoted by the § symbol. Works in which aphorism numbers restart in each subtitled section have the subtitle given between the title abbreviation and the aphorism number (e.g. aphorism 38 from the section "Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen" in *Götzendämmerung* is given as: GD "Streifzüge" §38). Abbreviations are listed below in order of original publication date.

| | |
|-------|--|
| GT | <i>Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik</i> |
| UB | <i>Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen</i> |
| MA | <i>Menschliches, Allzumenschliches</i> |
| M | <i>Morgenröthe: Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurtheile</i> |
| FW | <i>Die fröhliche Wissenschaft</i> |
| Z | <i>Also sprach Zarathustra</i> |
| JGB | <i>Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft</i> |
| GM | <i>Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift</i> |
| GD | <i>Götzendämmerung, oder: Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert</i> |
| AC | <i>Der Antichrist: Fluch auf das Christentum</i> |
| EH | <i>Ecce Homo: Wie man wird, was man ist</i> |
| WM | <i>Der Wille zur Macht</i> |
| NF | <i>Nachgelassene Fragmente</i> |
| KSA | <i>Kritische Studienausgabe</i> |
| eKGWB | <i>Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefe</i> |

The lengthier titles of several superhero comic books and series that appear frequently in this dissertation are abbreviated in citations and in the body of the dissertation after their first appearance in each chapter.

| | |
|------|---|
| DKR | <i>The Dark Knight Returns</i> |
| DKMR | <i>Batman: The Dark Knight: Master Race</i> |
| UXM | <i>The Uncanny X-Men</i> |

Introduction

Why Nietzsche? Why Superhero Comics?

1. Overview and Outline

In January 2022, a well-preserved copy of *Superman #1* (1939) sold at auction for \$5.3 million dollars, the highest price ever paid for a single comic book. Taking second and third place that year with price tags of over \$3 million apiece were two copies of *Action Comics #1* (1938), the debut issue of Superman and the comic book that launched the entire superhero genre. Six other comic books were sold that year at seven-figure prices, including the debut issues of such notable superheroes as Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America. Although it did not change hands in 2022, the debut issue of the Amazing Spider-Man (*Amazing Fantasy #15*, 1962) had been the most expensive comic book ever sold at auction (at \$3.6 million) from September 2021 until it was dethroned by *Superman #1* four months later. All of these sales are part of a general trend in the world of comics. The Certified Guarantee Company, which provides third-party quality assessment of collectibles, notes that in recent years comics collectibles “have seen a surge in value, with comic books particularly buoyed by their dominance in movies and television.”¹ As the CGC’s list of most expensive comics suggests, one superhero’s original comic books outrank all others: Superman.²

Why do early superhero comics fetch such high prices at auction? One factor is certainly the ubiquity of superhero films and their success at the box office (as of May 6, 2023, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has earned global receipts of more than \$29 billion since 2008,³ making it

¹ CGC, “Mile High Copy of Superman #1.”

² “Superman’s historical significance is singular among them [superheroes], continually leading the way in record-setting sales” (CGC, “Mile High Copy of Superman #1”).

³ *The Numbers*, “Box Office History.”

the most financially successful film franchise of all time). Historically, superheroes and superhero comics have not always enjoyed the popularity they do now, but the numbers speak for themselves: at this moment in time, superheroes are dominating the global popular imagination. And although this resurgence is led by cinematic adaptations of superhero material, comic books are enjoying a renaissance of popularity, as well—to such a degree that certain octogenarian comic books are tens of millions of times more valuable than their original cover prices.

The field of comics studies, particularly the study of superhero comics, has experienced a similar boom over the last two decades. For nearly half a century, the majority of literary and cultural critics in the United States dismissed comic books, especially those featuring superheroes, as, at best, unserious literature and, at worst, a threat not only to literacy but to the very fabric of U.S.-American social and family life. This negative perception of comics changed rapidly, however, in the final two decades of the twentieth century. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-91) was a literary sensation, and in 1992 it became the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize. In 2010, the graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons—a superhero story—made *TIME Magazine*'s list of the best English-language novels published between 1923 and 2005.⁴ Today, comics and graphic novels, including superhero narratives, are frequently the focus of popular and scholarly inquiry.

In addition to studies on the mechanics of comics as an art form and an influential mass medium, an increasing amount of secondary material on superhero comics is engaging with comics as sites of philosophical meaning-making. Collections of popular philosophical essays on superhero comics abound (*Superman and Philosophy*, *Batman and Philosophy*, *The X-Men*

⁴ Grossman & Lacayo, "All-TIME 100 Novels."

and Philosophy, *Watchmen and Philosophy*, etc.), and collections of scholarly philosophical essays—and even entire scholarly monographs—about superhero comics are also increasing in number. Superhero comics deal with issues of individual exceptionalism and transcendence of the mundane in modern mass society, and the best that the genre has to offer can make us question our moral preconceptions of right and wrong and consider other modes of being and acting in the world. Where once the character of Superman stood for “truth, justice, and the American Way,” many superhero comics today have become self-reflective, presenting critical fictional reexaminations of ideological power structures that they had previously taken for granted. Superheroic moral values have thus come under scrutiny, and although no final transcendence of the superhero appears to be possible (otherwise the genre would cease to exist), both comics creators and comics scholars are interrogating the genre, probing its shortcomings and identifying areas of growth and maturation.

In the course of this broad cultural self-investigation, some of Western philosophy’s biggest names and ideas are being brought into connection with superhero narratives. There are essays that attempt to discern instances of superheroes behaving according to Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, or that evaluate the actions of superheroes according to the theory of justice presented in Plato’s *Republic*. Such undertakings achieve varying levels of persuasiveness, but one name in particular constantly reappears in the discussion: that of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In fact, Nietzsche’s ideas and philosophical concepts have a history with superhero comics that begins shortly after the publication of the *very first* superhero comics in the 1930s and 1940s. This connection hinges on one of Nietzsche’s most prominent ideas (curiously, however, *not* the one that he himself considered most central to his worldview): that of the *Übermensch*.

Literally translatable as “overman,” the word has often been rendered as “superman” (although, as I will show in Chapter Five, the case could be made that “over-” or “superhuman” would be equally appropriate). The *Übermensch* appears as a metaphorical figure in Nietzsche’s 1883 work *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and it represents the heretofore unrealized heights of human potential. The *Übermensch* is an exceptional individual who rises above the mediocrity of the ordinary human masses and whose very existence—let alone anything such an individual might actually say or do—is justification enough for the existence of the entire human race. Beyond the obvious similarity in name (“*Übermensch*” and “Superman”), then, both U.S.-American superheroes and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* are concerned with the same fundamental issue: what place can human exceptionality have in a world dominated by the homogenizing forces of industrialization and mass culture? A significant number of prominent superhero comics address, either directly or indirectly, this question, and many works of popular philosophy and scholarly inquiry explore, to a greater or lesser degree, the ways in which Nietzsche’s philosophical concepts—of the superhuman, of moral valuation, of power and strength—resonate with similar issues in superhero comics. No systematic investigation of this striking resonance yet exists, however. This is precisely the lacuna that my dissertation fills.

The structure of my argument generally follows the historical development of superhero comics and the concurrent evolution of the Nietzsche connection. Superhero comics have evolved greatly in the eighty-five years since their inception, from the straightforward adventurousness of the first Superman comics to the self-referential complexity of post-*Watchmen* narratives. The genre’s engagement with Nietzsche’s works and ideas, on the part of creators and critics alike, has undergone a similar development. Relatively unnuanced takes on such issues as power, violence, and physical dominance have generally (but not entirely) given

way to more complex representations of conventional moral values and individual responsibility and identity. Although my treatment of these issues is not strictly chronological—even the first chapter contains some analysis of twenty-first-century superhero narratives—each chapter focuses on specific questions that have resonated with Nietzsche’s works and superhero comics at different periods in the latter’s history.

The first chapter addresses the question: what is the relationship between Nietzsche’s Übermensch, comic-book superheroes, and power? The chapter begins with an analysis of those U.S.-American public intellectuals and cultural critics who, in the 1940s and 1950s, criticized comics in part by associating them with Nietzsche’s philosophy, which had been appropriated by the ideologues of the Third Reich. Finding this anti-Nietzsche attitude to be present even in some pro-comics scholarship and popular criticism today, I examine Nietzsche’s concept of “der Wille zur Macht” and its noblest expression as “Selbst-Überwindung.” In conjunction with this analysis, I analyze Superman comics from the Golden Age and the present day, investigating their reliance on action and violence to solve problems as well as their visual emphasis on Superman’s hypermuscular physique. Ultimately, I suggest that Superman’s Golden-Age counterpart Batman better represents Nietzsche’s concept of “Selbst-Überwindung.”

The question answered in the second chapter is: what is the relationship between superhumans and “ordinary” people in both Nietzsche’s works and superhero comics? I focus primarily on Roy Thomas’s 1975 comic-book series *Invaders*. One of the series’ primary antagonists is a Nazi supervillain named “Master Man,” who is explicitly described as a “Nietzschean nightmare” in the first issue. First, I piece together the interpretation of Nietzsche’s Übermensch that Thomas presents in his comics. Turning then to *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886) and *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), I examine Nietzsche’s concepts of

“Herren-Moral” and “Sklaven-Moral,” as well as the relationship between these moral systems and the Übermensch-concept. The role (or lack thereof) of superhumans and Übermenschen in government is also addressed at the end of this chapter. The third chapter’s central questions flow directly out of the conclusions reached in the second chapter. How are superhuman races or species shown to coexist with ordinary humans in such comic-book series as *The Uncanny X-Men* (1963-2011)? Can there be a race of Nietzschean Übermenschen? If so, is such a race to become reality via selective breeding, unaided natural selection, or some other, non-biological means? And what will that race’s relationship with the rest of humanity be? I pay especially close attention to Nietzsche’s use of the words “Zucht” and “Züchtung” throughout his published works, as well as how his presentation of productive friendships and rivalries resonates with similar relationships depicted in *The Uncanny X-Men*.

The fourth chapter addresses superhero comics from 1986 to the present that contain direct references to and/or indirect resonance with Nietzsche’s ideas on morality and his proposed “Umwerthung aller Werthe.” Much of the chapter deals with the significance of an aphorism from *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* to Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s 1986 maxiseries *Watchmen*. I investigate how Moore and Gibbons, along with the creators whose subsequent works were inspired by *Watchmen*, use Nietzsche’s ideas to deconstruct conventional representations of the superhero. I then take this analysis further, delineating the limits of the superheroic figure in comparison with the morally destabilizing effect that Nietzsche’s Übermensch is said to have on human society. Nietzsche’s works problematize Western morality as such, and the questions posed to superhero comics in this chapter are: does the genre take a critical approach to conventional morality? How do superheroes give their lives purpose and meaning, and do their methods sufficiently address the crisis of nihilism with which

Nietzsche diagnoses modern mass society? Ultimately, certain superhero comics help to concretize Nietzsche's scattered and generalized attempts to address these issues in his later works.

The fifth and final chapter examines the relationship between sex, gender, and the superhuman as it is presented in both bodies of work. Can "der Übermensch" be understood as a gender-neutral descriptor? How do Nietzsche's works present "women" or "the feminine?" How are female superheroes represented in superhero comics, and what does the troubled history of this representation tell us about U.S.-American popular conceptions of human exceptionalism and gender? The chapter brings past and present Wonder Woman comics into dialogue with various pronouncements on "das Weib" drawn primarily from Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883), ultimately concluding that the presentation of sex and gender in both superhero comics and Nietzsche's works, while oftentimes clearly prejudiced and stereotypical, is more fluid than it appears to be at first glance.

As this outline makes clear, this dissertation intersects with multiple discussions within the secondary literature of both Nietzsche studies and comics studies. In Nietzsche studies scholarship, superhero comics are almost never mentioned, and when they are, it is only in passing. Works chronicling Nietzsche's reception history in Europe and/or the United States often address the influence that Nietzsche's works have wrought on the popular cultures of various nations, but I have not found that superhero comics are included in these histories. One of my goals in this dissertation, then, is to expand upon Nietzsche's global reception history by charting his reception in superhero comics and the secondary literature that has developed around them. I show how the anti-comics polemics of the 1940s and 1950s eventually gave way to more measured popular and scholarly analyses of comics and graphic novels. The early

cultural critics made no distinction between Nietzsche's Übermensch and the Nazi vulgarization thereof, whereas the stance taken by more recent comics studies is divided between those scholars and essayists who are still hostile toward Nietzsche's philosophy and those who seek to analyze superhero comics through a more Nietzsche-friendly lens. This development mirrors the changes that have also taken place in the ways that Nietzsche's ideas and concepts are integrated directly into superhero narratives by comics creators.

Since my project will also involve a process of reciprocal reading, using Nietzsche's philosophical works to analyze superhero comics as well as utilizing the latter to expound ideas presented in the former, I will be engaging in close readings of Nietzsche's published texts (and a select few posthumous fragments) and superhero comics. I will support my analysis of the former with past and present scholarship on those subjects in Nietzsche's works that relate to the central questions enumerated in the chapter descriptions above (i.e. power, dominance, race, morality, and sex-gender). In my interpretations of the latter, I will principally rely on secondary sources that reference Nietzsche when analyzing the content of superhero comics. When analyzing the formal aspects of superhero comics, I will use many key terms from central comics studies texts. I will give brief explanations to such terms as arise, and I will generally operate according to the dictate that the visual elements of comics contribute just as much to our comprehension and interpretation of them as do their textual elements. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994) provides the foundation upon which my theoretical grasp of comics is based. This comic book about comic books presents the vocabulary of comics studies in terms that are easy to understand and accessible to readers who do not have a background in the field. Although many scholarly monographs have been written on the art, style, and "system" of comics, I have not found any of them to have significantly

improved upon the lucid and intuitive description of comics presented in McCloud's works. Scholarly works that seek to develop an academic theory of comics, such as Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (1999, English translation 2007), provide a valuable service to the field; however, I have not found such neologisms as "arthrology" and "spatio-topia"⁵ to be necessary to my analysis of comics, and so have eschewed the use of such terms in favor of McCloud's more accessible terminology.

2. Making the Audible, Visible: Analyzing the Stylistic and Formal Resonances between Nietzsche's Works and Superhero Comics

Nietzsche's philosophic formulations pervade our popular consciousness. That such terms and phrases as "der Übermensch," "der Wille zur Macht," "jenseits von gut und böse," and even entire sentences (such as the infamous "Peitsche"-pronouncement in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, discussed in further detail in Chapter Five) became popular in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century is one thing. But that they became popular *in translation* and across the Atlantic Ocean is a testament to just how catchy these Nietzschean phrases are. Nietzsche was more than a coiner of catchphrases, however: he was a stylist, and he set out to change his readers' perception of what was possible for the written (German) word. Nietzsche's intent was to make written text seem as vital and dynamic as the spoken word—and, as we shall see in a moment, he publicly professed the belief that he had succeeded. In what follows, I will show that Nietzsche's use of specific formal mechanisms—of grammar, syntax, and page layout—result in a reading experience that bears striking similarities to the act of reading comics.

Nietzsche's prose—or "Überprosa," as Nietzsche scholar Heinz Schlaffer calls it—is itself attention-grabbing: it "überwältigt den Leser, der an die traditionelle Unterscheidung von

⁵ Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 21-23.

Prosa und Poesie gewöhnt ist.”⁶ Take any passage from Nietzsche, and it immediately becomes clear that this is no conventional text. Discursively, it is neither philosophical, nor empirical, nor even strictly literary; and although Nietzsche does include metered verse to open or close some of his works, his philosophical publications are, generally speaking, collections of hundreds of prose aphorisms. As an example of Nietzsche’s unique authorial voice, I present the following passage from Nietzsche’s last authorized manuscript, *Ecce Homo* (1888-89). Almost any passage from Nietzsche’s works could serve just as well here, but this one contains Nietzsche’s own stylistic self-assessment, ergo it is especially germane to the topic. Although this long passage is worth reading in its entirety, my focus will be more on the visual impact of the text than on its content:

Ich sage zugleich noch ein allgemeines Wort über meine *K u n s t d e s S t i l s*. Einen Zustand, eine innere Spannung von Pathos durch Zeichen, eingerechnet das tempo dieser Zeichen, *m i t z u t h e i l e n* — das ist der Sinn jedes Stils; und in Anbetracht, dass die Vielheit innerer Zustände bei mir ausserordentlich ist, giebt es bei mir viele Möglichkeiten des Stils — die vielfachste Kunst des Stils überhaupt, über die je ein Mensch verfügt hat. *G u t* ist jeder Stil, der einen inneren Zustand wirklich mittheilt, der sich über die Zeichen, über das tempo der Zeichen, über die *G e b ä r d e n* — alle Gesetze der Periode sind Kunst der Gebärde — nicht vergreift. Mein Instinkt ist hier unfehlbar. — *G u t e r S t i l a n s i c h* — eine *r e i n e T h o r h e i t*, blosser „Idealismus“, etwa, wie das „*S c h ö n e a n s i c h*“, wie das „*G u t e a n s i c h*“, wie das „*D i n g a n s i c h*“... Immer noch vorausgesetzt, dass es Ohren giebt — dass es Solche giebt, die eines gleichen Pathos fähig und würdig sind, dass die nicht fehlen, denen man sich mittheilen *d a r f*. — Mein Zarathustra zum Beispiel sucht einstweilen noch nach Solchen — ach! er wird noch lange zu suchen haben! — Man muss dessen *w e r t h* sein, ihn zu hören... Und bis dahin wird es Niemanden geben, der die *K u n s t*, die hier verschwendet worden ist, begreift: es hat nie Jemand mehr von neuen, von unerhörten, von wirklich erst dazu geschaffnen Kunstmitteln zu verschwenden gehabt. Dass dergleichen gerade in deutscher Sprache möglich war, blieb zu beweisen: ich selbst hätte es vorher am härtesten abgelehnt. Man weiss vor mir nicht, was man mit der deutschen Sprache kann, — was man überhaupt mit der Sprache kann. — Die Kunst des *g r o s s e n R h y t h m u s*, der *g r o s s e S t i l* der Periodik zum Ausdruck eines

⁶ Schläffer, *Das entfesselte Wort*, 49.

ungeheuren Auf und Nieder von sublimer, von übermenschlicher, Leidenschaft ist erst von mir entdeckt; mit einem Dithyrambus wie dem letzten des dritten Zarathustra, „die sieben Siegel“ überschrieben, flog ich tausend Meilen über das hinaus, was bisher Poesie hiess.⁷

This passage clearly shows that Nietzsche’s writing style is visually as well as thematically distinct. “Sperrdruck” is used to emphasize certain words, whereas publications today would use italics (for simplicity’s sake, I will also use italics when quoting Nietzsche’s works in all subsequent chapters). This has the effect of disrupting the potentially monotonous effect that such a long paragraph would otherwise have on the reader. This wall of text is rendered still less visually oppressive by the frequent use of em dashes (“Gedankenstriche” in German) and ellipses. Even before we get to the impact that Nietzsche’s style has on the *content* his works—which we will come to in a moment—we can see (literally) how his style affects the surface *appearance* of his text. It is almost certain that Nietzsche himself was consciously aware of the visual impact these elements would have on his text, a supposition supported by the fact that he cared so much about the appearance of his works that he insisted that they be set in Antiqua type rather than Fraktur, the default typeface for contemporary German-language publications.⁸ Nietzsche did not hesitate to declare his distaste for the nationalistic, culturally decadent Germany of his day in almost every book he wrote. His choice of typeface reinforces on the formal-visual level the thematic content of his works: they didn’t even *look* “German.” If even the font in which his books were printed was calculated to visually distinguish his texts from those of contemporary German writers (setting his works apart even before prospective readers—of which, admittedly, there were few during Nietzsche’s productive years—had

⁷ Nietzsche, EH “Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe” §4. Pettey analyzes part of this passage in *Nietzsche’s Philosophical and Narrative Styles*, 18.

⁸ Cf. Schläffer, *Das entfesselte Wort*, 24.

actually read any of the words on the page), then it seems fair to suppose that other visually distinguishing features (like “Sperrdruck” and the frequent use of atypical punctuation marks) were deliberately chosen by Nietzsche, as well.

The content of this passage supports this inference. Words like “Tempo” and “Gebärden” are repeated within the paragraph, and Nietzsche also adds that the reception and comprehension of his philosophy presupposes “dass es Ohren giebt — dass es Solche giebt, die eines gleichen Pathos fähig und würdig sind, dass die nicht fehlen, denen man sich mittheilen d a r f .” Tempo, gestures, ears to hear his words: “Hier redet kein Redner, hier spricht ein Sprechender,” writes Schläffer; “genauer: hier ahmt ein Schriftsteller die Sprechweise eines Sprechenden nach.” Using the written word, Nietzsche is trying to convey the essential characteristics of the *spoken* word. His idiosyncratic punctuation—the many em dashes and ellipses—is an “Ersatz für die fehlenden Tonzeichen” and serves as a “Nachahmung von Mündlichkeit in der Schrift[.]”⁹ Nietzsche even combines punctuation marks that typically do not go together, pairing periods and exclamation points with em dashes, for example. Schläffer calls this Nietzsche’s “Interpunktionsgewitter,”¹⁰ an apt term indeed for the storms of punctuation that appear in Nietzsche’s works. In every case, Nietzsche’s visually distinct punctuation affects how readers “hear” the text. Periods, exclamation points, and question marks “erzeugen im Leser die Vorstellung, daß er den Ton heben oder senken müsse, daß seine Stimmelaute oder leiser werde.”¹¹ Dashes and ellipses, on their own or in conjunction with other punctuation marks, “lassen die Rede verstummen, die Gedanken jedoch weitergehen”¹²

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹² Ibid., 33.

(the latter function is especially clear in German, as “Gedankenstrich” literally translates to “thought-line”).

Nietzsche’s text thus contains within itself directions on how to read it. “Die Typographie der Hervorhebung und Interpunktion übernimmt also eine ähnliche Funktion wie die Vortragszeichen in der Musik,” writes Schlaffer, concluding that Nietzsche, unable to realize his ambitions as a composer, “arbeitet seinen Text zum Notenblatt um.”¹³ The effect is so strong that, sometimes without a conscious effort of imagination, readers can see the conductor gesticulating in front of his orchestra, or picture the gestures (“Gebärden”) with which a speaker might accompany this text if it were being delivered orally. Schlaffer argues that when Nietzsche uses words like “Tempo” or “Rhythmus” in the passage above, he is clearly communicating that, like a composer, he is writing “für das Ohr,” so that the ear “auf den ganzen Körper wirke, bis zu den Füßen, in denen sich wieder die alte Lust zum Tanzen regen konnte.”¹⁴ Schlaffer further suggests that, on the one hand, Nietzsche’s rhythmic-lyrical style has a distinct rhetorical aim: “An die Stelle eines überzeugenden Arguments tritt die emotionale Intensivierung der akustisch-körperlichen Signale, die den Leser an seine vorrationale Konstitution erinnern und zu reflexionsloser Zustimmung bewegen sollen.”¹⁵ This may indeed be the case—Nietzsche himself characterized his works as “polemics,” which rely more on declaratory intensity than logic to make their argument. In the quoted passage above, however, Nietzsche writes that the “Sinn jedes Stils” is to communicate “eine innere Spannung von Pathos durch Zeichen.” This tension of pathos is physical, and as such must be expressed through the body. Gestures, tone, rhythm, are the “Zeichen” that the body uses to communicate pathos, and these are imitated in

¹³ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴ Ibid., 60,

¹⁵ Ibid., 67-68.

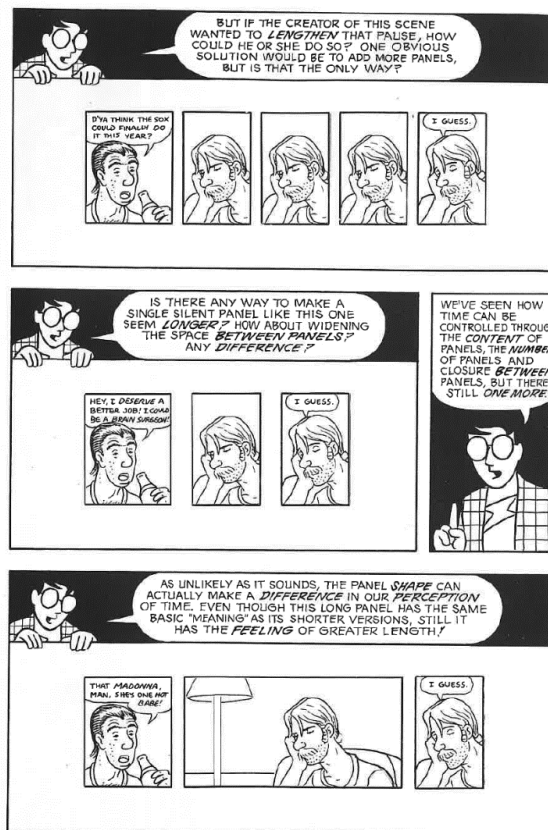
Nietzsche's text through punctuation and a syntax that is informal and often incomplete, leaving the reader to finish the thought and connect one thought to the next. Nietzsche's works are meant to be experienced, not simply read ("nicht nur lesbar, sondern auch erlebbar"¹⁶). To that end, his stylistic prose "imitiert die Kunstlosigkeit wirklich gesprochener Sätze, die ja fast alle grammatisch unvollkommen bleiben, und die Freiheit lyrischer Poesie, deren Vollkommenheit nicht in syntaktischer Exaktheit besteht."¹⁷

Nietzsche designed his written texts specifically to give the appearance of oral speech—a synesthetic goal that is also undertaken by the creators of comics and graphic novels. Comics artist, writer, and theorist Scott McCloud devotes an entire chapter of *Understanding Comics* to the various tools that comics artists have at their disposal to give the impression of aural phenomena in a strictly visual medium. Regarding oral speech, McCloud presents and comments on the "word balloon" in the excerpt shown below (**Fig. 0.01**). "Word balloons" (or "speech balloons/bubbles") are one of many "synaesthetic icons [*sic*]" used in comics to communicate sound visually—in this case, to visualize the spoken word. The size, shape, and line thickness of the words written within word balloons, along with variations in the shape, size, and style of the balloons themselves, all work to convey tone of voice, mood, and volume. There are other "sound effects" in comics, too: visually stylized onomatopoeia representing everything from automobile collisions to ringing phones to the clack of a computer keyboard. Nietzsche's works tend not to include these sorts of effects, but the focus on the visual representation of speech is common to both bodies of work. As almost every figure included in the body of this dissertation will show, most of the elements present in Nietzsche's passage on style are present in superhero comics: the frequent use of em dashes, ellipses, and punctuation marks other than

¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁷ Ibid., 79,

impression that the written text and its reader are actually a speaker and his listener. The use of “Sperrdruck” in Nietzsche’s texts also slows the pace at which words are read—the altered letter spacing breaks the readers’ flow, causing them to linger and spend more time reading a word or phrase that Nietzsche wants to emphasize. Altered fonts and unusual punctuation marks in comics have a similar effect on the comics reader, helping to determine the pace at which the content of speech balloons is processed in addition to giving “voice” to the characters. McCloud reminds us that comics have another time-altering tool at their disposal: space. In **Fig. 0.02** below, McCloud demonstrates that by varying the length and size of panels, or by repeating the same panel multiple times (thereby creating literal space between one character’s declaration and the other’s response), the reader’s sense of time passing during and between panels can be



101

Fig. 0.02 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 101.

distended. And although individual panels typically present a single, static image, artists can create the illusion of movement in several different ways, the most frequent of which McCloud presents in his book (see **Fig. 0.03** above). Just as Nietzsche's style is meant to suggest the presence of "Gebärden" that can only take place in real life and in real time, comics can add the illusion of movement to the illusion of speech.

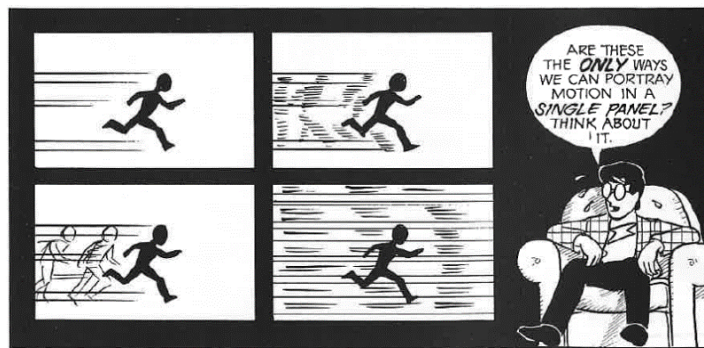


Fig. 0.03 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 114, panel 2.

Readers can also infer movement, along with other narrative connections, as their attention follows a sequence of panels. McCloud uses the term "closure"¹⁹ to describe the mental process of connecting the spatial and temporal events of sequential panels to one another (and to the act of inferring the existence of an entire world from a sequence of discrete images). We recognize from the visual cues mentioned in the previous paragraph that time is passing and actions are taking place within an individual panel. We also infer temporal and thematic relationships between panels, as in the dramatic example McCloud has chosen of an axe-wielding maniac approaching his victim (see **Fig. 0.04** below). From the contents of each panel, we presume that the second follows quickly upon the heels of the first, and in our minds, we fill

¹⁹ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 62-67



Fig. 0.04 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 66, panels 1-3.

in the missing time that elapses between panels, in what is called the “gutter.” McCloud identifies six different types of panel-to-panel transitions (see **Fig. 1.08** in Chapter One below), arguing that through the act of “closure,” readers are able to make the necessary narrative and/or thematic connections from one panel to the next. This makes the act of reading comics more participatory on an image-to-image basis than the act of viewing a film: “Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is *aided* and *abetted* by a *silent accomplice*,” writes McCloud. That accomplice is the reader, whose “*deliberate, voluntary closure* is comics’ *primary* means of simulating *time and motion*”—that is, of creating a meaningful, coherent narrative out of discrete images.²⁰

In a fascinating turn, the mechanism of “closure” can help us better understand the act of reading Nietzsche’s works, too. McCloud argues that continuous acts of closure are committed

²⁰ Ibid., 69.

when reading conventional literary texts foster even greater “intimacy” between writer and reader than in comics (see **Fig. 0.05** below, and notice how, by using a black background, McCloud forces readers to use closure to infer the boundary between his legs and hair and the rest of the panel). Words are essentially collections of abstract symbols that, through an act of closure, readers connect to physical objects/sensations and mental/intellectual constructions. The act of reading Nietzsche’s works, which consist solely of words and numbers, is therefore an act of continuous closure via which we connect abstract symbols to real and/or imagined objects and abstract concepts. Although this can be said of any literary text, the act of closure when reading Nietzsche’s works runs deeper still. I find a surprising parallel between Nietzsche’s aphoristic style and the panel-and-gutter presentation of sequential images in comics.

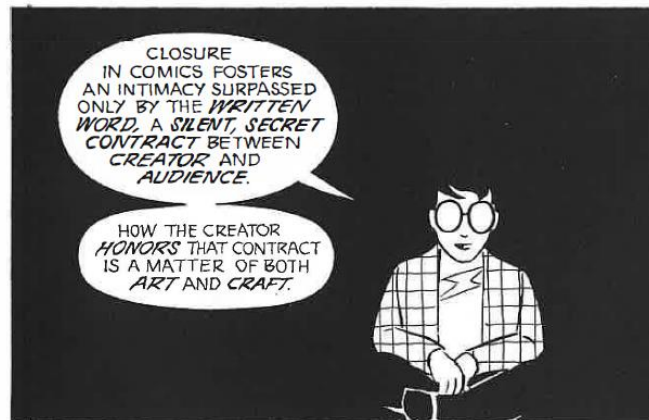


Fig. 0.05 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 69, panel 5.

Unlike the works of, say, Kant or Hegel, Nietzsche’s books are collections of aphorisms, some of which are multiple pages long, others only a sentence or two. The relationship of any given aphorism to those that precede or succeed it is not always immediately clear. Many of his works are subdivided into smaller parts or books, the titles of which partially elucidate the relevance of the aphorisms in that section to one another. *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I* and

Jenseits von Gut und Böse, for example, are each subdivided into nine titled parts. The aphorisms in each part contain Nietzsche's myriad insights into the topic stated in that part's title. The aphorisms collected under the title of, say, the sixth part of *MA-I*, "Weib und Kind," all treat of women, men, marriage, children, parents, etc.; those collected in *Jenseits's* "Fünftes Hauptstück: zur Naturgeschichte der Moral" contain various pronouncements on the history of moral values. Other of his works, however, are subdivided into parts that bear no subtitles. *Morgenröthe* and *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, for example, are each divided into five parts, but only the fourth part of the latter work has a subtitle. Readers are left to infer the relationship of one aphorism to the next, something that becomes especially challenging when the aphorisms in question are very short.

Let us examine the final fourteen aphorisms on the last two pages of Book III of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, presented as a scanned image in **Fig. 0.06** below. Sometimes, the connection between aphorisms is more clearly indicated by their content. All of these aphorisms have a subtitle, printed in "Sperrdruck" and further separated from the "body" of each aphorism by a period and an em dash. The titles of all the aphorisms on the right-hand page are all questions, indicating that they are a linked series addressed to some "du," which in this case is most likely a form of self-address on Nietzsche's part. The answers to the final three questions all refer to the problem of "shame," and so are further related to one another. The aphorisms on the left-hand page, however, do not have titles that build an obvious series, nor does the content of each aphorism immediately and unambiguously relate to that of the others. The reader is left to infer the relationship between the privilege of the dead to no longer die (§262), love and vanity (§263), the things "we" do being praised or criticized but never understood (§264), the irrefutable errors of humanity (§265), the cruelty of great ones toward their own virtue (§266),

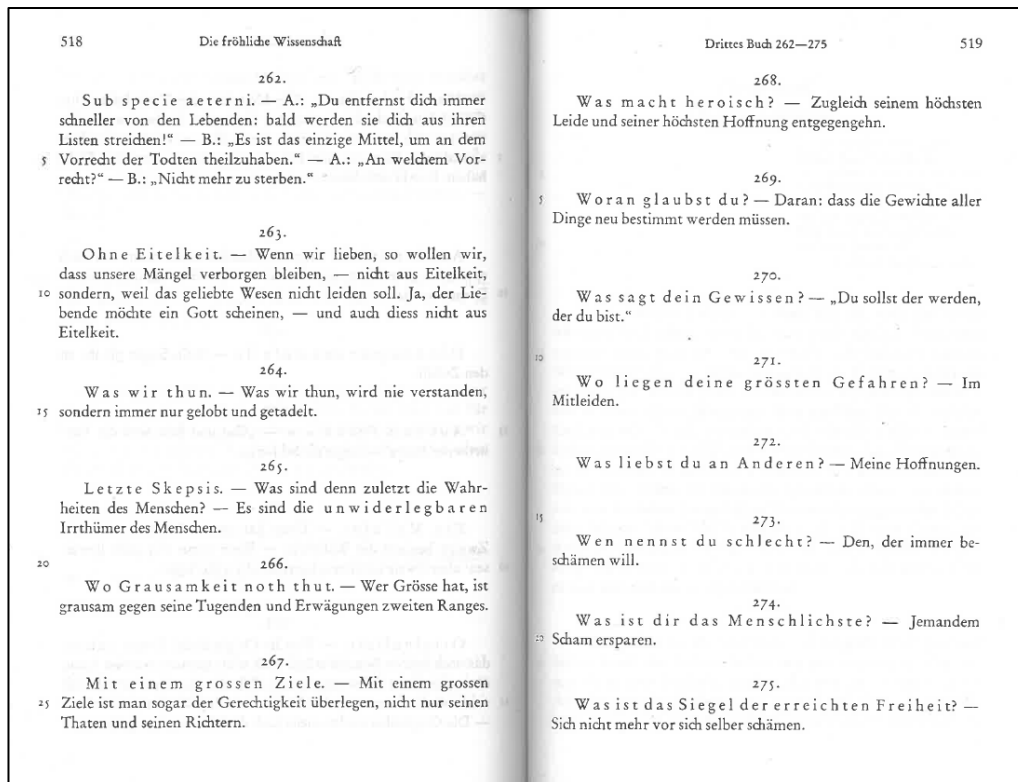


Fig. 0.06 Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 518-519 (§262-75).

and the assertion that having a great goal places one above justice (§267). Furthermore, what relationship do these aphorisms bear to the sequence of seven question-and-answer aphorisms that follow? And how are all fourteen aphorisms on these two pages related to the preceding 153 aphorisms in Book III? This is something that all readers must decide for themselves by using such clues from the text as there are, but also by bringing their own experience and intellect to bear in order to solve the puzzle. In other words, readers must constantly commit acts of *closure* when moving from one aphorism to the next. Even the visual arrangement of Nietzsche's aphorisms on the page reinforces this connection: the blank space separating each aphorism from the others is analogous to comic-book gutters, with each aphorism then being analogous to a panel. And just as the relevance of one panel to another can be more immediately apparent (as in the instance of moment-to-moment, action-to-action, or subject-to-subject transitions) or more

difficult to determine (as with scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur transitions), so too can some of Nietzsche's aphorisms be more easily and readily related to one another than others. Although the subject matter may vary greatly at times, both bodies of work require constant participation on the part of the reader to make sense of the visual relationships present on every page.

These formal and stylistic resonances between Nietzsche's works and comic books will not always be at the forefront of my analysis, but they are worth bearing in mind throughout the chapters that follow. Nietzsche's works appear at first glance to be easier to read than they really are. His aphoristic style could encourage readers to fly from aphorism to aphorism, making short work of even the longer passages presented for their consideration. Making sense of these aphorisms, and relating each to the others, is a time-consuming process requiring patience and, quite often, the act of rereading. For their part, superhero comics have long been thought to be simplistic in nature and incapable of communicating thematic content worth taking "seriously." As this dissertation will show, however, "serious" subjects do not always need to be addressed seriously in order to be addressed *adequately*. In support of this position, I will close this introduction with an aphorism from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in which we can clearly hear Nietzsche's scornful laughter at the expense of those who insist on "taking things seriously:"

Ernst nehmen. — Der Intellect ist bei den Allermeisten eine schwerfällige, finstere und knarrende Maschine, welche übel in Gang zu bringen ist: sie nennen es „die Sache *ernst nehmen*“, wenn sie mit dieser Maschine arbeiten und gut denken wollen — oh wie lästig muss ihnen das Gut-Denken sein! Die liebliche Bestie Mensch verliert jedesmal, wie es scheint, die gute Laune, wenn sie gut denkt; sie wird „*ernst*“! Und „wo Lachen und Fröhlichkeit ist, da taugt das Denken Nichts“: — so lautet das Vorurtheil dieser ernstesten Bestie gegen alle „fröhliche Wissenschaft“. — Wohlan! Zeigen wir, dass es ein Vorurtheil ist!²¹

²¹ Nietzsche, FW §327.

Chapter One

The Will to Superpower: Strength in Superhero Comics and Nietzsche's Concept of the *Übermensch*

1. Introduction

Superman's entrance into U.S.-American popular culture in 1938 was explosive. Readers (mostly young, mostly male) loved him, and a slew of other superheroes quickly popped up as publishers capitalized on the Man of Steel's popularity. Critics (mostly older, mostly male), on the other hand, saw him as a menace. Nietzsche's philosophical legacy had been dominated by his sister, who held nationalistic, militaristic, and racist views that her brother did not share. Thanks to her influence, the National Socialists found Nietzsche's philosophy tailor-made for them upon Hitler's ascendance to power in 1933. This association continues to haunt Nietzsche's reception even today—it is seemingly impossible for a scholar to talk about Nietzsche without also mentioning the Nazis, however briefly. For critics of superhero comics writing in the 1940s and early 1950s, the Nietzsche-Nazi connection was all the more immediate. Superman and his ilk, they argued, were fascists of the most brutal sort, relying on their fists instead of their minds to solve the world's problems and inculcating in the nation's youth a mentality of violence.

Unlike what these first critics believed, however, the connection between Superman and the *Übermensch* was not a question of direct influence. The association of Nietzsche with fascism already shows that Nietzsche's philosophical concept of the *Übermensch* entered into US-American popular consciousness through a German National-Socialist filter—to such great extent that to early critics of comic books, Nietzscheanism and Nazism were one and the same.

But Nietzsche's Übermensch had already entered U.S.-American pop culture through the science-fiction literature of the 1920s and early 1930s.

Eventually, however, Nietzsche's ideas would be directly and purposefully incorporated into superhero comics, a phenomenon I will investigate in a later chapter. Nevertheless, I believe that the early critics were responding, in a manner deeply revealing of the intellectual and political climate of the times, to an undeniable resonance between Nietzsche, Nazism, and superheroes. Even were it not for the continued scholarly and fan-based battles raging over the question of super-fascism, I believe that further exploration of this resonance is merited. To that end, this chapter will investigate, on the one hand, the thematization and visualization of power in superhero comics. On the other, I will examine the portrayal of the Übermensch's relationship to power in Nietzsche's works. Both superhero comics and Nietzsche's works present more nuanced takes on power than most early critics, and even scholars today, give either credit for. My task in this chapter will be to identify characteristics of Nietzsche's works and superhero comics that begin to explain the strong resonance that 1940s intellectuals experienced between the two.

2. Early Critics: Nazis, Nietzsche, and the Comic Book Crisis

One of the first high-profile attack on superhero comics was an editorial in the *Chicago Daily News* written by Sterling North in 1939, a year after Superman's debut in *Action Comics #1* (cover date June 1938). Reprinted as a single page in the journal *Childhood Education* in January 1940, North's attack has been referred to time and again over the past eighty-four years by supporters and detractors alike. North's editorial is too short to allow for much depth, and apparently too short to offer much in the way of evidence to support his claims. He—along with

unspecified others whom he simply refers to as “we” and “us”—claims to have perused 108 different comics magazines and to have found that 70 percent “were of a nature no respectable newspaper would think of accepting.” The material he found objectionable? “Superman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded ‘justice’ and cheap propaganda were to be found on almost every page.”²² He makes no mention of which comics comprised the 108 he allegedly examined, nor does he provide any examples of the objectionable content he lists. Though he does not make any direct connection to either the Nazis or to Nietzsche, the timing of North’s editorial is significant: Germany had invaded Poland just a few months before North’s editorial was published. The Third Reich’s superman had begun his march across Europe, and the inclusion of “Superman heroics” in North’s list of grievances suggests that the critic connected superheroes to the barbaric violence of self-proclaimed “supermen” overseas.

It would not take long for critics to link the comic-book superhero to fascist ideology even more explicitly, and thence to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*. On September 2, 1940, the periodical *New Republic* published Slater Brown’s editorial critique of superhero comic books. Brown recounts the events of *Superman #4* (1940), in which the Man of Steel faces off against Lex Luthor, mad scientist, in a tone dripping with sarcasm: Brown is not impressed by Superman’s fantastic hijinks. Brown ends his editorial by abruptly mentioning Nietzsche, imagining his reaction to this popular appropriation of his *Übermensch*-concept:

And though one cannot help wondering if Nietzsche, sourly contemplating Time’s Ruins, would consider this popular vulgarization of his romantic concept with equanimity, even as Swift may shudder over the final and ironic destiny of his Gulliver, I, at least, cannot share whatever disapprobation he may feel. For in Nietzsche’s own native land and in the neighboring country where he lived, it is not the children who have embraced a vulgarized myth of Superman so enthusiastically; it has been their elders.²³

²² North, “A National Disgrace,” 56.

²³ Brown, “The Coming of Superman,” 301.

Brown hints that Nietzsche might object to Superman as a “popular vulgarization” of his Übermensch, but Brown feels no sympathy for the late philosopher, on the grounds that the Übermensch-ideal had been previously corrupted by the Third Reich. Brown’s reasoning is curious, but the sentiment he expresses was so widespread during the Second World War as to obviate any need for evidential support. Again, the timing of Brown’s editorial is significant: the war in Europe had raged for a year and a day, and Hitler’s war machine showed no signs of stopping. Brown, like North before him, was quick to condemn *any* superman-figure as an ideological exemplar of the Third Reich’s “vulgarized” superhuman. If Nietzsche would object to a Superman drawn to please children, he should not have made his Übermensch-ideal so corruptible in the first place.

Sixth months later, in April 1941, another high-profile anti-comics article was published: “The Sad Case of the Funnies” by James Frank Vlamos. Vlamos goes one step further than North by explicitly linking Superman to fascism but does not go as far as to invoke Nietzsche. Vlamos limits his attacks on comics to a perceived pagan-fascist divinization of physical prowess. Superman’s “methods may be those of a bully, but his alleged motives make him a hero,” writes Vlamos derisively, adding that comic book protagonists (super or otherwise) “reside in a shady land between the underworld and the pagan heavens.”²⁴ Vlamos mocks comic-book characters’ physiques, dismissing them as hulking brutes, before finally noting that the violence-oriented narratives in comics “demonstrate all the arguments a child ever needs for an omnipotent and infallible ‘strong man’ beyond all law, the nihilistic man of totalitarian ideology.”²⁵ Vlamos is his own worst enemy, however, beginning his diatribe with a reckless and, indeed, repugnant hyperbole wherein he advises readers to seek relief from the “brutal,

²⁴ Vlamos, “The Sad Case of the Funnies,” 414.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 416.

violent and fake-scientific” comics page by “quickly turning back the pages to the front of the paper with its comparatively tame accounts of murder and holocaust.”²⁶ Comic books never, and certainly not in 1941, depicted horrors so great as to dwarf the real-world suffering of millions of human beings. Most contemporary critics realized this, too, and so Vlamos’s tone-deaf assertion did not find any like-minded thinkers.

In 1943, Catholic intellectual Thomas F. Doyle brought together all the different strands of comics criticism found across North, Brown, and Vlamos. In his article-length opinion piece “What’s Wrong with the ‘Comics?’” Doyle explicitly and neatly links Nietzsche, Nazism, and paganism to comic-book superheroes (chiefly Superman, though he does not restrict his ire solely to the Man of Steel):

Superman’s exploits do not meet with the approval of more discerning critics. In a vulgar way this fantastic character seems to personify the primitive religion expounded by Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. “Man alone is and must be our God,” says Zarathustra, very much in the style of a Nazi pamphleteer.²⁷

The problem here is that Nietzsche’s character *Zarathustra* never says any such thing. The four parts of *Also sprach Zarathustra* contain numerous pronouncements on the relationship between humanity and its God/gods that a Catholic intellectual would have no choice but to condemn, but this exact quotation does not exist. Doyle, however, seems little concerned with such petty details as quoting Nietzsche correctly, contenting himself with comparisons between the Nazi regime’s appropriation of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* and Superman’s penchant for solving problems with violence. Doyle’s main objection, however, is the fact that “there are plenty of American children who know more about the man-wonder Superman than they do about Christ or any of the great characters of the Bible.”²⁸ Doyle’s fabricated Nietzsche quotation

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 411.

²⁷ Doyle, “What’s Wrong with the ‘Comics?’” 549.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

underscores the “fact,” which Doyle implies all good Catholic parents must find repellent, that the youth of the day had replaced Jesus Christ with a secular savior.

For Doyle, Nietzsche epitomized this modern paganism. To be sure, Nietzsche frequently expresses his utter contempt for Christianity in his works, preferring the pagan worldview for, among other things, promoting individualism over a conformist herd mentality:

Die Erfindung von Göttern, Heroen und Uebermenschen aller Art, sowie von Neben- und Untermenschen, von Zwergen, Feen, Centauren, Satyrn, Dämonen und Teufeln, war die unschätzbare Vorübung zur Rechtfertigung der Selbstsucht und Selbstherrlichkeit des Einzelnen: die Freiheit, welche man dem Gotte gegen die anderen Götter gewährte, gab man zuletzt sich selber gegen Gesetze und Sitten und Nachbarn. Der Monotheismus dagegen, diese starre Consequenz der Lehre von Einem Normalmenschen — also der Glaube an einen Normalgott, neben dem es nur noch falsche Lügengötter giebt — war vielleicht die grösste Gefahr der bisherigen Menschheit [...].²⁹

Doyle never even considers that a pantheon of superheroes might offer children a variety of role models and encourage nonconformism. Instead, even as he decries U.S.-American children’s conformism to a so-called “pagan” ideal, he encourages parents to *promote* conformism to the Christian ideal. In so doing, Doyle is himself a perfect example of devotion to what Nietzsche dubbed the Christian “Normalgott.” According to the above passage, this can only lead to a society of averages (“Normalmenschen”) devoid of extraordinary individuals. Doyle remains unaware of this Nietzschean critique, and his attention soon shifts to the assertion, often championed during the war on comics but never definitively proved, that the crime portrayed in superhero comics inspires the children who read them to commit crimes in real life. He ends by condemning the parents who let their children read comics, arguing that this sort of pseudo-reading will cripple U.S.-American youth and rob them of “the vigorous and disciplined manhood that helped to build America and must save it today from its enemies.”³⁰

²⁹ Nietzsche, FW, §143.

³⁰ Doyle, “What’s Wrong with the ‘Comics?’” 557.

Walter Ong, another Catholic public intellectual, took Doyle's Nietzsche-Nazi link even further in "The Comics and the Super State" (1945). He argues that comic strips and comic books represent "reading made for effortless absorption, reading on the level at which propaganda moves."³¹ Ong declares superhero comics a form of mass propaganda, as dangerous to U.S.-American freedoms as any of the fascist super-state's most effective weapons in the war of public opinion. The sheer reach of comics was a problem for Ong: as a mass medium, they could potentially infect millions of impressionable minds.³² The ideology these comics promote is, according to Ong, explicitly fascist:

So it happens that the notion of a "superman" is part of the herdism of the Nazi Third Reich. The very title "superman"—as well as its earlier and unsuccessful form, "overman"—is an importation brought into English by George Bernard Shaw out of Nietzsche, the herald of Nazism and the new order, who had seen in his *übermensch* [sic] the salvation of mankind. The Superman of the cartoons is true to his sources. [... H]e is a super state type of hero, with definite interest in the ideologies of herdism politics.³³

Ong continues, condemning both the super state for its glorification of brute force and superhero comics for literally embodying this ideology: "Superman's permanent orgy of muscularity is a correlative of the glorification of youth that is part of the pagan economy in its original habitat as well as in Nietzsche, Wagner, and in Hitler's reconditioned Valhalla."³⁴ Comparatively speaking, however, the early Superman was hardly the "orgy of muscularity" that later

³¹ Ong, "The Comics and the Super State," 44.

³² North also mentions the ubiquity of comic books in the United States: "Ten million copies of these sex-horror serials are sold every month. One million dollars are taken from the pockets of America's children in exchange for graphic insanity" (56). He offers no source for this information. Ong, three years later, cites much larger figures (and, indeed, comic book circulation did boom during the Second World War) and writes his statistics in all their numeric glory: "In the 25,000,000 comic books that are produced in this country per month, each to be read by an average of four or five individuals, and in the 6,000,000,000 comic strips that appear every month in U.S. newspapers, there is at work a squirming mass of psychological forces." He continues: "Newspaper comic readers are estimated at between 60,000,000 and 70,000,000; comic book readers at 70,000,000" (34). The only bit of data he attributes to a source, however, comes from *Time* magazine, which he quotes as reporting "that one out of every five adults in the United States is an avid comic book addict."

³³ Ong, "The Comics and the Super State," 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

superheroes became. Compare the following two images, the first from the cover of *Action Comics #1*, the second from the cover of *Superman: Action Comics #1*, part of the *New 52* reboot launched by DC in 2011. (See **Figs. 1.01** and **1.02** below.) Though still muscular, the early Superman’s power was visible less in his physique and more in the feats of strength he performed. For Ong, however, this was still enough to condemn Superman as a pagan, fascist fantasy heralded by Nietzsche and embraced by the Third Reich.

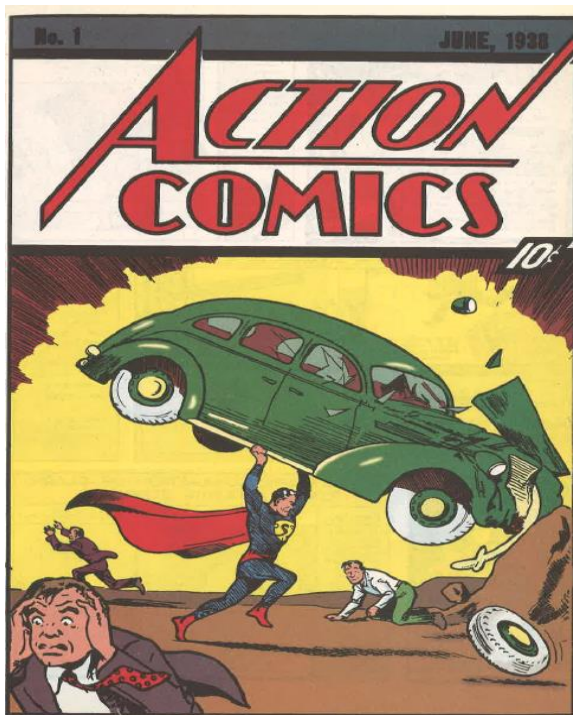


Fig. 1.01 Siegel and Shuster, cover of *Action Comics #1*.

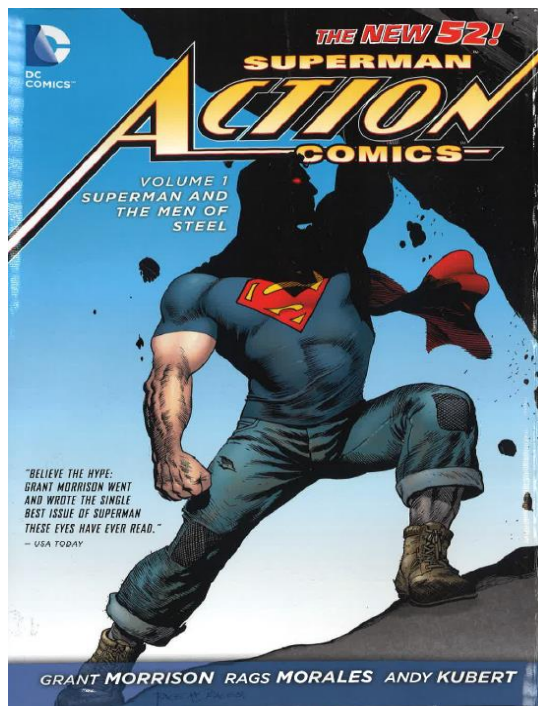


Fig. 1.02 Morrison et al., cover of *The New 52: Action Comics: Volume 1 Superman and the Men of Steel*.

Like Doyle, Ong’s manner of citing Nietzsche is problematic. In a parenthetical comment immediately following the “orgy of muscularity” quotation above, Ong reiterates his claim that “[t]his resurgence of official paganism in Germany was foreseen as a part of the new Germany by the prophet Nietzsche in his vision of the ‘rebirth in Germany of the Hellenic world.’”³⁵ Ong does not cite this quotation, so it is not clear where in Nietzsche’s corpus this

³⁵ Ibid.

precise phrase can be found—if it can be found at all. A thorough search of the digital critical edition has yielded a quotation from Nietzsche’s first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872), that might be the source for Ong’s translation: “Möge uns Niemand unsern Glauben an eine noch bevorstehende Wiedergeburt des hellenischen Alterthums zu verkümmern suchen; denn in ihm finden wir allein unsre Hoffnung für eine Erneuerung und Läuterung des deutschen Geistes durch den Feuerzauber der Musik.”³⁶ When he wrote this book, Nietzsche believed that Richard Wagner’s music would usher in this “Wiedergeburt des hellenischen Alterthums,” but soon thereafter he became repulsed by Wagner’s increasingly radical racial and religious opinions. Ong thus neglects to give his readers an accurate picture of Nietzsche, describing instead a philosopher of a paganistic “orgy of muscularity” and “total athleticism”³⁷ who would approve of superheroes whose “bull necks are often a pretty fair index of their intellectual prowess.”³⁸ It is this valuation of brute strength and physical power that Ong finds so objectionable in superhero comics and that he takes for granted in Nietzsche’s works.

To Ong, the very idea of the “superman” is fascist. In his essay, Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* and the comic-book Superman are ideologically identical and consequently morally reprehensible, rendering prolonged consideration of original source material unnecessary. The dearth of specific examples drawn from either comic books or Nietzsche’s published works is consistent across North, Doyle, and Ong’s polemics. Upon a more careful reading of Nietzsche’s works, however, surprising overlap appears between the anti-comics concerns raised by these critics, especially Ong, and Nietzsche’s own works (not least of all the fact that Nietzsche, too, wrote polemics, as the title page of his 1887 work *Zur Genealogie der Moral*:

³⁶ Nietzsche, GT §20.

³⁷ Ong, “The Comics and the Super State,” 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

Eine Streitschrift clearly illustrates³⁹). To begin with, Ong's concern that "[r]eading habits at a low level of awareness are being indulged more universally now than was ever possible before"⁴⁰ bears a remarkable resemblance to several moments in Nietzsche's works where the philosopher expresses his utter contempt for contemporary reading habits. The following excerpt from the foreword to the unpublished *Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten* is representative of Nietzsche's thoughts on the matter:

Für die ruhigen Leser ist das Buch bestimmt, für Menschen, welche noch nicht in die schwindelnde Hast unseres rollenden Zeitalters hineingerissen sind und noch nicht ein götzdienerisches Vergnügen daran empfinden, von seinen Rädern zermalmt zu werden—das heißt für Menschen! Diese aber können sich nicht daran gewöhnen den Werth jedes Dinges nach der Zeitersparniß oder Zeitversäumniß abzuschätzen, diese „haben noch Zeit“.[.]⁴¹

Nietzsche's scorn for the life lived in haste—that is, for the urban, industrial life—is palpable. Nietzsche's ideal readers have *not* conformed to the industrialized, utilitarian value system that Nietzsche abhors. Ong also saw reading becoming a passive activity, undertaken with neither intention nor attention. Comic books epitomize this sort of reading for him: “The plain fact is that the comics, although for a time they exhibited no objectionable phenomena, impose on their audience reading habits that are dangerous.”⁴² The danger that Ong sees—that the ideology of a fascist super state will be internalized by comics readers—is related to the concerns that Nietzsche expresses in the passage above, although Nietzsche of course does not mention “fascism,” as the movement had yet to be named.

³⁹ Nietzsche, KSA 5, p. 245.

⁴⁰ Ong, “The Comics and the Super State,” 34.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Ueber die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten*, “Vorrede,” KSA 1, 649. The critical edition contains another, slightly tamer version under the heading *Fünf Vorworten zu fünf ungeschriebenen Büchern*, intended as a gift for Cosima Wagner: “Für die ruhigen Leser ist das Buch bestimmt, für Menschen welche noch nicht in die schwindelnde Hast unseres rollenden Zeitalters hineingerissen sind, und noch nicht ein götzdienerisches Vergnügen daran empfinden, wenn sie sich unter seine Räder werfen, für Menschen also, die noch nicht den Werth jedes Dinges nach der Zeitersparniß oder Zeitversäumniß abzuschätzen sich gewöhnt haben” (KSA 1, 762). Nietzsche's point, however, remains the same.

⁴² Ong, “The Comics and the Super State,” 44.

Furthermore, both Ong and Nietzsche are concerned with the dangers of conformism. In Ong's estimation, the fascist super state requires absolute conformity: "The civilization of the new order is in great part a herdism phenomenon. Its subjects are, ideally, standardized men, men *en bloc*, men acting and controlled in the mass on the infra-rational plane."⁴³ Comics readers will learn to crush any individualism they should encounter, whether internal or external: "In the herd, differentiation is regarded with terror."⁴⁴ Nietzsche expressed a similar sentiment more than sixty years prior to Ong's essay: "Mit der Moral wird der Einzelne angeleitet, Function der Heerde zu sein und nur als Function sich Werth zuzuschreiben."⁴⁵ The original context of this statement has little to do with mass propaganda (though Nietzsche did not hesitate to express his contempt for newspapers in his day⁴⁶), falling as it does at the beginning of a sustained attack on Christian morality as herd morality *par excellence*. Nevertheless, it is interesting that Ong's essay, in which he articulates a resonance between superhero comics and a nazified Nietzscheanism, should contain passages that echo Nietzschean sentiments so closely. Of course, we can only pursue this line of comparison so far before we come to the problem of cherry-picking (not that any of the early comics critics were above that stratagem). Numerous passages in Nietzsche's works also denounce democracy as a "herdism phenomenon," a position Ong's essay decisively repudiates.⁴⁷

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, FW §116.

⁴⁶ See, for example, GT §20, in which Nietzsche bemoans the fact that the journalist, "der papierne Slave des Tages," has triumphed over the university professor as the arbiter of culture.

⁴⁷ As an example, I offer a passage from *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* §202, in which Nietzsche neatly manages to attack both Christianity and democracy as outcomes of herd-animal instincts: "[M]it Hilfe einer Religion, welche den sublimsten Heerdenthier-Begierden zu Willen war und schmeichelte, ist es dahin gekommen, dass wir selbst in den politischen und gesellschaftlichen Einrichtungen einen immer sichtbareren Ausdruck dieser Moral finden: die demokratische Bewegung macht die Erbschaft der christlichen."

More prominent even than Ong's critique, however, was Fredrick Wertham's landmark 1954 publication *Seduction of the Innocent*. Published nine years after the end of World War II, Wertham's book came at the height of "The Great Comic-Book Scare"⁴⁸ of the 1940s and 1950s and quickly made him the most famous (or infamous, depending on one's point of view) anti-comics crusader. Testifying before of such notable public bodies as the U.S. Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency,⁴⁹ Wertham was lauded by large numbers of "respectable" media outlets but was almost universally reviled by comic book artists, writers, editors, publishers, and fans. Fredric Wertham valued a socially oriented mindset over an individualistic one, and so in *Seduction of the Innocent* he objected strongly to the character of Superman. This objection was deeply rooted in the Nietzschean and fascistic connotations of the word "Superman." By 1954, the formula *Superman = Übermensch = Nietzsche = Nazi* was so widely accepted that Wertham could take it for granted in his book. As Nietzsche scholar Julie Ratner-Rosenthal notes, "during and immediately after World War II, Friedrich Nietzsche was persona non grata in American intellectual life."⁵⁰ Beyond the focus of the comics debate, U.S.-American public intellectuals—and indeed, the public itself—were convinced that Nietzsche's writings were inherently fascistic. Wertham capitalized on this association to make comics appear even more diabolical than they were already regarded to be.

While Wertham takes issue with *every* comic book genre, he only invokes Nietzsche specifically in relation to superhero comics, as part of his effort to portray Superman as a fascist nightmare. The first such invocation comes in the early pages of *Seduction of the Innocent*:

As our work went on we established the basic ingredients of the most numerous and widely read comic books: violence; sadism and cruelty; the superman philosophy, an

⁴⁸ Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*.

⁴⁹ The hearing in question (*Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books): Hearing before the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency*) was held by the 83rd Congress, 2nd session, on April 21, 22, and June 4, 1954.

⁵⁰ Ratner-Rosenthal, *American Nietzsche*, 221.

offshoot of Nietzsche's superman who said, 'When you go to women, don't forget the whip.' We also found that what seemed at first a problem in child psychology had much wider implications. Why does our civilization give to the child not its best but its worst, in paper, in language, in art, in ideas? What is the social meaning of these supermen, superwomen, super-lovers, superboys, supergirls, super-ducks, super-mice, super-magicians, super-safecrackers? How did Nietzsche get into the nursery?⁵¹

Many of Wertham's arguments in this book draw their authority from alliteration and repetition, respectively exemplified in this instance by the phrase "Nietzsche [in] the nursery" and the repeated attachment of the prefix "super-" to increasingly absurd nouns. (In a later chapter, he again refers to "crime comics" as "Kafka for the kiddies,"⁵² once more relying on pleasing alliteration to persuade in lieu of actual evidence. And clearly, there was no love lost between Wertham, a German ex-patriate, and the literature and philosophy of his home country.) As for content, when Wertham quotes Nietzsche, he omits all context that would complicate his "Nietzsche-Nazi" narrative. The lone quotation about women and whips, for example, comes from a section entitled "Von alten und jungen Weiblein" in the first part of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*. I will address the various interpretations of this passage in context in Chapter Five, Section 2; for now, I want only to point out Wertham's technical inaccuracies. It is not Nietzsche's Übermensch who says this; rather, the character Zarathustra (who is *not* the Übermensch) relates a story in which he encounters "ein altes Weiblein" who, after listening to Zarathustra's various pronouncements on "das Weib," says in response: "'Du gehst zu Frauen? Vergiss die Petische nicht! –'"⁵³ Wertham thus sacrifices accuracy in his rhetorical attempt to suggest that Nietzsche's Übermensch exhibits "violence[,] sadism and cruelty" toward women.

Wertham vilifies comics via association with Nietzsche once more several chapters later.

Here, the issue is again that of cruelty, though now with further moral implications:

⁵¹ Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Z-I* "Von alten und jungen Weiblein."

In these children there is an exact parallel to the blunting of sensibilities in the direction of cruelty that has characterized a whole generation of central European youth fed on the Nietzsche-Nazi myth of the exceptional man who is beyond good and evil. [...] How can they respect the hard-working mother, father or teacher who is so pedestrian, trying to teach common rules of conduct, wanting you to keep your feet on the ground and unable even figuratively speaking to fly through the air? Psychologically Superman undermines the authority and the dignity of the ordinary man and woman in the minds of children.⁵⁴

According to Wertham, reading about the exploits of extraordinary supermen diminishes a child's respect for ordinary authorities. Wertham believed that children must be protected from the pernicious influence of crime and horror comics. In later years, this diminishing respect for traditional authority figures would be ascribed, as comics historian Bradford W. Wright notes, to the acquisition of "new personal independence and a generational consciousness that struck some alarmed adults as evidence of diminishing respect for authority and declining traditional values."⁵⁵ Wertham, however, found his answers in concrete, external stimuli rather than the more intangible social processes described by Wright. Wertham's book and psychoanalytic practice were designed largely to shore up existing moral conventions, despite his occasional liberal stance on such issues as race relations. He accomplished this by criticizing comic books for a perceived lack of respect for democratic authority, vilifying Nietzsche in the process.

Wertham's work is far from perfect, and with the rise of comics studies as field of academic inquiry, scholars are paying renewed attention to *Seduction of the Innocent*, and to Fredric Wertham's work more broadly. Wertham's work is consequently notable for having inspired a significant body of "tertiary literature"—articles, book chapters, and at least one monograph. Usually, such literature presents evidence to either further discredit Wertham or to rehabilitate his status as a serious critic. Most comics-friendly scholarship takes the former

⁵⁴ Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 97-98.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 27.

approach. Carol L. Tilley argues in a 2012 essay that “Wertham privileged his interests in the cultural elements of social psychiatry and mental hygiene at the expense of systematic and verifiable science, an action that ultimately serves to discredit him and the claims he made about comics.”⁵⁶ Delving deep into the archive of Wertham’s notes, case records, and manuscript drafts, Tilley presents convincing evidence that Wertham often distorted and even outright falsified his clinical research and client testimony, sacrificing academic and scientific rigor to rhetorical effectiveness (similar to the strategies he employs when quoting Nietzsche). Comics historian David Hajdu is equally hostile toward Wertham. Although he concedes that “Wertham was correct to note that the very young had access to every type of comic book on the newsstand, and he pointed out, usefully, that warnings such as the ‘For Adults Only’ label that Fox used on its most lurid comics were likely an enticement to the wrong readers,” Hajdu goes on to argue that Wertham’s “obdurate infantilization of the comics readership was inaccurate and tactical, rather than scientific. It diminished the adolescents and young adults who turned to comics in part because the books represented an escape from childhood, a way to begin dealing with the mysteries, the titillations, and the dangers of adulthood” safely and responsibly.⁵⁷

Other scholars are more charitable. Duncan and Smith note that although Wertham’s book is neither academically nor scientifically rigorous, he “was no simplistic censor and was not lashing out at a medium he neither understood nor appreciated.” They argue further that “he saw comic books as just one mass medium, but certainly the worst in his estimation, which taught children that violence was a solution rather than a problem.”⁵⁸ Bart Beaty offers an even more sympathetic portrayal of Wertham as a tireless advocate for social reform. Wertham

⁵⁶ Tilley, “Seducing the Innocent,” 386.

⁵⁷ Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plauge*, 238, 239.

⁵⁸ Duncan & Smith, *The Power of Comics*, 276.

founded the LaFargue Clinic, which served a socioeconomically disadvantaged population consisting largely of people of color in Harlem. *Seduction of the Innocent*, as Beaty accurately points out, argues that superhero and other comics of the 1930s and 1940s contained racist and sexist content that could be harmful not only to the individual children reading those comics, but to the entire society in which those children grew up. Furthermore, Wertham wrote at a time when individualism was the reigning U.S.-American ideology, and so Beaty argues that “Wertham’s conclusions [...] need to be understood as relating to his politically motivated and progressive ideas about the social uses of psychiatry and the possibilities for postwar liberalism in the face of an overwhelming insistence on individualistic explanations of human behavior.”⁵⁹ Beaty contends that Wertham “sought not the end or even curtailment of a particular medium of communication but a reconceptualization of social relations,” and that critics who “refuse to engage with the arguments because they do not like the way these arguments are presented” are executing “an unscholarly dodge.”⁶⁰ This is giving Wertham a little too much credit, however. Wertham’s book is shrill and alarmist, and he claims on numerous occasions that reading comic books—especially “crime” comic books, which for Wertham included superhero comics—directly causes juvenile delinquency and the “illness” of homosexuality.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, 143.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 192, 201.

⁶¹ Whereas Wertham’s comments on the portrayal of race in comics are generally accepted as valid today, his concerns regarding “abnormal” sexual psychology (i.e. homosexuality) have not aged well. Beaty leaves this issue unaddressed until the end of his book, at which point he excuses Wertham’s anti-homosexual stance by arguing that comics fans are even *more* homophobic. Although this is true of some of comicdom’s more toxic fans, it nevertheless hardly excuses Wertham’s own views, and so is an “unscholarly dodge” on Beaty’s part. Will Brooker, on the other hand, addresses this issue more directly in *Batman Unmasked*. He argues that, far from “embodying a homophobic project of witch-hunting[,] Wertham expresses a concern for the sexuality of his young interviewees which although naïve was entirely understandable in context” (102). This is not the excuse Brooker thinks it is, but his larger point is that “Wertham’s highlighting of a few boys’ homoerotic interpretation actually made this reading widespread and caused it to circulate,” allowing this interpretation to be “taken up again by gay audiences in a less condemnatory social context” today (102-3). Essentially, Brooker is trying to find the silver lining here; Beaty, however, bafflingly tries to redirect present-day ire from Wertham onto comic-book fans.

Over the years, scholars and critics have become more accepting of comics than the early critics, and today most scholars agree that superhero comics possess philosophical and aesthetic merit. Many, however, still seek to distance comic books from Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Chris Gavaler's 2018 monogram *Superhero Comics*, for example, insightfully examines the hybrid pictorial and textual narrative techniques in comic books while dismissing Nietzsche as a eugenicist. Gavaler claims that Superman was created as "a reversal of Nietzsche's philosophy and Hitler's social agenda," directly linking Nietzsche's works to Hitler's actions.⁶² Though he addresses Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and its purported connection to Nazi ideology, Gavaler does not find it necessary to present the reader with any quotations from Nietzsche's writings, published or otherwise. He does mention *Also sprach Zarathustra*, though he calls the book "*Also Spake Zarathustra*,"⁶³ a curious combination of the original German title and the once popular English translation *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. I have so far been unable to locate any translated edition with this unique title, and since Gavaler does not actually cite this literary curio, his bibliography contains no helpful information for inquisitive readers. Like his predecessors from the 1940s and 1950s, Gavaler's opinion of Nietzsche is informed not by the latter's works, but rather by the National Socialists' appropriation thereof.

Writing two years before Gavaler, A. G. Holdier is no less hostile toward Nietzsche, though he has at least read enough of Nietzsche's works to provide his readers with a few of Nietzsche's more famous catchphrases.⁶⁴ As was the case with Wertham, Ong, Doyle, and Brown, Holdier believes that Nietzsche's *Übermensch* stands for physical strength above all else. Nietzsche, Holdier writes, "would be captivated by Superman's range of abilities, particularly

⁶² Gavaler, *Superhero Comics*, 108.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁴ Holdier does at least quote Nietzsche twice in his essay, and these specific quotations from "Zarathustra's Vorrede" will be examined in a later chapter.

their way of taking the best of human abilities (such as strength or speed) and cranking their power up off the charts.”⁶⁵ Unlike the critics of the 1940s and 1950s, however, Holdier argues that Superman is more than a brute and suggests that “the Man of Tomorrow deserves a more careful analysis.”⁶⁶ So, I believe, does Nietzsche.⁶⁷ Before we examine the ways in which superpowers are depicted in comics featuring Superman in Section 4 below, we will first look at how Nietzsche came by this reputation as the philosopher of power and physical strength.

3. Nietzsche’s Legacy and *Der Wille zur Macht*

By the time that the first Superman comics emerged, Nietzsche’s reputation as a philosopher of power and strength dominated U.S.-American discourse on the man and his work. The roots of this perception lie in Nietzsche’s European reception history, and especially in the efforts of his sister Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche to brand and market her brother as a German nationalist and militarist. Working with Heinrich Köselitz (who assisted Nietzsche during the latter’s lifetime by making legible copies of Nietzsche’s handwritten manuscripts and to whom Nietzsche gave the name “Peter Gast”), Nietzsche’s sister arranged selected fragments from Nietzsche’s *Nachlass* and published them as *Der Wille zur Macht*. While outlines for a multi-volume “Umwerthung aller Werthe” bearing the title *Der Wille zur Macht* abound in Nietzsche’s later notebooks, he had already reworked much of that material in *Götzendämmerung* (published in 1889) and *Der Antichrist* (manuscript completed in 1888). Nietzsche never actually wrote the book that would come to define his legacy. Despite Förster-Nietzsche’s insistence that Nietzsche

⁶⁵ Holdier, “Where Have All the Supermen Gone?” 7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁷ Incidentally, a closer inspection of Nietzsche’s corpus reveals that he, too, uses the phrase “Mensch des Morgens und Übermorgens” to describe someone: not the Übermensch, but rather an ideal type of philosopher who finds that his enemy is “jedes Mal das Ideal von Heute” (*JGB* §212).

still planned to write *Der Wille zur Macht*, the fact remains that no one can say for certain that by the end of the 1880s Nietzsche still intended to publish a book bearing this title, let alone a book like the one his sister published.

The structure that Förster-Nietzsche and Köselitz chose for *Der Wille zur Macht* reinforces at every turn the purported centrality of the “will to power” in Nietzsche’s philosophy. Förster-Nietzsche and Köselitz arranged over 1,000 notes in various stages of completion according to the vaguest of the twenty-five or so outlines scattered throughout Nietzsche’s notebooks.⁶⁸ Förster-Nietzsche chose this arrangement because, in her own words, it offers “den weitesten Spielraum das reiche Material, das zu andern Plänen vorhanden ist, sinngemäß einzuordnen.”⁶⁹ Förster-Nietzsche and Köselitz made the most of this freedom, creating subchapters and subheadings within the third part of the book that relate the will to power to all areas of life, indeed to life itself: “Der Wille zur Macht als Erkenntnis,” “Der Wille zur Macht in der Natur,” „Der Wille zur Macht als Leben,“ “Der Wille zur Macht als Gesellschaft,” and “Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst.”⁷⁰ The notes that the co-editors included under these and other subsections are fragmentary and incomplete, or at best complete but not in a finished form (consisting of numbered lists or bullet points, neither of which are present in any of Nietzsche’s finished and authorized manuscripts).

Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche also wrote the introductions to each volume of the “pocket edition” (*Taschenausgabe*) of *Nietzsches Werke* that attempted to reconcile her brother’s philosophy with her own militant German nationalism and anti-Semitism. In her introductory remarks to each of the two volumes containing the first and second halves of *Der Wille zur*

⁶⁸ Cf. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 6. The chosen plan divides the book into four sections: “Der europäische Nihilismus,” “Kritik der bisherigen höchsten Werthe,” “Princip einer neuen Werthsetzung,” and lastly “Zucht und Züchtung.”

⁶⁹ Förster-Nietzsche, “Einleitung,” xx.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxii-xxxiii.

Macht, Nietzsche's sister repeatedly emphasizes the central place that the concept of "the will to power" held in her brother's works and his intellectual life. She writes that, as early as 1870, her brother had recognized "'daß der stärkste und höchste Wille zum Leben nicht in einem elenden Ringen um's Dasein zum Ausdruck kommt, sondern als Wille zum Kampf, als Wille zur Macht und Übermacht!'"⁷¹ To support this claim she relates, in an unverifiable anecdote, the story of a walk she took with her brother on an idyllic autumn day in 1885. After heroizing her brother's military service as a field medic in 1870, Förster-Nietzsche informs her readers that her brother informed her the will to power revealed itself to him when he witnessed a troop column march past sometime during his military service. Förster-Nietzsche rapturously describes this column as "ein wundervolles Reiterregiment, prachtvoll als Ausdruck des Muthes und Übermuthes eines Volkes," which marched "vielleicht dem Tode entgegen, so wunderwoll in seiner Lebenskraft, in seinem Kampfesmuth, so vollständig der Ausdruck einer Rasse, die siegen, herrschen oder untergehen will." This entire anecdote is spurious, not least of all because the phrase "der Wille zur Macht" does not appear in any of Nietzsche's writings until 1883—thirteen years after his sister claims it first occurred to him. It is much more in line with Förster-Nietzsche's own worldview, itself an offshoot of the views held by her late anti-Semitic husband Bernhard Förster. Nietzsche held his brother-in-law, and all anti-Semites, in the greatest contempt. In the draft of a letter to his sister dating from the end of December 1887, for example, Nietzsche excoriates Bernhard Förster's anti-Semitic publication *Nachklänge zu Parsifal* and rejects those who, like his sister, seek to use his (Nietzsche's) philosophical works for anti-Semitic purposes: "Diese verfluchten schmutzigen Antisemiten-Fratzen sollen nicht an mein Ideal greifen!!" He

⁷¹ Ibid., x. Although the words "Wille" and "Macht" appear within the same aphorism a number of times in Nietzsche's corpus, the first use of the actual phrase "Wille zur Macht" that I have been able to find occurs in a note from the period between November 1882 and February 1883 (eKGWB/NF-1882,5[1]).

clearly states that his sister's agreement with her husband's racial and political agenda means that she has failed to understand everything that her brother stands for: "Hast Du gar nichts begriffen, *wozu ich in der Welt bin?*"⁷²

Nevertheless, many contemporary readers took Förster-Nietzsche at her word, and they also believed her further claim that the concept of "der Wille zur Macht" was the main focus of her brother's philosophy: "Die Erkenntniß aber, daß das ungeheuer complicierte Gewebe des Lebens am besten im Willen zur Macht zusammenzufassen sei, scheint ihm von Jahr zu Jahr immer deutlicher geworden zu sein."⁷³ Historian, philosopher, and translator Walter Kaufmann writes that, by ceaselessly championing this collection of fragments and incomplete notes as her brother's magnum opus, Förster-Nietzsche "unwittingly laid the foundation for the myth that Nietzsche's thought is hopelessly incoherent, ambiguous, and self-contradictory; and by bringing to her interpretation of her brother's work the heritage of her late husband, she prepared the way for the belief that Nietzsche was a proto-Nazi."⁷⁴ Scholars like Walter Kaufmann and Karl Schlechta began the work of debunking *Der Wille zur Macht* as an authorized work as early as the 1950s, but by then the damage had been done. *Der Wille zur Macht* assured that Nietzsche was warmly received by Social Darwinists, eugenicists, proto-fascists, and, eventually, fascists. Benito Mussolini is known to have been a "Nietzsche-Leser,"⁷⁵ and Adolf Hitler famously visited the Nietzsche Archive on at least two occasions to pay his respects both to the deceased thinker and his still-living sister. A photo of Hitler posing next to a bust of Nietzsche had

⁷² Nietzsche, eKGWB/NF-1887,968. Emphasis in the original.

⁷³ Förster-Nietzsche, "Einleitung," viii-ix.

⁷⁴ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 8. Curiously, Kaufmann, for all he does to discredit Förster-Nietzsche's interpretation of her brother's thought, published a translation of WM in 1968. His rationale for doing so is that "it is fascinating to look, as it were, into the workshop of a great thinker" (*The Will to Power*, xvi). In this, Kaufmann echoes Förster-Nietzsche's claim that the 1906 expanded edition of *Der Wille zur Macht* provides "in viel höherem Grade als die erste Ausgabe einen Einblick in des Autors Geisteswerkstatt." (Förster-Nietzsche, "Einleitung," *Nietzsches Werke: Taschenausgabe, Band IX*, xx.)

⁷⁵ Taureck, *Nietzsche und der Faschismus*, 87.

become world-famous by the start of the Second World War (see **Fig. 1.03** below), cementing the purported association between the two. European political cartoonists during the Second World War also made the connection, as in a 1944 cartoon by Bulgarian artist Ilia Beshkov (see **Fig. 1.04** below). Here we see Hitler, whose skeletal legs imply the German military's imminent defeat, fall back on his last two defenses: a revolver and a book by "Nitsche." The cartoon clearly suggests, as comics historian Tony Husband comments in an editorial caption, "that the ideas of the philosopher Nietzsche, including 'the Superman,' had helped lead to his [Hitler's] downfall."⁷⁶ This association persisted even after the end of World War II and Nietzsche's philosophical rehabilitation in the 1950s and 1960s. As Linda Williams notes, "the phrase 'will to power' remains the most notorious feature of Nietzsche's philosophy."⁷⁷ New editions and printings of *Der Wille zur Macht* continue to be published today.⁷⁸ *Der Wille zur Macht* and the Nazis continue to cast a shadow on Nietzsche's reception in popular culture, as evidenced by the cover illustration of *Der Spiegel* on 8 June 1981 (see **Fig. 1.05** below). It is hardly surprising, then, that this negative perception of Nietzsche's works was present in critical excoriations of comics during the 1940s and 1950s and that it persists in current popular and academic treatises on superhero comics.

Nietzsche had not always been persona non grata in the United States, however: in fact, his works were warmly embraced at the turn of the twentieth century by public intellectuals and "average" Americans alike. The prominent journalist and cultural critic H. L. Mencken was famously an admirer of Nietzsche's works, even translating *Der Antichrist* into English. His

⁷⁶ Husband, *Hitler in Cartoons*, 132.

⁷⁷ Williams, "Will to Power in Nietzsche's Published Works and the Nachlass," 447.

⁷⁸ In 1996, the Alfred Kröner Verlag, which published the 1906 edition, issued a new edition of *Der Wille zur Macht*. As of 2016, Jazzybee Verlag has offered a new printing, and Amazon Digital Services LLC has even created a free Kindle edition.

1908 book *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* was one of the first critical examinations of Nietzsche's life and work in English. Mencken's book, however, is more of a treatise on Mencken's own racist and misogynistic brand of Social Darwinism in which Nietzsche's philosophy features incidentally than a proper exposition of Nietzsche's ideas. Mencken describes Nietzsche's Übermensch as a physically powerful superbeing who gleefully dominates all others in the struggle for natural and social survival (the so-called "survival of the fittest," a term from Darwin's evolutionary theory that underwent its own vulgarization at the hands of



Fig. 1.03 Hitler next to a bust of Nietzsche, 1934. As cited in Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*.



Fig. 1.04 "Hitler" by Ilia Beshkov. As cited in Husband, *Hitler in Cartoons*.

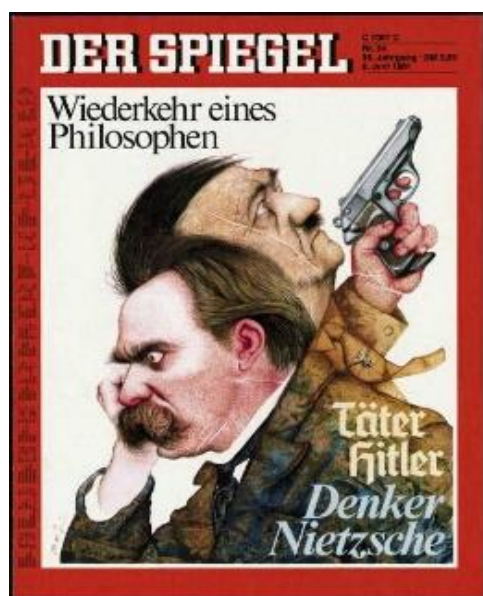


Fig. 1.05 Cover of "Wiederkehr eines Philosophen," in *Der Spiegel* 35, no. 24 (8 June 1981).

For further discussion of this image and Nietzsche's present-day reputation, see Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, 305-7.

Social Darwinists). “The strong must grow stronger,” writes Mencken in connection with Nietzsche’s Übermensch; “and that they may do so, they must waste no strength in the vain task of trying to lift up the weak.”⁷⁹ The degree to which Nietzsche’s works were celebrated by Social Darwinists and eugenicists in the United States certainly contributed to the negative perception of his works by such critics as Ong and Wertham. And if Mencken is right about Nietzsche’s Übermensch, more recent critics like Holdier and Gavalier are quite justified to dismiss Nietzsche’s Übermensch as a power-hungry egotist who cares nothing for those weaker than he is and who, consequently, has little in common with the more nobly minded comic-book superhero.

This Social Darwinist interpretation also influenced U.S.-American writers of popular science fiction in the 1920s and 1930s. Pop culture historian Elizabeth Stein Frisby traces a direct line from Nietzsche’s philosophy to the works of science-fiction writer Olaf Stapledon, and thence to other sci-fi notables like Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, and Theodore Sturgeon.⁸⁰ Comics studies scholar Peter Coogan examines Nietzsche’s influence on John Carter and Tarzan, Edgar Rice Burroughs’s most famous characters, in his dissertation-turned-monograph *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. While Coogan does not believe that Burroughs’s writings engage with Nietzsche’s Übermensch on a deeply philosophical level, Coogan argues that by using Nietzschean concepts, however superficially, Burroughs “created the *pulp ubermensch* [sic],” Coogan’s term “for the set of tropes used by pulp authors when they designate their hero as a superman.”⁸¹ Critics like Wertham and Ong, who valued socially-oriented philosophies above what they saw as the over-emphasis on individualism in American life, assumed

⁷⁹ Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 103.

⁸⁰ Frisby, *Nietzsche’s Influence on the Superman in Science Fiction Literature*, 162.

⁸¹ Coogan, *The Secret Origin of the Superhero*, 336.

that comic-book superheroes were as selfish and individualistic as their counterparts in both pulp fiction and the racist ideology of the Third Reich. While it is accurate to note that sci-fi novels such as these were a primary influence on Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster,⁸² their comic-book Superman actually represents the socially-oriented *antithesis* of the callous, anti-social supermen of the sci-fi pulps and Third Reich propaganda. We will see this in the next section, in which we will consider both the pictorial and textual manifestations of power in superhero comics and the thematic implications thereof. In conjunction with this examination of comic books, I will also examine Nietzsche's concept of the will to power, its relationship to the *Übermensch*-ideal, and any physical descriptions of the *Übermensch* that occur in his works.

4. Strength and Power: The Resonance between Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Comic-Book Superheroes

Comics are a hybrid visual-textual medium. As such, they are particularly well suited to present us with concrete visualizations of what a superhuman might look like. The first thing we notice about Superman is his appearance. The cover of *Action Comics #1* (cover date June 1938; refer to **Fig. 1.01** above) depicts a man in blue tights with a red cape smashing a car into a rock while three terrified men flee for their lives. This costumed figure could very well be a "pulp *ubermensch*" who distinguishes himself with his fists, as in Edgar Rice Burroughs's novels, or the "'strong man' beyond all law" of the type that Vlamos fears. Curiously, Superman's one-page introduction/origin story does not immediately assure us that Superman is one of the "good guys," either. The first panel of the first page shows a rocket departing a doomed and "distant planet" (see **Fig. 1.06** below). The narrow second panel shows a car's headlights picking out the

⁸² Cf. Coogan, *The Secret Origin of the Superhero*, Chapters 4 and 7 ("Edgar Rice Burroughs" and "The Prehistory of the Superhero," respectively) for more on the influence of pulp sci-fi novels on Superman's young creators.

red rocket where it has ostensibly landed (even with the narrative caption telling us what happens, this image is barely decipherable). In panel three, a diapered toddler lifts an armchair above his head. The accompanying caption running across the top quarter of the panel declares that this child possesses a “physical structure millions of years advanced of [our] own,” and that attendants were “astounded at his feats of strength.” Panels four through six show a grown man in a blue business suit leaping tall buildings, hoisting impossibly heavy loads above his head, and outracing a speeding locomotive. The man’s facial features are indistinct until panel seven—and even then, his facial features do not stand out as much as his blue tights and red cape. Only now, seven panels in, are we informed in large, red letters that this is “SUPERMAN!” and that he is



Fig. 1.06 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics #1*, 4, panels 1-9.



Fig. 1.07 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics #1*, 10, panel 50.

morally good: he is the “[c]hampion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need.” Superman is entirely characterized by his physical strength, his brightly colored costume, and his moral mission.

This introduction to Superman highlights comics’ ability to constantly keep a character’s appearance at the forefront of a reader’s attention, something that conventional literature cannot do. Peter Coogan describes this effect specifically in regard to the superhero’s costume:

A costume, no matter how well described, cannot appear as striking when described in words as when it appears in pictures. The costumed nature of the superhero cannot be as constantly signaled in prose as it must be in comics, and hence the superhero cannot stand out from a story’s ‘civilians’ as he can in comics form. So comics promote the separation of the superhero and other super-characters from the rest of the character cast.⁸³

In the case of the first Superman comics, the Man of Steel’s costume is especially important. Owing perhaps as much, if not more, to comics’ poor production quality than to Shuster’s artistic limitations, Superman’s face and physique are difficult to distinguish from those of other characters. When dressed in his Clark Kent attire, his glasses are his defining physical feature. Given the angle of illustration in panel fifty of *Action Comics #1*, for example, it would be nearly impossible to distinguish Clark from Butch (a thug cutting in on Clark’s dance with Lois) were it not for the latter’s green suit and orange-ish hair (see **Fig. 1.07** above). Even if he were not in his Clark Kent disguise, Superman would not be any more physically intimidating than Butch. In fact, the latter is actually larger than the svelte superhero. Superman’s physique would become more exaggerated over the ensuing decades (see **Fig. 1.02** above, for example), but there wasn’t much to visually distinguish the early Superman’s physique from those of the thuggish strongmen he encountered. The superhero costume lets us easily distinguish the hero from the

⁸³ Coogan, “Comics Predecessors,” 9.

villains, and even as publishing techniques improved and Superman's facial features were rendered in greater detail, his costume has remained his primary identifying feature.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, on the other hand, is not nearly as easy to visualize. “[W]ie sieht er letztendlich aus, dieser *Übermensch*?”⁸⁴ asks Nietzsche scholar Pierre Kynast. The question is largely rhetorical: Nietzsche's works ultimately do not answer this question. The word “*Übermensch*” (or the derivative form “*Übermenschen*”) appears only 38 times in all of his authorized published works⁸⁵ and only rarely in *Der Wille zur Macht*, and in no instance does Nietzsche grant the reader any insight into the *Übermensch*'s physical appearance. None of Nietzsche's authorized works tell us how tall the *Übermensch* is, whether he possesses a pale or swarthy complexion, or what color his eyes are. One short note from Nietzsche's *Nachlass*, traceable to the autumn of 1887, describes the *Übermensch* as follows:

Der Mensch ist das *Unthier* und *Überthier*; der höhere Mensch ist der Unmensch und *Übermensch*: so gehört es zusammen. Mit jedem Wachsthum des Menschen in die Größe und Höhe wächst er auch in das Tiefe und Furchtbare: man soll das Eine nicht wollen, ohne das andere — oder vielmehr: je gründlicher man das Eine will, um so gründlicher erreicht man gerade das Andere.⁸⁶

Here, man is related to a beast or monster (“*Unthier*”) and to something higher than an ordinary animal, though still an animal (Walter Kaufmann translates “*Überthier*” as “superbeast,” and indeed there are a number of “superbeasts” in superhero comics, not least of all Superman's super-dog Krypto; an interesting coincidence, but certainly unrelated to Nietzsche's original intent). The note goes on to indicate that this higher type of man is simultaneously inhuman and superhuman (“*Unmensch* und *Übermensch*”). “*Unmensch*” and “*Untier*” might call some

⁸⁴ Kynast, *Friedrich Nietzsche's Übermensch*, 12.

⁸⁵ According to the case-sensitive search results returned for “*Übermensch*” and “*Übermenschen*” on nietzchesource.org. The term (including derivative forms) occurs a further 82 times the notebooks from which Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and Heinrich Köselitz selected the fragments that would make up *Der Wille zur Macht*.

⁸⁶ WM §1027, or eKGWB/NF-1887,9[154].

unspecified image of a beast or monster to the reader's mind, but this is still far from a physical description, even in the negative. The higher man's "Wachstum [...] in die Größe und Höhe" clearly does not mean that the Übermensch grows taller and bigger than normal men, but that the Übermensch is figuratively greater than the rest of humankind. What the Übermensch looks like is completely irrelevant to what the ideal represents, and in another fragment, Nietzsche explicitly rejects the idea that the Übermensch must conform to the Aryan standard of beauty: "Sich nicht durch blaue Augen oder geschwellte Busen verführen lassen: *die Größe der Seele hat nichts Romantisches an sich...*"⁸⁷

Because readers are constantly presented with Superman's physical appearance, on the other hand, it's no surprise that early critics focused so much on Superman's physical strength, and that they should superficially connect this strength with Nietzsche's various pronouncements on "power," to which we will come in a moment. Every issue of *Action Comics* presents Superman's muscular, costumed body dozens of times. Furthermore, any action or violence that occurs in the stories also comes across much more viscerally and immediately. No matter how good a reader's imagination, a traditional text can only describe action with abstract symbols (letters). In a comic book, the reader can *see* what is done to whom and to what effect. And on a technical level, *Action Comics #1* is aptly named: I categorize more than two-thirds of the transitions between the first issue's 98 panels as "action-to-action," according to terminology developed by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, his groundbreaking comic book about comic books (see **Fig. 1.08** below). The same is true for *Action Comics #2* and *#3*.⁸⁸ Superhero comics focus on action, and that action is inherently violent even if the intentions behind it are

⁸⁷ WM §981, or eKGWB/NF-1887,10[68].

⁸⁸ Although I stopped keeping track after the first three issues, the impression remains that action-to-action transitions dominate in subsequent issues, and indeed in superhero comics generally over the past eighty-five years.

heroic. While Superman’s acts of violence are oftentimes socially acceptable and never directly fatal, all of Superman’s storylines adhere to the first “rule” of the genre as listed by comics scholar Mila Bongco: “A mystery or dilemma is confronted with violence.”⁸⁹



Fig. 1.08 McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 74.

Let us return to *Action Comics #1*, which illustrates the reliance of the superhero narrative on violent action as well as any of the thousands of superhero comics published since 1938. Panel ten, which begins the second page of the issue, depicts Superman exhibiting both superspeed and superstrength: he is shown mid-jump, soaring above a house and road, carrying a

⁸⁹ Bongco, *Reading Comics*, 91. Bongco further lists the following: “Women are victims to be rescued. Heroes are tough and honourable. The law needs the hero’s help. There are elaborate fight scenes whose winner is almost inevitable. Language is masculine. Plotting is precise and often predictable.” These attributes are equally important and will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

bound and gagged woman (see **Fig. 1.09**). Since we have been told of Superman's devotion to "helping those in need," we can assume that Superman has good reason to tie up and transport this woman in this manner. And in fact, panel twenty-two of the issue reveals that the woman is guilty of murder. Superman is—quite literally—bringing her to justice. Superman's path to justice is action-packed, as shown in **Fig. 1.09**. After depositing the bound and gagged murderer, Superman forcibly enters the governor's residence. In the process, he smashes through two doors, manhandles a frightened, nightgowned assistant/bodyguard, awakens the governor, is shot by and subsequently disarms the assistant, all to deliver a signed confession. Each action is given its own panel, and so the narrative proceeds on an action-to-action basis. A small clock in the bottom right corner of panels twenty-six and twenty-seven (see **Fig. 1.10** below) adds to the suspense, counting down the minutes until an innocent woman is executed. The governor, receiving the confession, telephones a stay of execution just in the nick of time.

In the 1940s and 1950s, critics like Ong and Wertham asserted that depictions of violence in comic books directly inspired impressionable young readers to commit acts of violence in real life. This particular argument has been broadly dismissed by comics scholarship today, but the superhero genre's reliance on violence is still sometimes acknowledged to be problematic. And some contemporary comics scholars and critics still share the early critics' negative view of Nietzsche: Holdier and Gavalier, for example, continue to scapegoat Nietzsche in their attempts to validate superhero comic books, salvaging the reputations of superheroes by doubling down on earlier attacks against Nietzsche. The notion that Nietzsche gloried in depictions of physical strength and would have approved of the use of violence to solve the world's problems persists, even if modern critics develop more nuanced moral interpretations of superheroic violence than



Fig. 1.09 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics #1*, 5, panels 10-17.



Fig. 1.10 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics #1*, 7, panels 26-28.

their predecessors from the 1940s and '50s. Holdier, for example, asserts that by “absorbing the power of the sun to accomplish the impossible, Superman proves to be the very embodiment of the will to power.”⁹⁰ Ostensibly, Holdier is not arguing that Nietzsche’s Übermensch photosynthesizes, but rather that Superman’s ability to absorb energy from Earth’s yellow sun (an ability added to the Superman mythos many years after his debut) would impress Nietzsche, who, Holdier argues, “would be captivated by Superman’s range of abilities, particularly their way of taking the best of human abilities (such as strength or speed) and cranking their power up off the charts.”⁹¹ This statement implicitly argues that, for Nietzsche, the “best” things about a given individual are how much he can lift and how fast he can run. Holdier interprets Nietzsche’s “will to power” in strictly physical terms: “power” means physical strength, and the “will to power” is the individual’s desire to increase his or her physical strength. Holdier further suggests that Nietzsche’s glorification of power comes without any moral constraints: that is, Nietzsche would be just as impressed by a supervillain as by a superhero, and that he would actively despise Superman for using his powers in service to others and keeping his identity secret: “The mere fact that Superman has a ‘mild-mannered alter ego’ would turn Nietzsche’s stomach, for no true Übermensch would ever hide his absolute superiority,” opting instead to “rule the unpowered peasants” of the world.⁹²

When we turn from Holdier’s essay to Nietzsche’s works, we can certainly find passages that, taken in isolation and without regard for original context, appear at first glance to support Holdier’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s “will to power.” “Was ist gut?” asks Nietzsche rhetorically in the second aphorism of *Der Antichrist*: “Alles, was das Gefühl der Macht,

⁹⁰ Holdier, “Where Have All the Supermen Gone?” 7.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

den Willen zur Macht, die Macht selbst im Menschen erhöht.”⁹³ If we couple this passage with, say, the following sentence from *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886), we can easily extrapolate a power-hungry Übermensch from Nietzsche’s works: “Die ‚Ausbeutung‘ gehört nicht einer verderbten oder unvollkommenen und primitiven Gesellschaft an: sie gehört in’s *Wesen* des Lebendigen, als organische Grundfunktion, sie ist eine Folge des eigentlichen Willens zur Macht, der eben der Wille des Lebens ist.”⁹⁴ Exploitation („Ausbeutung“) as the *essence* of organic life, coupled with a moral value judgment equating what is “good” with what increases our feeling of power? Increasing one’s physical strength by absorbing solar rays and establishing one’s dominance over others (“setting up his own kingdom to rule the unpowered peasants,” in Holdier’s words) would certainly seem to qualify as manifestations of Nietzsche’s “Wille zur Macht.”

Such an interpretation of Nietzsche’s “will to power,” while certainly possible, overlooks an enormous amount of material in Nietzsche’s published works and unpublished fragments that presents a much more nuanced picture of the concept. Let us start at the beginning. Chronologically, the first appearance of the phrase “der Wille zur Macht” comes in the first book of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, written in January of 1883. In the speech “Von tausend und einem Ziele,” Zarathustra informs his listeners (apparently referring to himself in the third person) that he has traveled far and seen many nations and many peoples (“Völker”). Consequently, he has discovered “vieler Völker Gutes und Böses. Keine grössere Macht fand Zarathustra auf Erden, als gut und Böse.” Zarathustra is speaking here of morality: every tribe, culture, and nation has its own moral values, what it considers “good” and “evil.” The greatest power on Earth, according to Zarathustra, is moral valuation. Thus: “Eine Tafel der Güter hängt über jedem

⁹³ Nietzsche, AC §2.

⁹⁴ Nietzsche, JGB §259.

Volke. Siehe, es ist seiner Überwindungen Tafel; siehe, es ist die Stimme seines Willens zur Macht." A given people's moral system (its "Tafel der Güter") represents the moral challenges it has overcome and is therefore the voice of its "will to power." Upon its first appearance in Nietzsche's works, then, the concept of "der Wille zur Macht" is exercised by a *group* of people rather than an individual and refers specifically to the human tendency to create moral systems. In order to differentiate itself from its neighbors, a people ("ein Volk") must make moral value judgments that differ from their neighbors' values. In so doing, a society exercises its will to power *over itself*: it sets and enforces moral laws that all members of that society must follow. Nietzsche's Zarathustra emphasizes the point that the "will to power" manifests as the act of value creation in "Von der Selbst-Überwindung," a speech in the book's second part. Here, Zarathustra declares:

„Nur, wo Leben ist, da ist auch Wille: aber nicht Wille zum Leben, sondern — so lehre ich's dich — Wille zur Macht!

„Vieles ist dem Lebenden höher geschätzt, als Leben selber; doch aus dem Schätzen selber heraus redet — der Wille zur Macht!“ —

The "will to power" is not the "will to life" or the "will to survive." There are things that human beings value ("schätzen") more than life, itself. There are as many such goals as there are individual human beings, but the very act of valuing something as worth more than life itself is, itself, an expression of the "will to power." The "will to power" is, consequently, the will to assign value to different moral concepts.

This being said, Nietzsche recognizes that the will to power *can* manifest itself as the desire to obtain power over others, whether physical, political, or moral. Nietzsche usually presents this idea in the form of opposing "wills to power" between two or more human "types." One such opposition is that between "Herren-Moral" and "Sklaven-Moral," which will be the focus of the next chapter. Another opposition, and the more germane to this discussion of power

as physical strength, is that between the healthy (“die Gesunden”) and the sick and weak (“die Kranken” and “die Schwachen”). Nietzsche writes that not only the strong and healthy, but also the weak and sick can seek power over others. The “sick” do this through deception and trickery: “Der Wille der Kranken, *irgend* eine Form der Überlegenheit darzustellen, ihr Instinkt für Schleichwege, die zu einer Tyrannei über die Gesunden führen, — wo fände er sich nicht, dieser Wille gerade der Schwächsten zur Macht!”⁹⁵ Here, tyranny is explicitly connected with “die Kranken,” not “die Gesunden.” The sick wish to dominate, a goal that Nietzsche argues should be opposed. The sick, because they are weaker than the healthy, cannot openly challenge the latter, and so they must resort to trickery. As we will see in the next chapter, this trickery usually involves developing a guilty conscience in the healthy and strong, who are eventually convinced that their strength and health are somehow shameful or sinful. Although the “will to power” of the strong and healthy may be exploitative, it is at least honest relative to the deceitful “will to power” of the weak and sick.

This proposition is enough for comics scholar Chris Gavalier to dismissively link Nietzsche with Sir Francis Galton, the man who “coined the term ‘eugenics[.]’”⁹⁶ Gavalier’s point is that Nietzsche supports the right of the strong to *dominate* the weak, whereas superheroes like Superman represent a worldview wherein the weak have the right to be *protected by* the strong. Sometimes, however, even superhero comics are not unambiguous on this point, and sometimes superhero comics present the idea that, to use Nietzsche’s words, “Die Kranken sind die grösste Gefahr für die Gesunden[.]”⁹⁷ Such is the case—on the surface, at least—with the first supervillain that Superman encounters in *Action Comics #13* (cover date

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, GM-III §14.

⁹⁶ Gavalier, *Superhero Comics*, 51.

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, GM-III §14.

June 1939). In this issue, the super-strong Superman battles the Ultra-Humanite, a physically disabled genius. Closer examination of *Action Comics #13* will, I believe, help us shed further light on the issue of “health” and “sickness” in Nietzsche’s works, and vice versa.

The Ultra-Humanite does not reveal himself to Superman (and thus to the reader) until the second half of *Action Comics #13*. Once he does, and we discover that he is physically disabled, the visual emphasis on Superman’s muscular physique retrospectively appears to be much more pronounced in this issue than in the preceding twelve. As ever, the title panel contains a narrative box highlighting Superman’s incredible physical strength: “Friend of the helpless and oppressed is *Superman*, a man possessing the strength of a dozen Samsons!” Superman is shown hoisting a truck over his head while the frightened driver cowers on the floor of the cab. Every subsequent page abounds with depictions of Superman’s super-power. In panel 7 (see **Fig. 1.11** below), strategically placed squiggles are drawn over his arms, chest, and legs, clearly outlining his bulging musculature. And if the readers aren’t paying close enough attention to the image, the narrative caption across the top of the panel specifically reminds us that Superman possesses “incredibly powerful muscles.” Superman later kidnaps a racketeering goon, who tries to stab Superman while the two are in midair. Panel 27 (see **Fig. 1.12**) shows both plummeting downward, Superman with well-muscled arms and legs akimbo, chest and abdomen fairly bursting through his skintight costume.

The adventure continues, and so does Superman’s “orgy of muscularity.”⁹⁸ He arrives at a taxicab garage operated by a protection gang and forces the two attendant goons to smash their own cars. The thugs need some convincing, and only after being tossed around by the physically superior Superman do they finally agree to destroy their automobiles with sledge hammers (see

⁹⁸ Ong, “The Comics and the Super State,” 38.



Fig. 1.11 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics #13*, 182, panel 7.

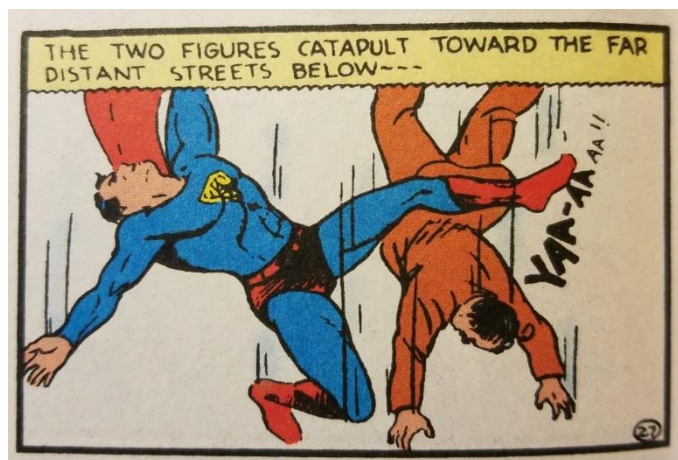


Fig. 1.12 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics #13*, 184, panel 27.



Fig. 1.13 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics #13*, 187, panels 52-53.

Fig. 1.13 above). Superman turns a man called Reynolds, ostensibly the gang's head honcho, over to the police, but the criminal escapes, forcing Superman to chase him into the woods. Arriving at an abandoned cabin, Superman finally faces the true mastermind: the "Ultra-Humanite." Upon his appearance in panel 71 (see **Fig. 1.14** below), it is not clear that the Ultra-Humanite is sitting down because he cannot stand; Reynolds, in the foreground, is also sitting in an identical green chair. But the very next panel clarifies the Ultra-Humanite's situation: he is a "paralyzed cripple" whose "fiery eyes [...] burn with terrible hatred and sinister intelligence." Dressed in a white coat and surrounded by laboratory paraphernalia, he is the textbook mad scientist. Though physically powerless, the Ultra-Humanite's superhuman mental abilities qualify him as a supervillain. "You may possess unbelievable strength - - but you are pitting yourself against a mental giant!" he tells Superman in panel 74. "[A] scientific experiment resulted in my possessing the most agile and learned brain on Earth!" he continues in panel 75. "Unfortunately for mankind, I prefer to use this great intellect for crime. My goal? *Domination of the world!!*"

The association of disability with criminal intention is striking. It is possible that Siegel and Shuster intended the Ultra-Humanite's disability to simply function as a means of physically differentiating him from Superman. Tom De Haven points out the obvious similarity of the two characters' names, wryly suggesting that "Jerry Siegel threw [that name] together probably from a handy thesaurus, using one-to-one synonyms for 'super' and 'man.'"⁹⁹ Despite the synonymity of their names, the two characters are opposites, and the opposite of a superpowered human being is, quite simply, an individual who is *less* than normally-abled. On the other hand, Gavalier, with passing reference to De Haven, goes further, stating that "Siegel, having designed

⁹⁹ De Haven, *Our Hero*, 123.



Fig. 1.14 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics* #13, 190, panels 69-76.

Superman as a distortion of his Nietzschean namesake, refracts the image back at its source, personifying fascism as a would-be ultra-human dictator.¹⁰⁰ Once again, Gavalier reductively equates Nietzsche's Übermensch with the Third Reich's notions of racial and political

¹⁰⁰ Gavalier, *Superhero Comics*, 111.

superiority. Furthermore, it is not clear whether Siegel and Shuster were responding specifically to *Nietzsche's* Übermensch. Nevertheless, the two creators were almost certainly aware of Nazi Germany's Aryan "superman." If, as Gavalier more accurately argues, the "New Deal Superman mirrored the Nazi superman, reversing political aims as an anti-democratic dictator,"¹⁰¹ then we can interpret the Ultra-Humanite as a further attempt to devalue the Hitlerian superman by making him a physical cripple. This is the first character in any Superman story to explicitly state "domination of the world" as his goal, and his objectionable moral alignment is reflected in his physical condition. In marked contrast to Superman's powerful frame and purposeful action, the Ultra-Humanite must be carried, chair and all, out of the cabin (see **Fig. 1.15** below). The would-be dictator's impotence is revealed as he flails his arms (and somehow his legs) in ineffectual rage, looking for all the world like a child throwing a tantrum. The critique of fascist dictators is clear. Superman's actions at the story's end are equally unambiguous: he "deliberately" smashes the escape-plane's propellor in panel 94, sending the plane and its



Fig. 1.15 Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics* #13, 192 panel 87.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

villainous occupants crashing to the ground. Of course, the Ultra-Humanite's body is not among the wreckage...

Although the association between physical disability and moral corruption is noticeable in this issue, the former is never explicitly stated to be the cause of the latter. In fact, several issues later, the Ultra-Humanite transfers his consciousness into the body of a young, attractive Hollywood actress. Despite his newfound able-bodiedness, however, the Ultra-Humanite remains as evil as ever, suggesting that his morally reprehensible desire for world domination has everything to do with his *inner* character rather than his *external* features and abilities. Thus, the Ultra-Humanite's physical disability may be an external signification, but perhaps not the *cause*, of an inner, spiritual "sickness." This is a problematic association in its own right, certainly, and the presentation of disability in comics (especially superhero comics) is gaining more widespread scholarly and popular attention.¹⁰² For our purposes, we should take notice of the fact that the dichotomy presented in *Action Comics #13* is not only one of physical ability versus physical disability (even though, due to the visual nature of the medium, this is prominently displayed), but between competing moral valuations (Superman's altruistic service versus the Ultra-Humanite's selfish desire for world domination). Ultimately, the latter is of greater significance when it comes to differentiating between "good" and "bad" superhuman characters in *Action Comics #13* and in superhero comics broadly speaking.

Similarly, the relationship between physical weakness and spiritual sickness in Nietzsche's works is more nuanced than it appears when certain quotations are taken out of context. Aside from a bizarre contempt for vegetarianism, which he faults for predisposing

¹⁰² See, for example, the chapter entitled "Why Illness & Disability?" in Hilary Chute's full-color 2017 monograph *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*.

people “zu Denk- und Gefühlsweisen, die narkotisch wirken,”¹⁰³ Nietzsche generally maintains that a physically ill individual is not necessarily fated to become spiritually sick. In the introduction to the revised and expanded second edition of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1885), Nietzsche uses his own life as an example. The philosopher was frequently ill, suffering from incredible migraines and prolonged bouts of stomach upset and vomiting. But he took pride in his ability to recover, not only physically but spiritually, as well. He never abandoned his philosophical mission, even though reading and writing brought on incapacitating migraines. In his own estimation, his survival depended on his ability to view each new onset of physical illness as the prelude to a still greater convalescence. Nietzsche writes that gratitude for a (brief) return to health permeates this book:

Die Dankbarkeit strömt fortwährend aus, als ob eben das Unerwartetste geschehn sei, die Dankbarkeit eines Genesenden, — denn die *Genesung* war dieses Unerwartetste. „Fröhliche Wissenschaft“: das bedeutet die Saturnalien eines Geistes, der einem furchtbaren langen Drucke geduldig widerstanden hat — geduldig, streng, kalt, ohne sich zu unterwerfen, aber ohne Hoffnung —, und der jetzt mit Einem Male von der Hoffnung angefallen wird, von der Hoffnung auf Gesundheit, von der *Trunkenheit* der Genesung.¹⁰⁴

Nietzsche here claims that, while his physical convalescence contributed to a “Saturnalia of the spirit,” his spirit, though it lacked all hope for the body’s convalescence, had nevertheless borne this sickness patiently, coldly, with discipline and without surrendering to despair. His body may have been sick and weak, but his spirit remained strong throughout his ordeal.

It is true, however, that for Nietzsche the body and the spirit are linked. When the body is healthy, it is easy for the spirit to be healthy. When the body is sick, the spirit will remain healthy if it is strong, or it will become sick if it is weak. When Nietzsche emphasizes physical health, he does so on the one hand in order to combat what he saw as a particularly dangerous

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, FW §145.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Vorrede §2.

spiritual illness. Nietzsche's emphasis on the *physical* must be understood first and foremost as a rejection of the *metaphysical*. The belief in the "beyond," religious or metaphysical, is a spiritual sickness that *can* be born of physical illness and weakness. If it is, the cycle becomes self-perpetuating, as the spiritually infirm turn against their own physical bodies. Thus the power of which Nietzsche's Zarathustra speaks when he says: "Bleibt mir der Erde treu, meine Brüder, mit der Macht eurer Tugend!"¹⁰⁵ has nothing to do with physical strength and everything to do with rejecting metaphysical moral worldviews. Holdier, however, believes the former to be the case when he compares Nietzsche's Übermensch to Superman. "To borrow another line from Nietzsche," writes Holdier, "Superman's abilities tend to 'remain faithful to the Earth,' with no hint of mystical or magical empowerment [...] his talents are biological."¹⁰⁶ Far from endorsing superpowers, natural or otherwise, Nietzsche's Zarathustra is actually encouraging his listeners to bring "die verflogene Tugend zur Erde zurück – ja, zurück zu Leib und Leben: dass sie der Erde ihren Sinn gebe, einen Menschen-Sinn!" Zarathustra's brothers-in-arms are waging a war against the religious and metaphysical doctrines and virtues that have disconnected moral value from the physical (i.e. real) world.

In *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), which will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Two, Nietzsche explicitly identifies the Judeo-Christian belief in God, sin, and the afterlife as "die furchtbarste Krankheit, die bis jetzt im Menschen gewüthet hat."¹⁰⁷ The greatest sickness that has ever ravaged humankind is, according to Nietzsche, *spiritual* in nature. In this section, Nietzsche enumerates at length the aspects of Christian belief that he finds objectionable, and the general gist is that he objects to "der *Wille* des Menschen, sich schuldig und verwerflich zu

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, Z-I "Von der schenkenden Tugend." All other quotations from Nietzsche in this paragraph come from the same.

¹⁰⁶ Holdier, "Where Have All the Supermen Gone?" 7. Again, Holdier does not name the source of this translation.

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, GM-II §22. All further quotations in this paragraph come from the same.

finden, [...] sein *Wille*, ein Ideal aufzurichten — das des ‚heiligen Gottes‘ —, um Angesichts desselben seiner absoluten Unwürdigkeit handgreiflich gewiss zu sein.” This he calls “eine Art Willens-Wahnsinn in der seelischen Grausamkeit, der schlechterdings seines Gleichen nicht hat[.]” It is a spiritual sickness beyond compare, and one that can easily manifest itself in the drive for physical power over others. By means of such religious notions, the physically weak and politically ineffectual can instill a guilty conscience in rulers and other “strong” individuals, to such a degree that the latter give up their power and submit to the rule of the former. This is the aforementioned “Wille gerade der Schwächsten zur Macht,” which must use intellectual trickery and spiritual deceit in order to triumph over the spiritually and physically healthy and strong. The “will to power” exists in *everyone*, argues Nietzsche, and it manifests itself differently according to the strength and healthiness of a given individual’s spirit.

Consequently, physical weakness is not inherently connected to spiritual sickness in Nietzsche’s works, but the former can often be indicative of the latter. And just as a sick person seeks only rest and the easing of his symptoms, so too does a spiritually sick person seek moral absolutes, which allow human beings to quiet their minds and bask the false comfort of metaphysical certainty:

Jede Philosophie, welche den Frieden höher stellt als den Krieg, jede Ethik mit einer negativen Fassung des Begriffs Glück, jede Metaphysik und Physik, welche ein Finale kennt, einen Endzustand irgend welcher Art, jedes vorwiegend aesthetische oder religiöse Verlangen nach einem Abseits, Jenseits, Ausserhalb, Oberhalb erlaubt zu fragen, ob nicht die Krankheit das gewesen ist, was den Philosophen inspirirt hat.¹⁰⁸

From this passage, we can also discover the deeper significance that Nietzsche attaches to the terms “Frieden” and “Krieg.” A philosophy that seeks peace of mind springs from sickness, not health. When philosophers seek “peace,” they define happiness negatively, as the absence of

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, FW-Vorrede §2.

unhappiness. Such a philosopher desires to reach a final state rather than face the constant struggle of self-overcoming by which individuals, and indeed all of humanity, raise themselves to ever greater heights of self-creation and moral valuation. Adopting a philosophy that values war higher than peace, on the other hand, metaphorically signifies a desire for philosophical struggle and conflict in order that these challenges might be used as fuel for perpetual development of the self. Even some fragments in *Der Wille zur Macht* support this interpretation of “war” and “struggle,” contrary to the militaristic image that Nietzsche’s sister seeks to create of her brother’s work. In the following fragment, which dates from a period between November 1887 and March 1888, Nietzsche notes: “Die stärksten und ohnmächtigsten Naturen werden sich gleich, wenn dieser Zustand über sie kommt: sie *vergöttlichen* das *Aufhören* der Arbeit, des Kampfes, der Leidenschaften, der Spannung, der Gegensätze, der ‚*Realität*‘ in summa... des Ringens um Erkenntniß, der *Mühe* der Erkenntniß.”¹⁰⁹ Work and struggle (“Arbeit” and “Kampf”) are explicitly connected to the struggle for knowledge (“Ringens um Erkenntniß”), not to literal physical warfare. For Nietzsche, the quest to increase human knowledge (“Erkenntniß”) is a battle every bit as much as a physical skirmish between opposing armies. All human beings, regardless of their degree of intellectual strength, are susceptible to the desire to deify the cessation of labor, of struggle (“des Kampfes”), and of the passions—that is, to abandon the pursuit of knowledge and the hard work that this pursuit requires.

For Nietzsche, life *is* struggle, a “war” waged between competing individuals’ wills to power as well as between conflicting drives within a single individual. Within every individual a sick, life-negating will to power battles a healthy, life-affirming will to power. A life-negating, “body-despising” will to power asserts itself at the expense of all healthy, self-sufficient types,

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, WM §335, or eKGWB/NF-1887,11[278].

who are made to feel inferior and forced to repress their life-affirming selves. The “will to power” of spiritual sickness, according to Nietzsche, can be and frequently is connected to physical weakness or ineffectualness, a suggestion that we see echoed in the crippled figure of the Ultra-Humanite. But for Nietzsche, spiritual infirmity is of primary consideration. Again, we see this echoed in the figure of the Ultra-Humanite, for even when the supervillain transplants his mind into a physically strong body, his spirit remains crippled. His life-negating desire to dominate others can never defeat Superman’s clarity of purpose, which springs from an overabundance (Nietzsche’s word is “Überfülle”¹¹⁰) of physical strength and manifests itself in his spiritual health.

5. Self-Overcoming: The True Superpower

A life-negating will to power seeks conformity and comfort. It does not desire change because change is an inherently painful process. For those possessing a life-affirming will to power, however, their strength—spiritual as well as physical—compels them to seek out new challenges and to welcome each new struggle as an opportunity for further self-overcoming. Nietzsche’s famous but often misunderstood aphorism “*Aus der Kriegsschule des Lebens*” takes on its full meaning in this context: “Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker.”¹¹¹ Life’s “school of war” instills in select pupils a life-affirming attitude. The higher type of human being converts the experiences of struggle and suffering into greater strength of body and mind. Every experience, good or bad, is made to serve a healthy individual’s self-overcoming. In Kynast’s estimation, the will to power is simply Nietzsche’s word for “permanente

¹¹⁰ See Nietzsche, GT “Versuch einer Selbstkritik” §1 and §5, as well as FW §370.

¹¹¹ Nietzsche, GD, “Sprüche und Pfeile” §8.

Selbstüberwindung.”¹¹² In order to achieve this state of permanent self-overcoming, strong, life-affirming individuals must be permitted the freedom to constantly create and recreate themselves. In the second part of the *Genealogie*, Nietzsche definitively declares that “der Wille zur Macht” is “eben jener *Instinkt der Freiheit*.”¹¹³ Every living organism seeks the freedom to grow and thrive. This goal aims beyond mere survival, and so Nietzsche does not speak of the “will to live,” but rather the “will to power.”

In support of this assertion, Kaufmann calls our attention to a speech in the second part of *Zarathustra* titled “Von der Selbst-Überwindung.” In this section, argues Kaufmann, “[t]he will to power is conceived of as the will to overcome oneself.”¹¹⁴ According to the character Zarathustra, “das Leben selber” spoke to him, saying, ““Siehe, [...] ich bin das, *was sich immer selber überwinden muss*.”” Zarathustra continues, saying that Life told him of itself: “,Was ich auch schaffe und wie ich’s auch liebe, – bald muss ich Gegner ihm sein und meiner Liebe: so will es mein Wille.”¹¹⁵ Life itself must constantly overcome that which it once created and loved. It must never *be*—it must always *become*. The *Übermensch*, then, is one who adopts the same attitude toward Life as Life itself has. Nietzsche’s *Übermenschen* seek the freedom to create values and give their lives meaning, and as they develop, they have the strength to recognize that a once cherished conviction or goal no longer serves them, and so they create new convictions and set new goals. Contrary to Holdier’s assertion that Nietzsche values physical strength above all else, this sort of self-overcoming has nothing to do with anaerobic exercise. Living in this way requires spiritual and moral strength, for, as Kaufmann observes, “these

¹¹² Kynast, *Friedrich Nietzsches Übermensch*, 90.

¹¹³ Nietzsche, GM-II §18.

¹¹⁴ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 200.

¹¹⁵ Nietzsche, Z-II “Von der Selbst-Ueberwindung.”

Übermenschen appear as symbols of the repudiation of any conformity to a single norm”¹¹⁶— even to such norms as they, themselves, create! The spiritual capacity to face the truth—the truth that there are no absolutes, and no moral values save what human beings set for themselves¹¹⁷—is the measure of the will to power. “It may seem to make the will to power more attractive that one can exert it by being a philosopher, without harming anyone,” muses Kaufmann.¹¹⁸ Still, we must not forget that for Nietzsche, the sufferings and privations wrought by real, physical hardships, including even war, also provide opportunities for self-overcoming for those individuals who are spiritually strong enough to take advantage of the situation. Nevertheless, as Norbert Reichel so neatly puts it, “[d]ie Fähigkeiten, die Nietzsche dem ‚Schaffenden‘ zuschreibt, sind vor allem *intellektuelle*.”¹¹⁹

The individual’s path of continual self-overcoming is rarely pleasant. Healthy individuals, however, can bear struggle and strife if they have given their life a purpose: “Hat man sein *warum?* des Lebens, so verträgt er sich fast mit jedem *wie?* – Der Mensch strebt *nicht* nach Glück; nur der Engländer tut das,” writes Nietzsche in *Götzendämmerung*.¹²⁰ Every human being wants to have a purpose in life or, failing that, a purpose *for* life. Spiritually weak and sick individuals embrace metaphysical and religious notions that the purpose of life lies in preparing for an afterlife—or they simply assert that life has no meaning and embrace nihilism (according

¹¹⁶ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 309.

¹¹⁷ As the figure of Life cries out to Zarathustra in Z-II “Von der Selbst-Ueberwindung:” “Gutes und Böses, das unvergänglich wäre – das giebt es nicht!”

¹¹⁸ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 203.

¹¹⁹ Reichel, *Der Traum vom höheren Leben*,“ 125, emphasis added.

¹²⁰ Nietzsche, GD “Sprüche und Pfeile” §12. The reference to “Engländer” is an allusion to British utilitarian philosophers, whom Nietzsche held in decidedly low esteem. A note used in WM sheds further light on this aphorism, illuminating the fact that Nietzsche, in his talk of “Lust” and “Unlust,” pain and pleasure, is not advocating for a hedonistic lifestyle: “Ist man über das ‘Warum?’ seines Lebens mit sich im Reinen, so giebt man dessen *Wie?* leichten Kaufs. Es ist selbst schon ein Zeichen von Unglauben an *Warum?*, an Zweck und Sinn, ein *Mangel an Willen*, wenn der Werth von Lust und Unlust in den Vordergrund tritt und hedonistisch-pessimistische Lehren Gehör finden; und Entsagung, Resignation, Tugend, „Objektivität“ können zum Mindesten schon Zeichen davon sein, daß es an der Hauptsache zu mangeln beginnt. [¶] Daß man sich ein Ziel zu geben weiß — — —” (WM §790, or eKGWB/NF-1887,11[104]). .

to Nietzsche, however, there really is no difference between nihilism and any religion that preaches an afterlife). Healthy individuals, on the other hand, seek the freedom to set their own goals and give their own lives meaning, accepting that there is no definitive “meaning of life” and committing to revising their worldviews as their lives progress.

The question we must now pose to the comic-book Superman, then, is: does he exhibit the same strength *of spirit* and dedication to self-overcoming as Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*? Comics theorist Scott Bukatman says no: “Superman just doesn’t cut the mustard as an *übermensch* [sic]. He is to the manner born, so to speak; he doesn’t need to *become* a superman.”¹²¹ This is certainly true of the early Superman, who, as we have seen, arrives on the scene fully formed in *Action Comics #1*. Nothing in Superman’s original one-page origin story depicts a meaningful physical (let alone spiritual) development: as an infant, Superman was already superhumanly strong, and this power only increased as he grew older. This is not “development” in any way that would be meaningful to a human being (and, as Nietzsche himself points out, we can only ever approach unknown or unfamiliar phenomena from our limited human perspective¹²²).

When DC’s *The New 52* reboot hit the shelves in 2011, critics were quick to praise “this all-too-human Superman.”¹²³ It quickly becomes clear that this paratextual comment (itself a possible reference to Nietzsche’s 1878 work *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*) does not refer to the rebooted Superman’s physical powers. While returning to Superman’s roots as a social

¹²¹ Bukatman, “A Song of the Urban Superhero,” 193.

¹²² Nietzsche, FW §374: “ Wir können nicht um unsre Ecke sehn: es ist eine hoffnungslose Neugierde, wissen zu wollen, was es noch für andre Arten Intellekt und Perspektive geben *könnte*: [...] Aber ich denke, wir sind heute zum Mindesten ferne von der lächerlichen Unbescheidenheit, von unsrer Ecke aus zu dekretiren, dass man nur von dieser Ecke aus Perspektiven haben *dürfe*.“

¹²³ *Scripps Howard News Service*, cover review of *Superman Action Comics Volume 1*.

crusader, the writer and artists¹²⁴ behind the rebooted Superman quickly raise the stakes to cosmic levels. Superman is appropriately superpowered, and though General Lane (Lois Lane's father) mentions in the first issue of the new series that Superman is faster and stronger than he was six months ago,¹²⁵ the reader is not shown this physical development. When Superman bursts onto the scene in panel two of the first issue, he is moving so fast that he is only a red blur (see **Fig. 1.16** below). In panel three, he is shown from behind. His cape obscures most of his body from view, but his powerful forearms are clearly visible. In panel four, the reader sees his arms in more detail, along with his muscular chest and sculpted abdomen. The focal point in panel five is Superman's eyes, glowing white-red with the barely contained energy of his heat-ray vision. Superman is, if not at the height of his abilities, then at least close, and over the course of the next several issues he faces no physical obstacles that he cannot easily defeat.

Superman is not appreciably "all-too-human" in terms of his moral and spiritual development, either. From the very beginning, he has a clearly established moral code: in the fifth panel of **Fig. 1.16**, he addresses the corrupt businessmen whose party he has crashed as: "*Rats. Rats with money.*" (Their armed henchmen are, appropriately, "rats with guns.") His mind is already made up concerning the moral correctness of his actions. Superman is entirely sure of his moral mission—the protection of Metropolis and its inhabitants—doubting himself only once, and very briefly, in the series' third issue. In the span of a single gutter, Superman transitions from absolute confidence to complete resignation (see **Fig. 1.17** above). He wastes no time, however, in once again donning the costume (which, despite having been thrown into the garbage in #3, he appears to have had on his person in #4). Returning once again

¹²⁴ Grant Morrison, writer; Rags Morales, penciller; Rick Bryant, inker; Brad Anderson, colorist; Patrick Brosseau, letterer.

¹²⁵ Morrison et al., „Superman versus the City of Tomorrow,” n.p. It's also worth noting that none of these issues has a cover date.



Fig. 1.16 Morrison et al., first full page of “Superman versus the City of Tomorrow.”



Fig. 1.17 Morrison et al., “World Against Superman,” n.p., panels 5-6. Note how the pipe, bottle, and brick all extend beyond the top panel as the situation escalates beyond Superman’s control. In the bottom panel, Superman’s musculature is on full display.

to the first issue, Lex Luthor, after incapacitating Superman with a runaway bullet train, says wryly: “Behold. I give you Superman” (n.p.). This is, on one level, a clever callback to the famous line in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*: “Seht, ich lehre euch den Übermenschen.”¹²⁶ Grant Morrison, the writer of the rebooted series, uses the English translation of this phrase as the sole epigraph to *Supergods*, his 2011 memoir and comic-book history.¹²⁷ In the comics, Luthor has delivered Superman into the hand of the U.S. government, an action-oriented and literal version of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* teaching the ideal of the *Übermensch* to his listeners. More than this,

¹²⁶ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vorrede” §3.
¹²⁷ Morrison, *Supergods*, ix.

however, Luthor’s comment leaves no doubt that this *is* Superman and not merely a man on the way to *becoming* super.

In contrast to *The New 52*, however, Marv Wolfman and Claudio Castellini really do present Clark Kent’s spiritual development in the aptly titled *Man and Superman*.¹²⁸ In this four-part story arc, Superman’s development once again does not occur along physical lines—he is already spectacularly over-muscled when he arrives in Metropolis. In the first chapter, “In Which He Leaves Smallville as a Boy,” Superman’s physically perfect body is on full display as he struggles with crippling self-doubt (see **Fig. 1.18** below). Lying in bed, wearing only underwear, Clark curls up in the fetal position: despite his colossal physical strength, he is still in a state of infancy, unsure of himself and lacking the inner strength to give direction to his physical powers. We learn over the course of the narrative that Clark has been struggling with the moral implications of his powers ever since he was a young farm boy in Smallville, Kansas.



Fig. 1.18 Wolfman and Castellini, “Chapter One, in which He Leaves Smallville as a Boy,” n.p., panels 4-5.

¹²⁸ Begun in 2006, the project was shelved for over a decade before it was finally revived and published by DC in 2018. The title is perhaps a reference to George Bernard Shaw’s famous play of the same name, though neither Wolfman nor Castellini refer to this source in the deluxe edition’s commentary.

He is never shown training his body, for this part of himself has always been in peak condition. It is his moral and spiritual powers that require his attention.

A prolonged flashback in Chapter 3, “In Which He Asks the Question that Will Change His Life,” shows Clark working to improve his journalistic writing and discussing a pressing moral question with his parents. Trying on his outfit for the first time, Superman’s expression belies his heroic posture (see **Fig. 1.19** below). “If I put on the costume, I’m sorry, wear the *uniform*,” he observes, “I may never have a *quiet* moment again. Is it *selfish* to want what other people take for granted?” Clark wonders whether, given his powers, it would be morally acceptable for him *not* to spend every waking moment helping people. Martha Kent believes that the world “will *survive* with him helping *part-time*, too.”¹²⁹ Jonathan Kent is less sure of this. He tells his son that it isn’t “selfish” to want a life of his own, but he adds that “life isn’t always fair. Like I say, we do what we do.” Unsurprisingly, his parents’ conflicting advice leaves the young Clark Kent without a clear idea of what to do. From a Nietzschean perspective, we know that what he requires is the *freedom* to create his own way forward. He cannot do this for as long as he is directly under the influence and control of his parents, however well-intentioned their motives may be.

He creates his identity and his purpose by the end of the narrative, of course. And he does not disregard his parents’ advice entirely. Instead, he synthesizes his new sense of self out

¹²⁹ Wolfman and Castellini, *Man and Superman*, Chapter Three, n.p.

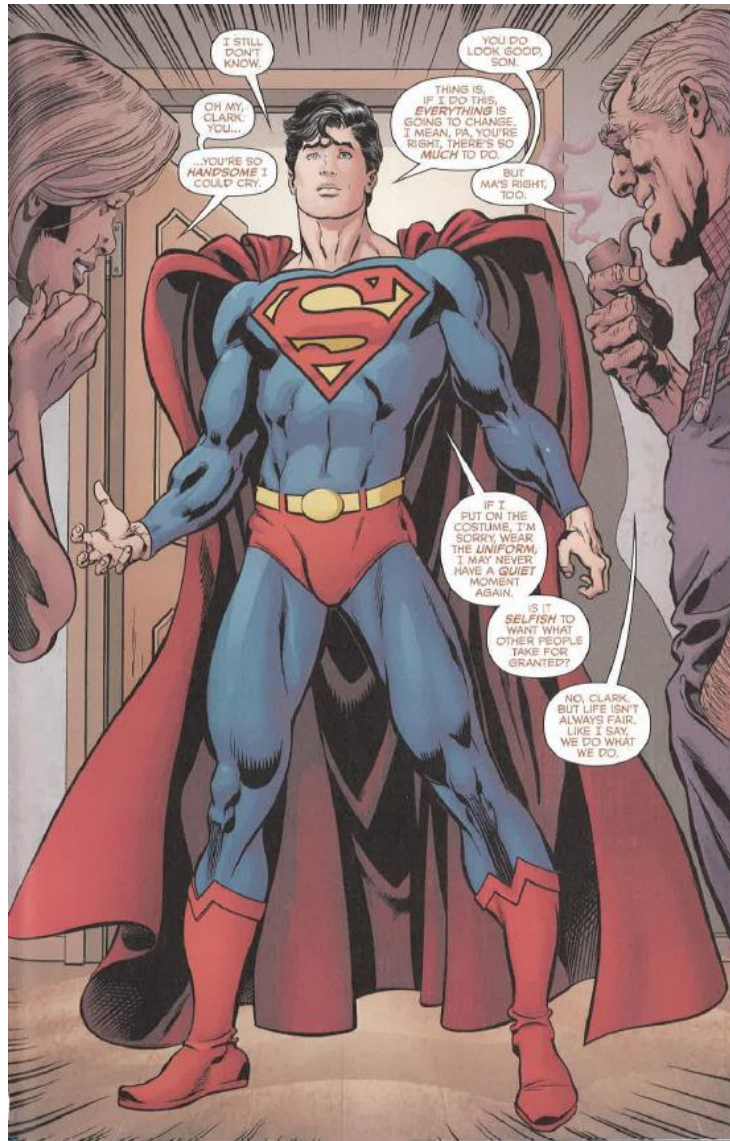


Fig. 1.19 Wolfman and Castellini, “Chapter 3, in which He Asks the Question That Will Change His Life,” n.p.

of what he has been taught *and* the realities of his own life as he has chosen to live it. Having traveled to Metropolis and grappled with what it means to be “Superman” (as in **Fig. 1.18** above), Clark realizes that the binary presented by his parents is a false one. He can help people by being Superman *and* by leading a “normal life” as the hard-hitting investigative journalist Clark Kent. In the latter guise, he can devote his career to exposing corruption, championing

social change, and spreading Superman’s message of hope and self-reliance to the world. Clark and Superman become two faces of the same person. This transformation reaches apothecic heights when, in Chapter Four (“In Which He Becomes a Man”), Superman/Clark flies home to retrieve his uniform. The image of Clark/Superman’s arrival at the Kent farm is undeniably dramatic in the body of the graphic novel, but in its reworked form as the cover of the deluxe edition, Clark/Superman appears downright godlike (see **Figs. 1.20** and **1.21**).¹³⁰ Castellini’s attached commentary on his own artwork does much of the interpretive work for us:

This touching scene in the evocative background of dawn, with the rays of the rising sun that highlight Clark’s backlit figure, highlights the birth of Superman. [...] With this entire picture, I wanted to sum up Superman’s entire moral fabric and pay tribute to the essence of the character, perfectly rendered by Marv’s wonderful script.¹³¹

The image is decidedly messianic, with rays of light framing Superman’s body. Hands outstretched in a gesture of benevolence, Superman is almost Christ-like—an impression reinforced by Martha and Jonathan’s joined hands. For me, the image evokes Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*.¹³² Having confronted and foiled the plans of the evil Lex Luthor, Superman/Clark has made “the decision to be filled with determination and acceptance.”¹³³ Returning to the farm to retrieve his uniform signifies his simultaneous acceptance and overcoming of all the boyhood doubts that had plagued him as a boy. He remains connected to his human roots—his parents and rural upbringing—even as he sets out on his superhuman mission. He has become, as the title implies, both “man” *and* “Superman.”

¹³⁰ In the comic book, this scene occurs immediately before Jonathan hands Clark his uniform. In the appendix “Birth of the Covers,” artist Castellini explains that, “for reasons of obvious spectacularity, he is already wearing the Superman costume” on the deluxe edition’s cover (117).

¹³¹ Castellini, *Man and Superman*, “Birth of the Covers,” 177. Admittedly, Castellini writes only that the clasped hands symbolize the Kents’ “bond of love and satisfaction for the decision of their ‘child’” (“Birth of the Covers,” 177). But this certainly does not mean that this is the *only* thing their clasped hands could signify.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Fig. 1.20 Wolfman and Castellini, “Chapter 4, in which He Becomes a Man,” n.p., panel 5.

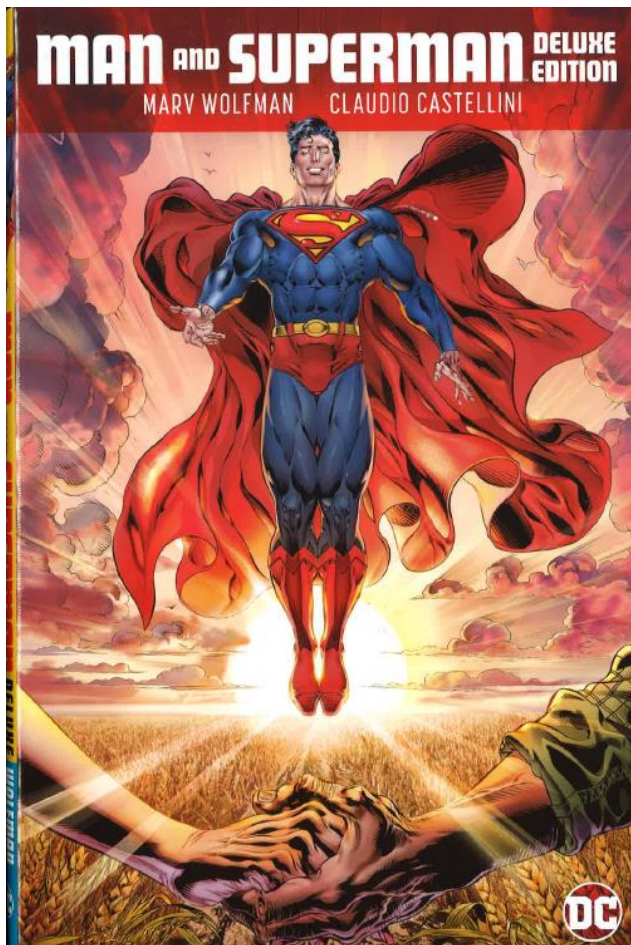


Fig. 1.21 Wolfman and Castellini, cover of *Man and Superman: Deluxe Edition*.

Superman’s messianic status is tempered, however, by Clark’s final newspaper article. In this “interview” with himself, Clark/Superman declares:



Fig. 1.22 Wolfman and Castellini, “Chapter 4, in which He Becomes a Man,” n.p., panel 4.

Superman’s spiritual and moral self-overcoming has led him to the realization that humankind must walk the path of its *own* self-overcoming. He cannot do it for them; he is a guide, not an outright savior. There are no shortcuts on the path to overcoming, as Nietzsche’s Zarathustra reminds us: “Es giebt vielerlei Weg und Weise der Überwindung: da siehe *du* zu! Aber nur ein Possenreisser denkt: ,der Mensch kann auch *übersprungen* werden.“¹³⁴ There are as many paths to self-overcoming as there are human beings. But the hard work of self-overcoming cannot be avoided. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra knows this, and so does Wolfman and Castellini’s Superman. The end of *Man and Superman* is just the beginning: Superman will continue along his path of self-overcoming and do his best to help us along ours, but without doing the hard work for us *or*

¹³⁴ Nietzsche, Z-III, “Von alten und neuen Tafeln” §4. For more context on the figure of the “Possenreiter,” see Nietzsche, Z-I, “Zarathustra’s Vorrede” §6-8.

restricting the freedom of each individual to choose what form their personal self-overcoming will take.

By the time of *Man and Superman*, it had long been established that Superman can assist but never dictate humanity's self-overcoming. In the story arc "The Power Within" (1988-89),¹³⁵ for example, Superman confronts a group of worshippers who have formed a cult of Superman. He sternly rebukes them for having surrendered their individual freedom in exchange for physical superpowers. In the final episode, it is revealed that the supervillain Darkseid granted the cultists their powers, not Superman. Darkseid declares that he "wanted the people who worship you to witness *true power!*"¹³⁶—that is, the power to dominate others. In so doing, Darkseid planned to use the now power-hungry cultists to serve his own nefarious ends of world domination. Superman explicitly rejects this conception of power, asserting that the greatest power of all is the ability to think for oneself. Having exposed the villainous Darkseid's plans and ended his influence over the cultists, Superman implores his former worshippers to heed his words:

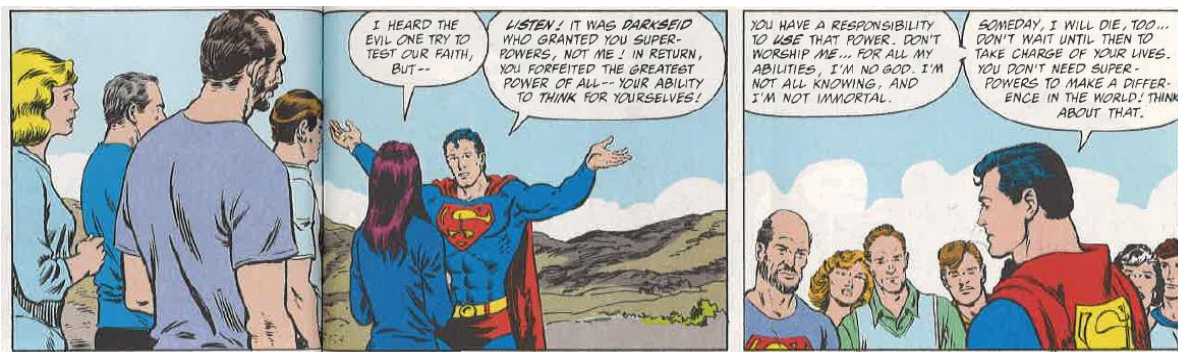


Fig. 1.23 Stern et al., *Action Comics* #641, 80-81, panels 5-6. Unlike most comics, this series is printed horizontally across two pages. Panel 5 almost appears split in two where the pages meet in the middle, but it is in fact one continuous panel.

¹³⁵ *Action Comics* #601-641. Roger Stern, writer; Curt Swan, penciller; John Beatty and Murphy Anderson, inkers; Bill Oakley, letterer; Tom Zuiko and Petra Scotese, colorists; Mike Carlin, editor.

¹³⁶ Stern et al., *Action Comics* #641 ("The Power Within"), 80, panel two.

Superman’s greatest accomplishment in this tale is not the physical defeat of Darkseid (in fact, Darkseid bests Superman physically but retreats, having lost his hold on the cultists in the process of fighting Superman). Instead, Superman has done something far more valuable: he has restored his former worshippers’ freedom to choose their own paths—their “power within.” Superman admonishes his devotees not to rely solely on him for help and protection, insisting that, since he won’t be around forever, they should not wait until he dies “to take charge of your lives.” He informs them that they do not need his superpowers—that they are, in fact, perfectly capable of providing themselves with purpose and direction.

Nietzsche expresses a similar idea in “Vademecum – Vadetecum,” the seventh of sixty-three rhyming preludes to *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*:

Es lockt dich meine Art und Sprach,
Du folgest mir, du gehst mir nach?
Geh nur dir selber treulich nach: —
So folgst du mir — gemacht! gemacht!¹³⁷

Nietzsche insists that his primary goal is not to tell his readers *what* to think (though he never tires of doing so), but rather to model *how* they should think. Nietzsche tells readers that he is only following himself, and so the best way to “follow his example” is simply to be true to themselves. His figure of Zarathustra echoes this sentiment in the ninth section of “Zarathustra’s Vorrede:” “Ein Licht gieng mir auf: Gefährten brauche ich und lebendige, — nicht todte Gefährten und Leichname, die ich mit mir trage, wohin ich will. [¶] Sondern lebendige Gefährten brauche ich, die mir folgen, weil sie sich selber folgen wollen — und dorthin, wo ich will.”¹³⁸ Zarathustra does not want slavish devotees, nor does he want power over others. He does not present the Übermensch because, as Holdier claims Nietzsche believes, “the only god

¹³⁷ Nietzsche, FW “Vorspiel in deutschen Reimen,” §7.

¹³⁸ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vorrede” §9.

for us is whoever turns out to be the strongest—in all likelihood, someone like Darkseid.”¹³⁹ Zarathustra instead wants to inspire his disciples to blaze their own intellectual trails, and Nietzsche similarly encourages his readers to take responsibility for the freedom to determine their own self-overcomings. *This* is the true “will to power” of which Nietzsche writes so much, and we have seen several examples of the comic-book Superman demonstrating precisely this “will to power” and reasserting humanity’s right to do the same.

6. Batman and Self-Overcoming

Because it is so rare for Superman to encounter any difficulty when overcoming physical and mental obstacles, two recent essays suggest that *Batman* better exemplifies the Nietzschean ideal of self-overcoming: C. K. Robertson’s “The True *Übermensch*: Batman as Humanistic Myth” (2005) and Suzie Gibson’s “Batman Is Superman” (2016). We will examine these two essays in chronological order. Robertson begins his essay by comparing Batman’s origin story to Nietzsche’s biography. Both, Robertson argues, suffered traumatic losses during childhood: Nietzsche’s father died when he was four years old, and Bruce Wayne’s parents were murdered when he was still a boy. I don’t believe Robertson’s point is to equate the suffering of a fictional character with the loss experienced by a real human being, but he does imply that both the real Nietzsche and the fictitious Bruce Wayne heroically overcome these losses. Nietzsche, who was constantly sick, “trained his mind like an Olympian,” which Robertson compares to Bruce Wayne’s transformation into Batman: “Driven by an indomitable will, this boy trained body and mind to human perfection.”¹⁴⁰ Robertson is here referring to *Detective Comic #33* (cover date November 1939), in which Batman’s origin story is finally revealed in a two-page

¹³⁹ Holdier, “Where Have All the Supermen Gone?” 5.

¹⁴⁰ Robertson, “The True *Übermensch*,” 49.

sequence (see **Fig. 1.24** below).¹⁴¹ Kneeling as though in prayer, Bruce Wayne declares: “I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals.” The following panel shows an adult Bruce Wayne working in a lab, having become “a master scientist.” The panel after that, located squarely in the page’s center, contains an image of Bruce Wayne, muscular body on full display, heaving a heavy weight high overhead. The narrative caption proclaims that Wayne has trained “his body to physical perfection.” A burst of yellow and red surrounds his figure, almost as though he were backlit by an explosion. This is not the case: instead, the colors are understood as visible to the reader but



Fig. 1.24 Kane and Finger, *Detective Comics* #33 63, full page.

This is the second page of Batman’s 2-page origin story.

¹⁴¹ When Batman was first featured in *Detective Comics* #27 (cover date May 1939), he appears fully formed, a “mysterious figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrong doer [sic], in his lone battle against the evil forces of society...” In his second adventure, (*Detective Comics* #28, cover date June 1939), the introductory narration (in a scroll-shaped “box”) reminds the reader that Batman’s true identity is that of Bruce Wayne, “bored young socialite.” This motivation is hardly satisfying, and so, seven issues into Batman’s original run, Bob Kane and Bill Finger (writer and artist, respectively) fit a deeper backstory into two neat pages.

not to the character within the panel's picture space and are meant to highlight the "amazing athletic feats" Wayne is performing.

Robertson argues that Batman's origins and further adventures chronicle "the way he continuously overcomes his human vulnerability,"¹⁴² but the original Batman's "self-overcoming" is limited to these three panels. Later iterations of the character make Bruce Wayne's choice of the bat as his symbol personally significant: as a boy, he developed a phobia of bats; by adopting the bat as his super-identity, he shows his readiness to overcome his own fear. This first version of Batman, on the other hand, chooses to base his superhero persona around the nocturnal creatures simply because he interpreted the random appearance of a bat at his mansion window as an omen reminding him that "criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot" (see the final three panels in **Fig. 1.24**; the irony of believing in omens while in the same breath deriding criminals as "superstitious" is apparently lost on Bruce Wayne). Throughout his early adventures, Batman meets any number of physical and/or intellectual obstacles that he overcomes with varying degrees of effort, but this constant overcoming appears to have no effect on his character development. He is effectively reset at the beginning of every issue, facing off against an endless stream of similarly static villains. Only Bruce Wayne's initial ability to overcome the trauma caused by his parents' murder and his dedication to training his body and mind as an adult support Robertson's case for Batman as an *Übermensch*. Robertson draws from Nietzsche's *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* and *Götzendämmerung* to make his argument. From the former, Robertson refers the reader to aphorism 268: "What makes [one] heroic? To go to meet simultaneously one's greatest sorrow and one's greatest hope." From the latter, Robertson excerpts "that which does not kill me makes me stronger," which I have discussed in Section 5

¹⁴² Robertson, "The True *Übermensch*," 56.

above. Combining both, Robertson concludes that “young Bruce Wayne suddenly left the world of the weak and, through his unique response to tragedy, entered a new world of the strong, the world of the *übermensch* [sic].”¹⁴³ Once the original Batman has made this transition, however, he never reevaluates his war on crime, nor does he evince any tendency to incorporate his encounters with various supervillains and petty criminals into continual moral and spiritual self-overcoming. Even taking Robin the Boy Wonder as a sidekick in *Detective Comics* #38 (cover date April 1940) does not precipitate any change in Wayne/Batman’s character! Not at first, at any rate. While subsequent artists and writers would sometimes present a slightly more nuanced Batman, the character remained largely static for the first half of his existence.

That would all change forty-six years later. Frank Miller, Lynn Varley, and Klaus Janson are widely credited with reinventing and reinvigorating the character of Batman in their landmark 1986 graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (hereinafter referred to as *DKR*). Will Brooker’s history of the character describes how the *DKR*-Batman became “the template of serious, grim, adult crimefighting,” an identity which the character has inhabited ever since.¹⁴⁴ Frank Miller confirms in his introduction to *Batman: Year One* (published in 1987) that he conceives of his darker, grittier version of Batman as a direct counter-presentation to the “camped-out” version of the character prominent in the 1960s.¹⁴⁵ Miller’s version of Batman has inspired many later film adaptations of the character, from Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989) to Christopher Nolan’s *Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005-2012). The post-1985 Batman is troubled, battling inner demons that constantly threaten to overwhelm him in addition to the usual external foes. According to Miller’s version of the character as first introduced in *DKR*, the trauma that

¹⁴³ Ibid., 55. Robertson does not cite the translations. In the original, the full aphorism reads: “*Was macht heroisch? — Zugleich seinem höchsten Leide und seiner höchsten Hoffnung entgegengehen*” (FW §268).

¹⁴⁴ Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 283.

¹⁴⁵ Miller, “Introduction,” *Batman: Year One*, n.p.

fuels Batman's superhero persona threatens to entirely subsume his Bruce Wayne alter-ego, and so the former must constantly be overcome.

Suzie Gibson places this grimmer interpretation of Batman at the center of her essay, "Batman Is Superman." Part of the same series of popular essays on superheroes as Holdier's "Where Have All the Supermen Gone," Gibson's essay refreshingly departs from Holdier's negative and limited focus on Nietzsche's will to power. She draws instead from Nietzsche's concept of the Apollonian and Dionysian creative forces in her attempt to illuminate Batman's inner struggle. Gibson applies these terms to Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* and simultaneously argues that the post-*DKR* version of Batman "straddle[s] Dionysian chaos with Apollonian reason."¹⁴⁶ To properly assess this argument, we must begin by delving a little deeper into what Nietzsche means by these two terms than Gibson does in her essay. We will then investigate how these two natural creative drives can be related to the *Übermensch* before finally considering Batman's fitness as an *Übermensch* in this expanded sense of the term.

The terms "das Apollinische" and "das Dionysische" first appear in Nietzsche's *Die Geburt in Tragödie* and refer to creative natural and artistic forces in ancient Greek and nineteenth-century German culture. In what follows, I shall restrict our understanding of "das Apollinische" and "das Dionysische" to Nietzsche's pronouncements on the same in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. The two terms, and especially "das Dionysische," undergo a subtle transformation of meaning in Nietzsche's later works (beginning with Book V of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, appended to the new edition in 1885). I will touch on this transformation in greater detail at the end of Chapter Four below. In *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, the two terms refer first and foremost to natural forces that are channeled through human artistic endeavor. Nietzsche emphasizes from

¹⁴⁶ Gibson, "Batman Is Superman," 243.

the start that we should regard “das Apollinische und seinen Gegensatz, das Dionysische, als künstlerische Mächte,” which burst forth “aus der Natur selbst, *ohne Vermittlung des menschlichen Künstlers.*” Nietzsche equates the Apollonian drive with “die Bilderwelt des Traumes” and defines the Dionysian “als rauschvolle Wirklichkeit, die wiederum des Einzelnen nicht achtet, sondern sogar das Individuum zu vernichten und durch eine mystische Einheitsempfindung zu erlösen versucht.”¹⁴⁷ Aesthetically, music is representative of the Dionysian force that reconnects individuals and cultures with the primal, mystical, eternal unity of nature, while the Apollinian takes the form of „blidende Kunst“ and grants individuals „jene maassvolle Begrenzung, jene Freiheit von den wilderen Regungen, jene weisheitsvolle Ruhe des Bildnergottes.”¹⁴⁸

The Apollinian and Dionysian creative drives, according to Nietzsche in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, are in a state of constant struggle with one another. At any given time, one or the other can gain the upper hand within an individual or even within an entire culture. Out of this contest between the two, however, come ever more powerful “births:” “beide so verschiedene Triebe gehen neben einander her, zumeist im offenen Zwiespalt mit einander und sich gegenseitig zu immer neuen kräftigeren Geburten reizend.”¹⁴⁹ In ancient Greece, Nietzsche argues, the struggle between the two culminated in the birth of Attic tragedy and the dramatic dithyramb, which together form “das gemeinsame Ziel beider Triebe, deren geheimnisvolles Ehebündnis, nach langem vorhergehenden Kampfe, sich in einem solchen Kinde – das zugleich Antigone und Cassandra ist – verherrlicht hat.”¹⁵⁰ The constant struggle between the two competing drives carried ancient Greek culture ever higher, until both drives united and produced a “child” greater

¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche, GT §2.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., §1.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., §4.

than either of its parents. In the tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus, writes Nietzsche, the ancient Greeks joyously affirmed life and recognized “dass selbst das Hässliche und Disharmonische ein künstlerisches Spiel ist, welches der Wille, in der ewigen Fülle seiner Lust, mit sich selbst spielt.”¹⁵¹

Importantly, these two drives, in addition to creating different types of art, grant human beings two very different insights into the natural world and humanity’s place within it. These differing insights into the nature of human existence also pose distinct dangers to human existence and consciousness. The Dionysian drive grants humanity an awareness of the unchanging unity of nature underlying all human activity. The Dionysian artist casts “einen wahren Blick in das Wesen der Dinge” and recognizes that humanity’s “Handlung kann nichts am ewigen Wesen der Dinge ändern.”¹⁵² This recognition, however, can easily rob an individual (or an entire culture) of the motivation to act at all. The beautiful illusions that one creates under the aegis of the Apollonian drive provide much-needed relief and frees human beings from Dionysian paralysis, allowing them to give their lives sense and meaning. Too far in the Apollinian direction, however, and one arrives at the equally fallacious conclusion “dass das Denken, an dem Leitfaden der Causalität, bis in die tiefsten Abgründe des Seins reiche, und dass das Denken das Sein nicht nur zu erkennen, sondern sogar zu *corrigiren* im Stande sei.”¹⁵³ Here we see already the rejection of absolutes that Nietzsche will apply time and again to all moral values, which for him includes the “unerschütterliche Glaube” in the ultimate explicability of the universe through science.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., §7.

¹⁵³ Ibid., §15. The phrase “unerschütterliche Glaube” also comes from this section.

Although Nietzsche had not conceived of the Übermensch at the time of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, we can connect the idea of the Übermensch to the interplay of these two creative forces with relative ease. The Übermensch is one who keeps both the Apollinian and Dionysian truths in view at the same time. The Übermensch recognizes that, because there is no metaphysical guarantee of human worth or absolute moral value, the meanings and purposes that we set for ourselves are illusory—but these illusions are necessary, and we must believe in them while also remaining open to amending them as required by our own internal and external circumstances. This is a difficult position to maintain, but the reward is, in Nietzsche’s estimation, great enough to justify the difficulty of the undertaking. By reconciling the conflicting drives to create beautiful illusions (the foundation of culture) and the drive to return to a preconscious state of natural unity, individuals and entire civilizations can synthesize both drives into entirely new states of being that are greater than the sum of their parts. The formula according to which “das Apollinische” and “das Dionysische” combine and transcend themselves in the form of Attic tragedy becomes emblematic of the process of self-overcoming in general.

I believe that this is what Gibson’s essay is suggesting, for although her depiction of the Dionysian force is more negative than Nietzsche’s (both Batman and the Übermensch, according to Gibson, are constantly “weighed down by the gravity of a dark and messy Dionysian world”¹⁵⁴), she recognizes that achieving greater unity of self requires *both* drives. In *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, both drives are necessary if human existence is to be justified—and, as Nietzsche famously asserts, “nur als *aesthetisches Phänomen* ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig *gerechtfertigt*.”¹⁵⁵ Gibson, however, suggests that “the resolution of the two [creative drives] is

¹⁵⁴ Gibson, “Batman Is Superman,” 239.

¹⁵⁵ Nietzsche, GT §5.

not the ultimate goal of the *Übermensch* since his identity is forged in and through conflict.”¹⁵⁶ It is true that the *Übermensch* is “forged” by external and internal conflicts, but Gibson has curiously overlooked the fact that the way these conflicts “forge” the *Übermensch* is through self-overcoming, by which process a “new” self is constantly being synthesized from two or more conflicting elements. The ancient Greeks were able to reach great heights under the alternating rule of the Apollonian or the Dionysian, but their *highest* achievement was the result of a successful *union* of the two. Similarly, if the *Übermensch* represents constant conflict without moments of resolution and synthesis, then the ideal could never encompass the highest heights of human existence. If we understand self-overcoming as a constant process that never reaches a final state (for to consider oneself in a “final state” would be to abandon the concept of self-overcoming and simply remain content with oneself as one is and cease to exercise one’s “will to power”), then it is no longer contradictory to understand the *Übermensch* as a series of conflicts *and* resolutions.

Understood thusly, I also believe that the Batman in Miller, Varley, and Janson’s *DKR* exemplifies this struggle and can be interpreted as an example of the dangerous opposition and triumphant union revealed in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Batman’s greatest foe in this four-part miniseries is himself. Physically, he struggles to get his own aging body to do what he requires of it. Spiritually, he must resist the bloodlust that threatens to overwhelm him, symbolized as a red-eyed, bare-fanged bat. When we meet the aging Bruce Wayne at the beginning of *DKR*, he has turned to non-physical means of fighting crime in Gotham city (financing the psychological rehabilitation of Harvey Dent, a.k.a. “Two-Face,” for example). But as he walks the streets, he feels this is not enough: “[I]n my gut the creature writhes and snarls and tells me what I

¹⁵⁶ Gibson, “Batman Is Superman,” 236.

need..."¹⁵⁷ Bruce Wayne has retired from vigilantism, but the unified identity he presents is a lie. So, as it turns out, is that of Harvey Dent, the erstwhile supervillain who has duped his psychiatrists into believing that their rehabilitation of his fractured psyche was successful. Writer and artists present this in a visually significant scene, in which the figure of Harvey Dent is split in two by the gutter (that is, the space between panels):

Fig. 1.25 Miller et al., *The Dark Knight Returns*, 15, panels 10-18.



The placement of the gutter divides images that conventionally would not need to be divided, splitting Dent’s head in two and foreshadowing his return at the end of part one as the villainous “Two-Face.” Miller and Varley toy with the established graphic convention of the gutter to hint at the split identity of the outwardly unified Dent. Having just undergone successful reconstructive surgery, Dent’s face is no longer halved. Externally, he has been made whole once again. Internally, he remains fractured.

This scene also foreshadows the revelation that, despite his outwardly unified appearance, Bruce Wayne’s personality is similarly divided (and Dent’s eventual death hardly makes the reader optimistic about the outcome in Batman’s case). In a stunning five-page

¹⁵⁷ Miller et al., *DKR*, 12.

sequence, Miller and Varley again play with conventional panel-gutter arrangement to represent Wayne's loss of mental control and the resurgence of the beast within (see **Fig. 1.26** below). We are given to understand that Bruce Wayne must actively repress the memory of his parents' deaths, but at this moment in the narrative, it forces its way back into his conscious mind. At first, the memory is controlled: Bruce is initially able to relive the trauma without breaking. His

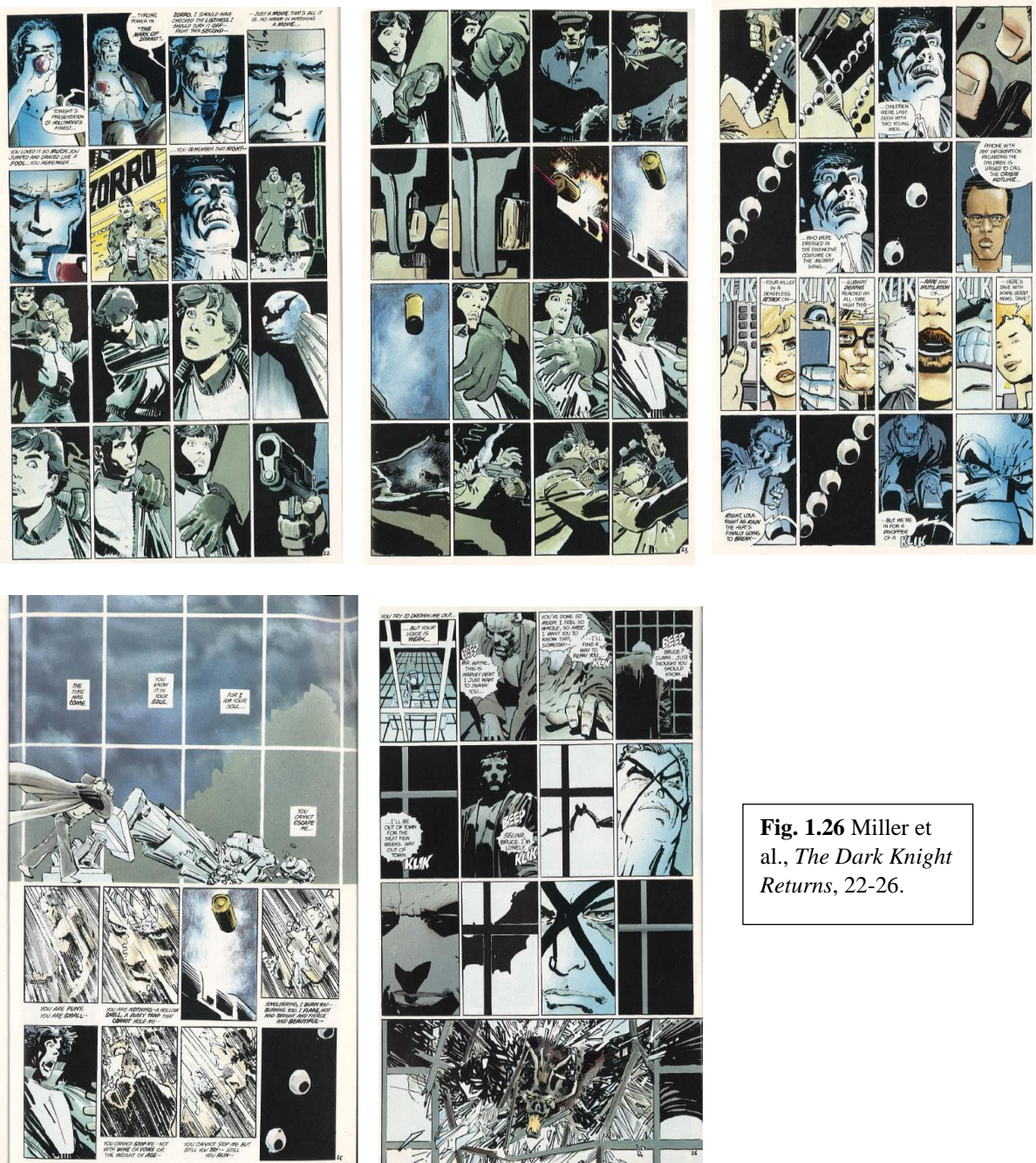


Fig. 1.26 Miller et al., *The Dark Knight Returns*, 22-26.

mental state is mirrored by the precise structure of the panels: each of the sequence's first three pages presents sixteen panels in an orderly 4×4 grid. As the flashback continues, however, panels depicting the flashback are intercut with images of Wayne's face, frozen in a horrified grimace. The third row of the third page is divided into eight panels instead of four as Wayne frantically changes television channels in a futile effort to distract himself from the horror show playing out inexorably in his mind. At first, it looks as though he might have been successful—the final row of the third page reverts to the more spacious four-panel arrangement. The next page, however, shatters this hope. What initially appears as a continuation of the 4×4 panel grid is actually, upon closer inspection, an enormous window. The “gutters” are no longer gutters, but the individual panes of the floor-to-ceiling window. Menacing clouds gather outside Wayne Manor. Bruce, his coat billowing behind him like a cape, staggers into a statue, which topples to the floor. The scene's action is no longer confined by the gutters: Wayne's carefully ordered world is disintegrating, his long-repressed Dionysian awareness overcoming his Apollinian façade. He makes one last, desperate attempt at control. Although the top half of the page is one large panel, the 4×4 arrangement nevertheless remains largely intact, and actual gutters return in the bottom two rows of panels and continue on the following page. In the first panel of this final page, however, the windowpanes are present *within* the panel, and the moonlight cascading through the glass casts the shadow of the frame over Wayne's hunched figure. He is trapped in a *cage*. Is the cage keeping Bruce Wayne in—or keeping the Batman *out*? In the final panel, which occupies the entire bottom row, a bat crashes through the window. The window frame breaks—so does the grid of panels—so does Bruce Wayne.

If we identify, as Gibson suggests we do, Bruce Wayne's attempt to retire and combat crime entirely within existing institutional structures as the manifestation of the Apollonian

urge,¹⁵⁸ then the re-emergence of the Batman-persona that recognizes no boundaries between lawful order and criminal chaos represents the triumph of the Dionysian drive. For the rest of *DKR* Part 1 and most of Parts 2 and 3, the Apollonian rarely gains the upper hand. Over the course of the narrative, however, Batman gradually comes to view his external opponents as an opportunity for growth—that is, as opportunities to achieve an increase in power in the Nietzschean sense of the term, not through greater strength, but by expanding his sense of what it means to *be* Batman. After he is bested in physical combat against the leader of the “Mutant” criminal gang in Book Two (“The Dark Knight Triumphant”), Batman returns to fight smarter, not harder. But his transformation is not yet complete. In Book Three (“Hunt the Dark Knight”), Batman fights and defeats the Joker, but it is a Pyrrhic victory. Batman/Wayne realizes that he must adapt, but it is not yet clear what form his self-overcoming will take. In Book Four (“The Dark Knight Falls”), Batman must confront an opponent he has no chance of defeating: Superman. To accomplish this, Batman must abandon his entire approach to crimefighting. Spiritually, the character realizes that “Batman” must die and be transcended by something higher.

Only when Batman/Wayne faces Superman, a foe he has no hope of defeating physically, does he realize that the solution does not lie in either of his two identities. Superman, convinced that superheroes can only legitimately operate under the auspices of the U.S. government, is ordered to subdue Batman. Batman/Wayne, realizing that the Batman’s time is at an end, uses the battle to fake his own death. What rises from the grave is neither Batman nor Bruce Wayne. Referred to only as “Boss,” he is the leader of “The Sons of Batman,” a group forged from the remnants of the “Mutant” gang. Under his leadership, the Sons of Batman (and the new Robin)

¹⁵⁸ Gibson’s focus is on Christopher Nolan’s film trilogy, not Miller et al.’s *DKR*. Wayne’s unsuccessful “retirement” is a major plot point in the concluding film of Nolan’s trilogy, however, and so the comparison stands.

have “years - - to train and study and plan... Here, in the endless cave, far past the burnt remains of a crimefighter whose time has passed... It begins *here* - - an army - - to bring sense to a world plagued by *worse* than *thieves* and *murderers*...”¹⁵⁹ Where Batman was obsessed with dying a death that was “good enough,” in his new identity he realizes that “[t]his will be a *good* life... good *enough*.”¹⁶⁰ Rather than repress his Batman identity or surrender completely to it, Wayne transcends it—his journey of self-overcoming ends in a triumphant act of self-reinvention. Like the Apollonian and Dionysian creative forces, the conflict between the Batman and Bruce Wayne identities strengthens the character until he can finally overcome both of his old selves and become someone *new*. And like the birth of tragedy out of the union of both creative drives, the “Boss’s” ultimate transcendence of both identities results in the creation of something much greater than the sum of its parts.

This struggle to create one’s self out of a mass of contradictory impulses and identities has become central to the superhero genre in the decades since *DKR*’s publication. Batman and Superman are not the only characters who, through a series of reimaginings, have become “a conflicted *Übermensch* who experiences the paradoxical intertwining of passion and reason, rapture and discipline.”¹⁶¹ But while they might become better versions of themselves, do they take the further step that Nietzsche recommends—do they question the very foundation of their moral worldview? How do superheroes *use* their powers—in the service of what authority, of which morality or “Tafel der Werthe?” How does Nietzsche describe the *Übermensch*’s relationship to existing social mores and to “normal” human beings? Don’t miss the next installment of *The Adventures of Overman*, where we address these questions—and more!

¹⁵⁹ Miller et al., *DKR*, 199.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10, 199. This theme bookends the entire four-part story arc.

¹⁶¹ Gibson, “Batman Is Superman,” 241.

Chapter Two

Superheroes versus Übevillains: Relationships Between Exceptional Individuals and the Masses in Superhero Comics and Nietzsche's Works

1. Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between exceptional individuals and average humanity in Nietzsche's philosophical works and superhero comic books. In superhero comic books, superpowered individuals use their powers to protect law-abiding, non-superpowered people. If superpowered individuals use their powers to dominate, enslave, or otherwise exploit those weaker than they, then these individuals are supervillains, not superheroes. The impression persists, both among creators and scholars of superhero comics, that Nietzsche's Übermensch would fall into the latter category. I will argue that this is not the case, examining Nietzsche's many statements about the relationship between what he considered "higher" types of individuals and the mediocre human majority. While the relationship between Nietzsche's Übermensch-concept and existing humanity is not perfectly aligned with the relationship between superheroes and regular human beings, it is not nearly as hostile as many critics and artists portray it. Additionally, I will argue that Nietzsche's philosophy offers readers a new framework according to which superheroes' altruism can be understood as acts of overflowing physical and spiritual strength and health.

The chapter is divided into six sections, the first being this introduction. Section 2 examines two supervillains created by Roy Thomas, onetime Marvel editor-in-chief and subsequent writer for DC. Thomas's 1975 character Master Man, and to a lesser extent his 1987 character Übermensch, are loosely inspired by Nietzsche's philosophical examinations of *Herren-Moral* and *Sklaven-Moral*. This section shows how Thomas's portrayal of the

characters, particularly Master Man, presents a cohesive interpretation of Nietzsche's Übermensch as a dominator and oppressor of non-superpowered human beings. Section 3 presents my interpretation of Nietzsche's position regarding different types of morality. This section focuses primarily on Nietzsche's 1887 work *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, and I draw from other sources from Nietzsche's corpus and the vast body of secondary literature on Nietzsche's thinking. I demonstrate that Nietzsche does not advocate for *Herren-Moral* over *Sklaven-Moral*, positing instead that the Übermensch will overcome this dichotomy entirely. Section 4 continues this analysis, drawing from a greater number of Nietzsche's works to create an understanding of what Nietzsche posits is the relationship between the exceptions and the rule. While Nietzsche adamantly rejects *Mitleid* as a source of altruistic action, he does not reject altruism altogether. Instead, he argues that exceptional individuals will help the weaker and less fortunate because these higher types are filled to overflowing with a sense of their own personal strength and power. This bears some similarities to Superman's evolving motivations over the past 80 years, for at no point does he ever seem to pity humanity. Of course, Nietzsche and the artists behind superhero comics differ when it comes to identifying the beneficiaries who are worthy of such intervention. In Section 5 I take an in-depth look at the supervillain Lex Luthor. I pay particular attention to Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo's 2005 mini-series *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel*, in which the creative duo question whether Luthor's anti-Superman actions might actually be to humanity's benefit. I argue that Luthor's actions and character disqualify him as an Übermensch but do not rule him out as a necessary precursor to the Übermensch. Finally, Section 6 compares Nietzsche's position regarding the Übermensch's role in human governance to superhero comic-book narratives that question whether superheroes ought to govern the rest of humanity. Both Nietzsche and superhero comics conclude that neither the Übermensch nor the superhero should

rule average humanity. Once again, however, the creators of superhero comics differ from Nietzsche when it comes to the reasons *why* the exceptions should not govern the rule.

2. Roy Thomas's Übevillains

In 1975, Roy Thomas, who had succeeded Stan Lee as Marvel's editor-in-chief in 1972, headed the creative team behind *Invaders*, a series about a WWII-era superhero team led by Captain America. Captain America, who famously punched Hitler in the face on the cover of his 1941 comic-book debut, resumes the Nazi-pummeling role he had abandoned after the end of the war in Thomas's series. Writing thirty years after the end of the Second World War and twenty-one years after Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* shook the nation and nearly ended the comic book industry, Thomas's series also functions as a platform from which he could rebut anti-comic-book claims that superheroes indoctrinated children with "the Nietzsche-Nazi myth of the exceptional man who is beyond good and evil."¹⁶² Thomas's *Invaders* explicitly rejects the notion that superheroes exemplify any such "Nietzsche-Nazi myth"—but *not* by defending Nietzsche against the Third Reich's appropriation of his work and ideas. Instead, at the same time as Captain America and his troop of superheroes beat ink-and-paper Nazis to a pulp, Thomas doubles down on the ideological Nietzsche-bashing begun by the earliest critics of comic books.

Thomas's strategy is simple: by reducing Nietzsche's philosophy to buzzwords and putting those words into the mouths of his supervillains, he can depict superheroes literally fighting *against* the "Nietzsche-Nazi" Übevillain. Over the course of the three-part first issue,

¹⁶² Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 97.

Thomas & Co. introduce readers to the villainous Colonel Krieghund,¹⁶³ who oversees production of the first Axis super-soldier. The result of these experiments—the bluntly named Master Man—is “*not just any man, but an over-man, an Übermensch!*” Speaking in a thick German accent to a captured U.S.-American scientist, Colonel Krieghund exhorts his prisoner (and by extension the reader) to “Behold - - der **MASTER MAN!**” (see **Fig. 2.01** below). This is an obvious allusion to the famous and oft-quoted passage from *Also sprach Zarathustra*: “Seht, ich lehre euch den Übermenschen.”¹⁶⁴ The reference is made all the clearer in part three of *Invaders #1* when Master Man, commencing a one-man assault on a British battleship, cries out: “Behold, English dogs - - I teach you the *Übermensch* - - - and his name is *Master Man!*” (see **Fig. 2.02** below).

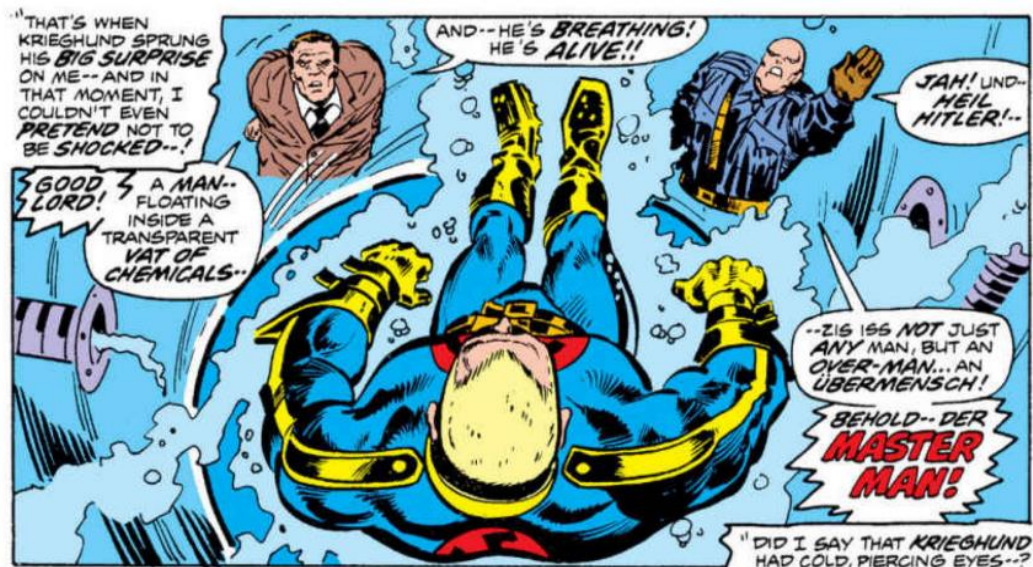


Fig. 2.01 Thomas et al., *The Invaders #1* page 16, panel 3.

¹⁶³ Thomas’s background as an English teacher is already apparent: the Colonel’s name clearly evokes the “dogs of war” that Marc Antony foresees Caesar’s ghost letting slip (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 1, line 273).

¹⁶⁴ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vorrede” §3.

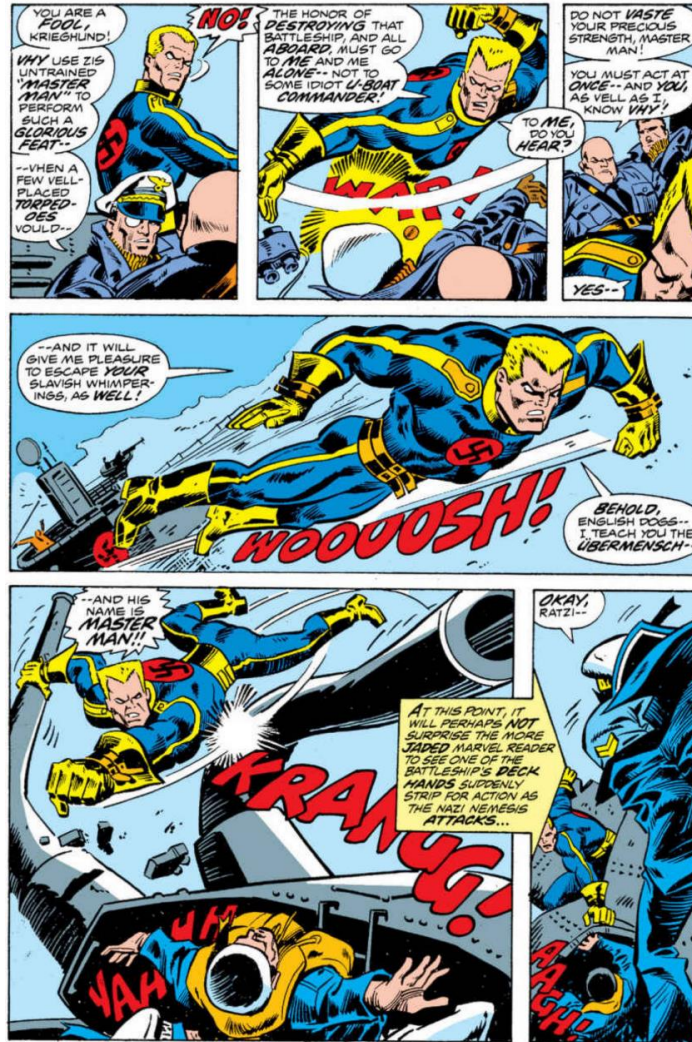


Fig. 2.02 Thomas et al., *The Invaders #1*, page 23.

In *Invaders #1*, Thomas assembles a “Greatest Hits” compilation of quotations pulled from Nietzsche’s works and set down in new contexts. His appropriation of Nietzsche, however, is more thorough than it appears at first glance. Upon further inspection, *Invaders #1* presents a relatively coherent (albeit superficial and ultimately inaccurate) interpretation of Nietzsche’s Übermensch-concept. More than a declaration of war, Master Man’s self-introduction in **Fig. 2.02** above actually presents an interpretation according to which Nietzsche’s Übermensch is made synonymous with “master.” Thomas’s Master Man believes himself to be the rightful ruler

of the non-super. His contempt for “ordinary” humanity extends even to his Nazi superiors (see panels 1-4 in **Fig. 2.02** above), for though he attacks the British battleship at Colonel Krieghund’s command, doing so comes with the additional benefit of putting him out of earshot of Krieghund’s “slavish whimperings.” In fact, Master Man’s belief that he is entitled to dominate all others (with the later exception of Adolf Hitler, whose alleged superiority Master Man acknowledges) is made earlier, in part two of *Invaders #1*:



Fig. 2.03 Thomas et al., *The Invaders #1*, page 18, panels 3-4.

As in panel four of **Fig. 2.02**, Master Man’s dialogue in the second panel here is lifted directly from *Also sprach Zarathustra*: “*Ich lehre euch den Übermenschen,*” Zarathustra announces to the marketplace crowd; “*Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll.*”¹⁶⁵ In Master Man’s mouth, however, overcoming (“surpassing”) does not refer to the self and connotes instead a sense of domination over others: having surpassed humanity in strength, this comic-

¹⁶⁵ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vorrede” §3. The more famous line that begins with “Seht,” comes at the *end* of Zarathustra’s address to the crowd in this section. Thomas omits the rest of the sentence: “Seht, ich lehre euch den Übermenschen: der ist dieser Blitz, der ist dieser Wahnsinn! —”

book *Übermensch* believes his physical superiority positions him as “master” and everyone else as his “slaves.”

Consequently, Master Man instantly comes into conflict with his creator Colonel Krieghund, who believes that he is Master Man’s master. The whip that Krieghund carries is symbolic not only of an oppressive master-slave dynamic, but is also another signifier of the unsavory “Nietzsche-Nazi” association popularized, in the comic-book world, by Fredric Wertham.¹⁶⁶ The reference here is oblique, but Thomas makes the connection much more explicit when, in *Invaders #13* (February 1976), the evil General Eisen, enraged by a female superhero’s insolence, says:



Fig. 2.04 Thomas et al., *The Invaders #13*, page 263, panel 5.

Thomas, like Wertham, simply attributes this quotation to Nietzsche, neglecting to discuss its context in *Also sprach Zarathustra*. While Nietzsche is the author of *Zarathustra*, interpreting this passage purely as an endorsement on the author’s part of fascist fetishistic sexual violence,

¹⁶⁶ See Chapter One, page 13.

as Thomas does here, is a gross oversimplification (see Chapter Five for more on Nietzsche’s philosophical positions on women).

Returning to *Invaders #1*, Master Man’s introduction is still further loaded with references to Nietzsche and quotations from his works. These densely packed allusions are more like sound bites than extended exegeses, but again they add up to a clear interpretation of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*. Two further excerpts from Master Man’s origin story are worth reproducing at this point:

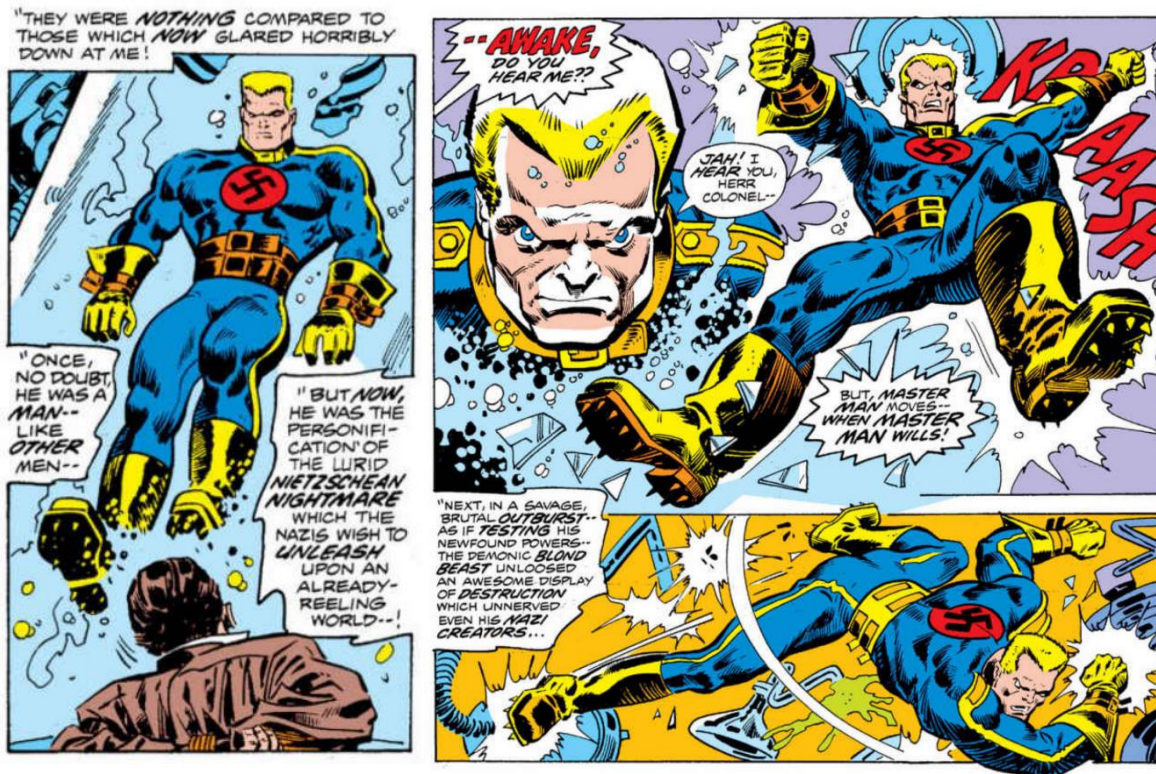


Fig. 2.05 Thomas et al., *The Invaders #1*, page 17, panel 1 (left) and page 18, panels 1-2 (right).

Bold and italicized catchphrases bombard the reader in these panels: Master Man is “the personification of the lurid *Nietzschean nightmare*,” a “demonic *blond beast*” who unleashes “an

awesome display of *destruction* which unnerved even his *Nazi creators*” before finally asserting his right, as master, to dominate those same creators. His posture in the second panel of page 18 visually emphasizes the “blond beast” descriptor, which is a reference to a phrase that Nietzsche uses in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* and that Thomas clearly uses to emphasize Master Man’s exaggerated physicality and his literal embodiment of the blond-haired, blue-eyed Aryan ideal. Not only his hair, but his gloves, boots, and belt are bright yellow. His body is contorted into a position that not only resembles the swastika on his back (the black-on-red color scheme in turn reminiscent of a Black Widow spider), but places all four of his limbs on the same plane such that he appears to be on all fours. In this single image, Thomas rejects the sense of grandeur with which the Third Reich sought to imbue the concept of the “blond beast.” This “Übermensch” is a garishly colored brute, contorting his body in spasms of senseless, bestial destruction. Thomas is in clear agreement with Wertham, Ong, and the other critics from the 1940s and 50s: Nietzscheanism and Nazism are one and the same, and the Übermensch, far from presenting an aspirational ideal, is a brainless brute prone to paroxysms of senseless violence and hellbent on subjugating those who are physically weaker than he.

Thomas’s *Invaders* is equally emphatic, however, in the assertion that *superheroes* share none of Master Man’s villainous philosophical convictions. The Invaders, despite their aggressive name, are champions of peace, democracy, and freedom from tyranny and oppression. Thomas revisits Captain America’s origin story in the early pages of *Invaders #1*. Considered “too puny, too *sickly* to be accepted by the *Army*,” Steve Rogers was chosen from among “hundreds of similar *volunteers*” to drink a chemical concoction that would either turn him into a super-soldier—or kill him. Unnamed government agents told him that he had been singled out “because of ‘your courage, your intelligence, and your willingness to risk death for your country

if the experiment should fail.”¹⁶⁷ These are the qualities that underlie Captain America’s super-strength. Master Man was made from the same chemical, the formula for which was extracted under torture from leading U.S. scientists. Yet the formula does not work as well for Master Man as it did for Steve Rogers/Captain America. The formula’s effects on Captain America are permanent, but Master Man must receive constant doses. When this does not occur, he reverts to his physically weak former self. Master Man is really Wilhelm Loehmer, who, like Steve Rogers, was a “weakling” before the mysterious chemical formula buffed his physique. Unlike Rogers, however, Loehmer has no strength of character (what we might call “spiritual strength” according to the argument presented in Chapter One) underlying his physical strength. Where Steve Rogers is courageous, Wilhelm Loehmer is all swagger; where Rogers is intelligent, Loehmer is merely conceited; and where Steve is willing to lay down his life in patriotic service, Wilhelm begs for mercy as soon as his powers abandon him (see **Fig. 2.06** below). Thomas’s message is clear: the self-styled master man who seeks to dominate and enslave others relies on physical force to compensate for a lack of inner strength. Thomas does not dispute the idea that Master Man, and by extension the leaders of the Third Reich, from Colonel Kriegshund to Adolf Hitler, are right to call themselves *Übermenschen*. Instead, he seeks to discredit the term *Übermensch* in favor of the term *superhero*. Thomas uses Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*-concept as a foil, highlighting the difference between superheroes and supervillains and presenting the *Übermensch* as a would-be master and enslaver of ordinary human beings.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas et al., *Invaders #1*, 9.



Fig. 2.06 Thomas et al., *The Invaders*, 30, panels 1-3.

Thomas’s tenure at Marvel ended unpleasantly in 1981 (though he later repaired the relationship), and for most of the 1980s he wrote for DC Comics, Marvel’s chief competitor. While he contributed stories to such notable titles as *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League of America*, he also co-wrote *The Young All-Stars* with his wife Dann Thomas. Running for thirty-one issues (June 1987 to November 1989), this series allowed Thomas to return again to the glory days of World War II. The titular teen heroes are an offshoot of the larger (and adult) All-Star Squadron and face off against a Nazi supervillain group called “Axis Amerika.” The villainous team created by Thomas, a former English teacher, is a veritable smorgasbord of German artistic, historical, and cultural references that Thomas explains in the editorial back pages of *The Young All-Stars* #3. “Gudra the Valkyrie,” he says, “harks back to **Teutonic** myth—and more particularly to a couple of *WONDER WOMAN* stories in the 1940s” featuring a similar character. “See Wolf,” Thomas writes, refers to the term “used for Nazi subs—U-boats—during World War Two. We merely personified it.” “Usil” is “the name of an Etruscan sun-god, which seemed appropriate for an Italian fascist archer.” The “Great Horned Owl” is, by

Thomas’s own admission, “the name of a hero I created as a child.” “Grosseule’s” son “Fledermaus/The Bat” may be a reference to Johann Strauss II’s *Die Fledermaus*, but Thomas doesn’t say. The group’s megalomaniacal leader, unsurprisingly, is simply named “Übermensch,” and Thomas credits Nietzsche with the name: “His name, derived from the German philosopher Nietzsche, can be translated into English as either ‘over-man’ or ‘super-man,’” writes Thomas.¹⁶⁸ He even includes the former translation in the panel depicting Übermensch’s attack on the All-Star Squadron’s headquarters (see **Fig. 2.07** below).



Fig. 2.07 Thomas et al., *The Young All-Stars* #2, 21, panel 1.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas et al., *The Young All-Stars* #3, n.p. (back matter).

Visually, Thomas's "Übermensch" continues the bald supervillain trend that began with Siegel and Shuster's Ultra-Humanite and includes other notables, from DC's Lex Luthor to Marvel's Kingpin. Unlike the Ultra-Humanite, however, "Übermensch" has superhuman strength and physique. Clad from the neck down in a blue-and-red costume (perhaps meant to be disturbingly similar to Superman's outfit), Übermensch's musculature is even more prominently displayed than the bare-chested Usil's. In his note on Übermensch's name, Thomas hints that the villainous Übermensch is intended as a foil to the series' stand-in Superman character Arn "Iron" Munro.¹⁶⁹ It is later revealed that "Iron" Munro and Übermensch are both (spoiler alert) products of a secret superhuman chemical formula, but the two characters are moral opposites: while Übermensch works to further the Third Reich's goal of world domination, "Iron" Munro possesses a righteously democratic moral compass in addition to a full head of hair. With these two characters, Thomas essentially repeats the Captain America vs. Master Man opposition from *Invaders*.

As with the *Invaders*' Master Man, Thomas's point with the *Young All-Stars*' "Übermensch" is clear: though he is as physically capable as the heroes he faces, the villainous "Übermensch" is simply a brute. "Übermensch" doesn't even quote Nietzsche when he talks. Instead, the cleverest thing "Übermensch" can think to say is pretty typical bad-guy fare (see **Fig. 2.08** below). Although he does so without the benefit of Nietzsche's commanding prose, "Übermensch" nevertheless expresses the same contempt as Master Man for those whom he considers inferior (which is pretty much everyone). "Übermensch," too, heaps scorn upon his Third Reich superiors—even the arguably stronger Baron Blitzkrieg who, in the former's opinion, does not assign him to missions that are "worthy of Übermensch."¹⁷⁰ The titular Young

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Thomas et al., *The Young All Stars* #22, 24.



Fig. 2.08 Thomas, Roy et al. *The Young All-Stars* #2, 22, panels 2-5.

All-Stars, on the other hand, never view *any* mission that aids the Allied war effort as being beneath them. Despite his immense physical strength, “Übermensch” is apparently not strong enough to hold his own arrogance in check. Thus, we see that, once again, Thomas rather heavily-handedly makes the same point he made twelve years earlier with Master Man: that comic-book superheroes are an explicit rejection of the “Nietzsche-Nazi” Übermensch.

Thomas’s work precedes recent critics and comics scholars who argue against Nietzsche’s Übermensch in favor of superheroes. Thomas, however, is not working at the remove of scholarship and secondary literature, operating instead at a fascinating intersection of pop culture and philosophy, blending weighted philosophical terms and phrases with eye-popping visuals. Thomas accomplishes his interpretation of Nietzsche’s Übermensch as a world-dominating brute with the ease and fluidity of an experienced comic-book writer. Thomas’s *Invaders* and *Young-All Stars* series suggest that, while superheroes use their physical and mental superiority to preserve the freedom and autonomy of non-superpowered individuals, an Übermensch, on the other hand, views his relationship to the physically weaker as that of master to slave. The question with which comics scholars and even Nietzsche scholars continue to

struggle today is: is Nietzsche's Übermensch really conceived to be the "master" of "ordinary" human beings?

3. Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* and the Master-Slave Moral Duality

It's easy to see how an artist like Roy Thomas could arrive at this "Übermensch = Master Man" interpretation. One of Nietzsche's most prominent philosophical claims is that of the opposition between *Herren-Moral* and *Sklaven-Moral*. The impression, shared by Thomas and other comic book creators and critics, that Nietzsche advocates the morality of a master caste most likely stems from the fact that Nietzsche appears to criticize *Sklaven-Moral* much more harshly than *Herren-Moral*. In what follows, I will trace Nietzsche's conception of *Herren-* and *Sklaven-Moral*, the relationship between the two, and Nietzsche's ultimate call for a new type of human being (the Übermensch) to *transcend* this duality. I will show that, while Nietzsche finds *Sklaven-Moral* more contemptible than *Herren-Moral*, his presentation of both concepts is multifaceted. According to Nietzsche, both moral perspectives have served important historical, species-preserving functions (within European civilization, at least). Nietzsche certainly presents *Sklaven-Moral* as more pernicious than *Herren-Moral* when it is adopted by a majority and enforced on a society. But Nietzsche also maintains throughout all of his published works that, where there is the greatest *danger* to humankind, there, too, is the greatest *opportunity* for growth and overcoming. Eventually, Nietzsche insists that a *new* morality will be created and will overcome the millennia-long conflict between *Herren-* and *Sklaven-Moral*.

The terms “Herren-Moral” and “Sklaven-Moral” appear for the first time¹⁷¹ in Nietzsche’s published works in the ninth and final division (“Neuntes Hauptstück: was ist vornhem?”) of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Nietzsche’s 1886 follow-up to *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Nietzsche writes that, after examining the moralities of various human societies, he has deduced the “zwei Grundformen” of all moral codes and laws. He adds, however, an immediate caveat:

Es giebt *Herren-Moral* und *Sklaven-Moral*; — ich füge sofort hinzu, dass in allen höheren und gemischteren Culturen auch Versuche der Vermittlung beider Moralen zum Vorschein kommen, noch öfter das Durcheinander derselben und gegenseitige Missverstehen, ja bisweilen ihr hartes Nebeneinander — sogar im selben Menschen, innerhalb Einer Seele.¹⁷²

In this passage, Nietzsche identifies the two moral foundations, but then he immediately adds that higher and more heterogeneous cultures are marked by attempts to *mediate* between the two. The coexistence of master and slave moralities is not easy, but a higher culture does not shrink from the challenge of mediating between the two. A society in which many races, classes, and spiritual types are mixed is, in Nietzsche’s mind, a strong society.¹⁷³ Furthermore, he posits that these moral foundations are found in individual human beings as well as in entire cultures. Thus, from the moment he introduces the idea of morality’s dual foundation, Nietzsche immediately moves from external to internal considerations. Nietzsche derives the existence of *Herren-* and

¹⁷¹ Of course, Nietzsche discourses on morality in all of his published and private works. The word “Moral” alone appears in 242 textual units across all of his published, private, and authorized manuscripts; nearly one thousand hits are generated when his fragments are included in the search parameters (eKGWB).

¹⁷² Nietzsche, JGB §260.

¹⁷³ Cf. FW §147, in which Nietzsche states that the failure of an attempted reformation means that a society is composed of enough autonomous individuals that no single person can attain the rank of dictator: “Je allgemeiner und unbedingter ein Einzelner oder der Gedanke eines Einzelnen wirken kann, um so gleichartiger und um so niedriger muss die Masse sein, auf die da gewirkt wird; während Gegenbestrebungen innere Gegenbedürfnisse verrathen, welche auch sich befriedigen und durchsetzen wollen. Umgekehrt darf man immer auf eine wirkliche Höhe der Cultur schliessen, wenn mächtige und herrschsüchtige Naturen es nur zu einer geringen und sectirerischen Wirkung bringen: diess gilt auch für die einzelnen Künste und die Gebiete der Erkenntniss.”

Sklaven-Moral from cultural-historical realities and then extrapolates a figurative, spiritual significance from that reality (at least, what *he* considers to be the historical “reality” of European cultures). As occurred in Chapter One, wherein we came to recognize that spiritual strength is of greater importance to Nietzsche than physical strength, so, too, will we come to see that the spiritual significance of these conflicting moral foundations will assume greater importance in Nietzsche’s philosophy than their historical “reality.”

Part of what disposes Nietzsche more favorably toward *Herren-Moral* than *Sklaven-Moral* is that the former is active, the latter reactive. Briefly stated, the aristocrat or nobleman calls himself and his social equals “good” and the socially inferior “bad.” The distinction between “good” and “evil,” on the other hand, originates in *Sklaven-Moral*: “Die Sklaven-Moral ist wesentlich Nützlichkeits-Moral. Hier ist der Herd für die Entstehung jenes berühmten Gegensatzes ‚gut‘ und ‚böse‘: — in’s Böse wird die Macht und Gefährlichkeit hinein empfunden, eine gewisse Furchtbarkeit, Feinheit und Stärke, welche die Verachtung nicht aufkommen lässt.” Where master castes value strength, power, and the ability to rule, slave castes fear exactly these tendencies, for it is at the hands of the masters that they suffer. Formulated another way, Nietzsche distinguishes the two types of morality according to the attitude of each toward *fear*: “Nach der Sklaven-Moral erregt also der ‚Böse‘ Furcht; nach der Herren-Moral ist es gerade der ‚Gute‘, der Furcht erregt und erregen will, während der ‚schlechte‘ Mensch als der verächtliche empfunden wird.”¹⁷⁴ Members of a master caste value that which evokes and *want* to evoke fear because fear is the source of their social power. Consequently, individuals and actions that evoke fear are “good,” whereas “bad” people are simply those who are socially ineffectual. Such individuals are regarded as contemptible

¹⁷⁴ This and all subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from Nietzsche, JGB §260.

(“verächtlich”) or “bad,” but *not* as “evil.” “Evil” is what the members of a slave caste call that which fills them with fear. By attaching this negative moral evaluation to “fear,” the actions which cause fear—the actions of the master caste, that is—are labeled “evil” and are to be avoided. Thus, “good” people and actions according to *Herren-Moral* are precisely the “evil” people and actions vilified according to *Sklaven-Moral*. The “good” human being praised by a slave caste is, in a word, “der *ungefährliche* Mensch.” This is the danger of *Sklaven-Moral*, for when its adherents attain the upper hand in society and culture (as Nietzsche argues happened when Christianity was made the official religion of Imperial Rome in the fourth century A.D.), the prophets of *Sklaven-Moral* vilify the strong (that is, those who seek to dominate others through fear) in an attempt to make every human being as harmless (“ungefährlich”) as possible. But Nietzsche warns that humanity will lose its capacity for change if it should ever be rendered entirely harmless, for change is a painful, often *harmful* process. Nietzsche posits that those who would overcome themselves and their society’s values and beliefs will inevitably cause others to experience spiritual suffering (it is not easy to change one’s most deeply cherished moral convictions, after all), but that this fact should not prevent higher individuals from seeking to effect change in the first place.

Like the best superhero comic book writers, however, Nietzsche ends this section of *Jenseits* with a final twist: he identifies “ein letzter Grundunterschied” between the two moral foundations:

das Verlangen nach *Freiheit*, der Instinkt für das Glück und die Feinheiten des Freiheits-Gefühls gehört ebenso nothwendig zur Sklaven-Moral und -Moralität, als die Kunst und Schwärmerei in der Ehrfurcht, in der Hingebung das regelmässige Symptom einer aristokratischen Denk- und Werthungsweise ist.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Nietzsche, JGB §260.

Freedom is the consequence of *Sklaven-Moral* and “Schwärmerei” that of *Herren-Moral*!

Freedom—of spirit and mind—is of paramount importance to Nietzsche; he refers to himself and his like-minded readers as “wir freien Geister” a number of times throughout *Jenseits*. With Roy Thomas’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s Übermensch as a brutish “Master Man” in mind, the fact that Nietzsche should attribute the desire for freedom to *Sklaven-Moral* is surprising, to say the least—and that he should follow this by labelling “Schwärmerei in der Ehrfurcht” a symptom of an “aristokratischen Denk- und Werthungsweise” even more so! Nietzsche’s use of the term “Schwärmerei” is somewhat ambivalent in the context of his entire body of work, but within *JGB* he does lament that most people confuse the philosopher with “dem religiös-gehobenen entsinnlichten ,entweltlichten‘ Schwärmer und Trunkenbold Gottes.”¹⁷⁶ This is not a complimentary application of the word *Schwärmer*, and we have no reason to suspect that Nietzsche means it any more positively when he applies it to the “aristocratic way of thinking.” Thus, in this passage, Nietzsche calls the high regard in which the master caste holds “Ehrfurcht” (a word that means “awe” but that literally translates as “respect-fear,” clearly recalling the emphasis of *Herren-Moral* on that which causes fear) an “infatuation” (“Schwärmerei”), one that borders on a delusional idolization of fear. It becomes obvious to the reader that such an overestimation of “Ehrfurcht” requires a counterbalance—which returns us to Nietzsche’s claim that all “higher” cultures are characterized by attempts to mediate between these two types of morality.

Consequently, although Nietzsche credits aristocracy with every “Erhöhung des Typus ,Mensch‘,” he also acknowledges the brutality with which these enhancements were accomplished:

¹⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *JGB* §205.

Die vornehme Kaste war im Anfang immer die Barbaren-Kaste: ihr Übergewicht lag nicht vorerst in der physischen Kraft, sondern in der seelischen, — es waren die *ganzeren* Menschen (was auf jeder Stufe auch so viel mit bedeutet als ‚die ganzeren Bestien‘ —).¹⁷⁷

The aristocracies of bygone cultures were *barbarians*, though of spiritual more than physical strength. They were the ones who had the spiritual strength to discipline themselves, which in turn allowed them to conquer others with ease. As we know from Chapter One, this spiritual strength is the necessary precondition for human greatness without which physical strength is meaningless. Because they embraced *both* their spiritual and physical drives, these “noble” races were “more complete human beings” (“*ganzeren* Menschen”) than someone like the “Verächter des Leibes” (see Chapter One, Section 4). However, just because they are “more complete” does not mean they are “complete” (“*ganzeren*” vs. “*ganzen*”). Indeed, Nietzsche ends with the qualification that embracing both physical and spiritual strength also made the noble-barbarian castes more complete *beasts*. Thus, while the master castes are responsible for every enhancement of the human species, they are “Schwärmer in der Ehrfurcht” and more bestial than their slave-caste counterparts. For their part, the slave castes are impotent and seek to make every human being equally so, yet the instinct toward freedom (political, philosophical, spiritual, etc.) has its genesis in the slave caste.

These contradictions are not fully resolved in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, yet it was vitally important to Nietzsche that his readers fully understand the dangers *and potentials* of these two moral types. To that end, in 1887 he supplemented these observations with an entire book: *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. Stylistically, this is one of his most conventionally structured works. The entire book deals with a single subject—morality—and is organized into three main

¹⁷⁷ This and subsequent quotations in this paragraph all come from Nietzsche, JGB §257.

essays, each of which in turn is further subdivided into sections that, while never more than a few pages long, are nevertheless much longer than Nietzsche's average aphorism. In a further departure from his more aphoristic works, which often leave it to the reader to connect the dots between aphorisms, the sections of the *Genealogie* all follow a logical rhetorical progression from one to the next. Despite its more intuitive structure, however, the content of Nietzsche's *Genealogie* is some of the most challenging in his entire oeuvre, and the evaluative distinctions between *Herren-* and *Sklaven-Moral* become even less clear-cut than in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*.

Nietzsche begins his investigation in the genealogy of morals by countering a common presupposition of his day, namely that those actions that were useful to society were the first things to be called "good." Nietzsche credits unnamed "englischen Psychologen" with this idea, and though he does not call them "English dogs" like Master Man does (see **Fig. 2.02** above), his scorn is palpable in the first few sections of the *Genealogie*'s "Erste Abhandlung: ‚Gut und Böse‘, ‚Gut und Schlecht‘." In keeping with his assertions in *Jenseits*, Nietzsche argues that the noble and powerful castes of any society are the first to determine what is "good," and that what they find "good" is, naturally, themselves:

Vielmehr sind es „die Guten“ selber gewesen, das heisst die Vornehmen, Mächtigen, Höhergestellten und Hochgesinnten, welche sich selbst und ihr Thun als gut, nämlich als ersten Ranges empfanden und ansetzten, im Gegensatz zu allem Niedrigen, Niedrig-Gesinnten, Gemeinen und Pöbelhaften. Aus diesem *Pathos der Distanz* heraus haben sie sich das Recht, Werthe zu schaffen, Namen der Werthe auszuprägen, erst genommen: was gieng sie die Nützlichkeit an!¹⁷⁸

These aristocrats did not have utility in mind when they called themselves good. Indeed, much of what they valued—strength, passion, pride, and warlike tendencies—came at their *own*

¹⁷⁸ Nietzsche, GM-I §2.

expense as well as that of those “beneath” them. By enshrining themselves as the “good” and disregarding all others as “bad,” these “master men” set out to make the world in their image and accomplished their task to a remarkable degree.

“Nützlichkeit,” on the other hand, is a reactionary concern. The right of the aristocratic caste to rule was accepted in ancient times because, in exchange for submission to their tyranny, the lower castes were protected from external threats. Nietzsche scholar Richard Schacht writes that it was this “fear of whatever ‘external dangers’ threatened ‘the survival of the community’” that “initially prompted the accordance of ‘moral honors’ to those human types and qualities best serving to promote the preservation of the community in the face of such peril.”¹⁷⁹ Once the external enemies were vanquished, however, the weaker castes began to fear the strong individuals who had until recently been their protectors. This was oftentimes the result of the very real exploitation of the lower castes at the hands of the higher castes, but Nietzsche goes further and suggests that anyone who is socially, culturally, and/or spiritually impotent will begin to mistrust, and eventually come to resent, those who have the strength (spiritual as well as physical) to create.¹⁸⁰ This resentment born of impotence is the root of all *Sklaven-Moral* (which, we must remember, is a spiritual state of being and can exist regardless of whether or not literal slaves are present in a given society): “Der Sklavenaufstand in der Moral beginnt damit, dass das *Ressentiment* selbst schöpferisch wird und Werthe gebiert: das *Ressentiment* solcher Wesen, denen die eigentliche Reaktion, die der That versagt ist, die sich nur durch eine

¹⁷⁹ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 434. Schacht is referring to Nietzsche, JGB §201; the translation he uses is Walter Kaufmann’s.

¹⁸⁰ Interestingly, similar plotlines play out in several superhero comics, especially those written and drawn in recent decades. In *The New 52* reboot of Superman-oriented *Action Comics*, for example, Superman is feared and vilified by the human population, which goes to great lengths to invent superweapons capable of destroying him. Only when another alien, Brainiac, arrives and actively threatens human existence does humanity embrace Superman and call out for his help. Eventually, both parties settle into a state of uneasy coexistence once Superman has vanquished the threat (cf. Morrison et al., *Superman and the Men of Steel*, in *The New 52: Action Comics*).

imaginäre Rache schadlos halten.”¹⁸¹ *Sklaven-Moral* is a reaction to an external stimulus; more precisely, it is a reaction against the actions taken and moral values set by a master caste.

With the rise of *Sklaven-Moral*, the *opposite* values are suddenly accorded “moral honors:” humility, meekness, and submission are valued over strength, creativity, and competition. Now, the “Ohnmächtigen, Gedrückten, an giftigen und feindseligen Gefühlen Schwärenden” are calling the shots, and such individuals desire a condition of “Narcose, Betäubung, Ruhe, Frieden, ‚Sabbat‘, Gemüths-Ausspannung und Gliederstrecken.” These, Nietzsche suggests, are the things that a literal slave values most of all, and anyone who is creatively impotent and “in whom poisonous and inimical feelings are festering”¹⁸² will long for the spiritual equivalents of the physical conditions desired by actual slaves. Nietzsche’s example *par excellence* of a resentful, spiritually impotent *Sklaven-Moral* that has supplanted an active, life-affirming *Herren-Moral* is Christianity. Christianity veils the impotent and spiritually sick individual’s thirst for revenge in a cloak of—hypocrisy of hypocrisies!—*love*. This love is not “die eigentliche Verneinung jenes Durstes nach Rache;” rather, this love “wuchs aus ihm [der Durst nach Rache] heraus, als seine Krone.”¹⁸³ The spiritually impotent revenge themselves upon the spiritually powerful by creating a moral order according to which the characteristics of the “weak” (humility, passivity, meekness) are given ultimate moral value. When divine authority is attributed to this morality, it becomes very persuasive, and so a “master caste” can be convinced to capitulate to a “slave caste” in this way. Nietzsche does suggest that literal slaves are quite justified for feeling this way and valuing rest and the cessation of work above all else, and for seeking to convince their masters that *Sklaven-Moral* is preferable to *Herren-Moral*.

¹⁸¹ This and all subsequent Nietzsche quotations in this paragraph are from Nietzsche, GM-I §10.

¹⁸² From Walter Kaufmann’s translation of GM-I §10.

¹⁸³ Nietzsche, GM-I §8.

What Nietzsche objects to “in the strongest possible terms,” according to Schacht, is the dictate of a spiritual *Sklaven-Moral* (such as Christianity, which marketed itself as the religion of the lower castes in ancient Roman society) that *all* of humanity to submit to its value system. When “the old *ressentiment* lingers on” in a society, interprets Schacht, “even though it is no longer the morality of one segment of the population that is ruled by another,” it can “cast a pall over human life and poison the wellsprings of human growth and development.”¹⁸⁴

Compared to this excoriation of *Sklaven-Moral*, Nietzsche’s treatment of *Herren-Moral* appears relatively benign—even affirming. This flattering impression of *Herren-Moral* derives largely from Nietzsche’s use of charged terms like “die blonde Bestie” in connection with ancient aristocratic castes. This particular instance is a good example Nietzsche’s tendency, according to both Schacht and Kaufmann, to allow his polemical writing style to overpower his more nuanced analysis.¹⁸⁵ For although this term carries a very nuanced significance that is not limited to its appearance in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, it is very easy to ignore the full significance of the term and appropriate it for nefarious racial and political ends. This is what the thinkers of the Third Reich did, and it is, of course, this fascist interpretation that Roy Thomas has picked up on in his *Invaders* series. As we will now see, Nietzsche’s use of this phrase is much more complicated and is *not* unambiguously positive.

Nietzsche writes in the *Genealogie* that the noble/aristocratic castes of ancient cultures are restrained “inter pares” by respect and gratitude, but also jealousy and mistrust. These same individuals, however, behave “nicht viel besser als losgelassne Raubthiere” when they reach the

¹⁸⁴ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 438.

¹⁸⁵ Over the course of his *Nietzsche*, Kaufmann writes several variations of the following in regard to a number of different issues: “Nietzsche himself weakened his argument by occasional *bon mots* [...and his] polemics obscure his basic contention” (270). With specific regard to the issue of competing moralities, Schacht maintains that “Nietzsche arrives at conclusions with respect to the value of these ‘moral values’ which are not as simply and completely negative as one might initially suppose, and indeed as some of his less guarded and more polemical remarks might seem to suggest” (*Nietzsche*, 455).

boundaries “wo das Fremde, *die Fremde* beginnt.”¹⁸⁶ Among foreign peoples, these nobles commit acts of violence and violation, regressing “in die Unschuld des Raubthier-Gewissens *zurück*.” Nietzsche emphasizes the word *back*, highlighting that this is a step *backward*, away from the civilized human being toward the beast within. In this context, Nietzsche mentions “die blonde Bestie” for the first time:¹⁸⁷

Auf dem Grunde aller dieser vornehmen Rassen ist das Raubthier, die prachtvolle nach Beute und Sieg lüstern schweifende *blonde Bestie* nicht zu verkennen; es bedarf für diesen verborgenen Grund von Zeit zu Zeit der Entladung, das Thier muss wieder heraus, muss wieder in die Wildniss zurück: — römischer, arabischer, germanischer, japanesischer Adel, homerische Helden, skandinavische Wikinger — in diesem Bedürfniss sind sie sich alle gleich.

Although the term “blonde Bestie” would quickly be taken up by German ultra-nationalists, including most infamously the philosophical and political thinkers of the Third Reich,¹⁸⁸ Kaufmann points out that the Germanic tribes of past millennia are but *one* of many different races that Nietzsche lists as “blond beasts:” “The ‘blond beast’ is not a racial concept and does not refer to the ‘Nordic race’ of which the Nazis later made so much. Nietzsche specifically refers to Arabs and Japanese, Romans and Greeks, no less than ancient Teutonic tribes when he first introduces this term.”¹⁸⁹ Consequently, Kaufmann argues that “the ‘blondenness’ obviously refers to the beast, the lion, rather than the kind of man.”¹⁹⁰ The aristocrats of various races and nationalities are being metaphorically compared to a lion. Kaufmann’s reading has become

¹⁸⁶ This and all subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from Nietzsche, GM-I §11.

¹⁸⁷ Indeed, for the first of only a handful of times in his entire published corpus. The phrase is used again near the end of this section (see below), and once more in GM-II §17, though here the exact wording is: “irgend ein Rudel blonder Raubthiere.” Another occurrence is found in *Götzendämmerung*, “Die ‘Verbesserer’ der Menschheit,” §2. Another related reference appears in *Also Sprach Zarathustra IV*, “Unter Töchtern der Wüste” §2, though the exact phrasing is again slightly different: “In Furcht vielleicht vor einem / Grimmen gelben blondgelockten / Löwen-Unthiere” (cf. Schank, “Nietzsche’s ‘Blond Beast,’” 146).

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Brennecke, “Der ‘blonde Bestie,’” 123-24.

¹⁸⁹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 225.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

widely accepted in Nietzsche scholarship. In his 1976 essay on the various misinterpretations of Nietzsche's "blonde Bestie," for example, Nietzsche scholar Detlef Brennecke concurs, adding: "Abermals sagt er [Nietzsche], dass Germanen ‚blonde Bestien‘ *neben anderen* waren – Siegesmenschen also, die deshalb ‚vornehm‘ waren. Doch das heißt: wenn das Attribut der Blondheit nicht auf Germanen gemünzt ist, dann ist es von ihnen nicht abzuleiten. Sein Zielpunkt liegt woanders."¹⁹¹

This "Zielpunkt" can be found in *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The very first speech that Zarathustra delivers after his lengthy "Vorrede" bears the title "Von den drei Verwandlungen." In it, Zarathustra presents three animal metaphors representing the three stages in human—and eventually super-human (*übermenschlichen*)—development, of which the lion is only the *second*, not the *final*, stage: "Drei Verwandlungen nenne ich euch des Geistes: wie der Geist zum Kameele wird, und zum Löwen das Kameel, und zum Kinde zuletzt der Löwe."¹⁹² In the first stage, many heavy burdens are given to "dem Geiste, dem starken, tragsamen Geiste, dem Ehrfurcht innewohnt"—that is, to the camel-spirit. Nietzsche's Zarathustra dispels any suspicion that the spirit in this phase of development is a slavish beast of burden: "Was ist das Schwerste, ihr Helden? so fragt der tragsame Geist, dass ich es auf mich nehme und meiner Stärke froh werde." The camel in this metaphor actively seeks out the heaviest burdens so that it can experience the joy of exercising its own strength. The list of possible "heaviest" burdens that follows contains only spiritual burdens, not physical ones. Nietzsche scholar Charles Taylor consequently notes:

We start [...] with our focus precisely on the *strong* Spirit rather than on a weak form of Spirit generally attributed to obedient, passive domesticated animals. [...] The weight-bearing Spirit asks those who are heroes (and not the many assembled in the marketplace)

¹⁹¹ Brennecke, "Der 'blonde Bestie,'" 116.

¹⁹² Nietzsche, Z-I, "Von den drei Verwandlungen." All subsequent quotations from Nietzsche in this and the following paragraph come from this section.

what for them is the heaviest so that similarly difficult burdens may be undertaken. There is in such thinking about the camel a divergence from the standard view of the beast of burden.¹⁹³

The camel is not analogous to the preachers or practitioners of *Sklassen-Moral*, for the camel does not desire rest, peace, or the cessation of labor that Nietzsche maintains are the hallmarks of such moralities. Consequently, we cannot interpret the first metamorphosis from camel to lion as implying a metamorphosis from slave to master (along with any concomitant hierarchization according to which “master” is above/better than “slave”).

The heavily laden camel retires to a lonely desert, and there it transforms into the lion. The lion symbolizes the stage at which the human spirit fights for the freedom to assert its will against conventional moral values, represented in Zarathustra’s speech as a great dragon: “‘Du-sollst’ heisst der grosse Drache. Aber der Geist des Löwens sagt ‚ich will‘.” Brennecke tangentially connects the lion to the “blonde Bestie,” which he argues represents those ancient races that considered themselves noble but were called “barbarians” by those who suffered at their hands: “‘Ich will’, sagt der Barbar wie der Löwe.”¹⁹⁴ I believe that we can make the connection even more explicit. According to Nietzsche, noble castes and races act with the clear conscience of predators whenever they discharged their aggressive energies against weaker, foreign peoples. *Herren-Moral* rests on “ich will,” pitting the individual against every “Du-sollst” and “Du-sollst-nicht.” Those who, like Zarathustra (and Nietzsche himself), would pave the way for the creators of new values must adopt a similar attitude as they wage war on the reigning moralities of their day. However, these lions—these “blonde beasts”—are only capable of opposing existing values: “Neue Werthe schaffen — das vermag auch der Löwe noch nicht:

¹⁹³ Taylor, “A Sketch (*Riß*) of the Camel in *Zarathustra*,” 33.

¹⁹⁴ Brennecke, “Der ‘blonde Bestie,’” 130. Brennecke thus subscribes—as do I—to the conventional interpretation of “die blonde Bestie” that, according to Nietzsche scholar Paul S. Loeb, began with Walter Kaufmann’s “denazification of Nietzsche’s writings” in the 1950s (“Zarathustra’s Laughing Lions,” 121) and continues today.

aber Freiheit sich schaffen zu neuem Schaffen — das vermag die Macht des Löwen,” says Zarathustra. The “blonde Bestie” symbolizes an attitude toward morality that Nietzsche endorses not as an end in itself, but as a necessary precondition for the creation of *new* moral values.

Seen in this light, the “blonde Bestie” does not refer to the blond, Teutonic master-race of which National Socialist thinkers and propagandists were so enamored. What confuses the issue is Nietzsche’s repeated estimation of master-caste characteristics over those of the slave-caste, as he does in the conclusion of the eleventh section of *Zur Genealogie*’s first essay:

Man mag im besten Rechte sein, wenn man vor der blonden Bestie auf dem Grunde aller vornehmen Rassen die Furcht nicht los wird und auf der Hut ist: aber wer möchte nicht hundertmal lieber sich fürchten, wenn er zugleich bewundern darf, als sich *nicht* fürchten, aber dabei den ekelhaften Anblick des Missrathenen, Verkleinerten, Verkümmerten, Vergifteten nicht mehr los werden können?¹⁹⁵

This is doubtless one such unfortunate instance where, according to Brennecke, Nietzsche “habe dem, was folgte, mit einem vordergründig unpräzisen, in Wirklichkeit jedoch viel zu komplizierten Schlagwort Lebenskraft verliehen.”¹⁹⁶ The Third Reich’s exegesis of Nietzsche’s “blond beast,” however, began and ended here, and Roy Thomas’s character Master Man is therefore consistent with the Third Reich’s appropriation of the “blonde Bestie” concept but *not* with its original meaning in Nietzsche’s works.

For the lion is not the final stage of the human spirit according to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. The Übermensch-spirit undergoes a final metamorphosis and becomes a *child*. Says Zarathustra:

Unschuld ist das Kind und Vergessen, ein Neubeginnen, ein Spiel, ein aus sich rollendes Rad, eine erste Bewegung, ein heiliges Ja-sagen.

¹⁹⁵ Nietzsche, GM-I §11.

¹⁹⁶ Brennecke, “Der ‘blonde Bestie,’” 145.

Ja, zum Spiele des Schaffens, meine Brüder, bedarf es eines heiligen Ja-sagens: *seinen* Willen will nun der Geist, *seine* Welt gewinnt sich der Weltverlorene.¹⁹⁷

There is nothing “final” about this final state of the human spirit’s development; instead, it is a *new beginning*. The child is “innocent” and represents a “forgetting” of all that has come before: of camel and lion, of all “ich will” and “Du-sollst.” This new will says a holy “Yes!” to life and to its own will to power (which, we may recall from Chapter One, are one and the same) and affirms its ability to create. The Übermensch will constantly overcome himself and the values of the time, leaving in his wake both master *and* slave moralities.

Nietzsche reiterates this point in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, alluding to the coming of a higher type of human being who will rise above the two main moralities analyzed in this book.

In a relatively short section immediately following the description of the “blonde Bestie,”

Nietzsche writes:

— Aber von Zeit zu Zeit gönnt mir — gesetzt, dass es himmlische Gönnerinnen giebt, jenseits von Gut und Böse — einen Blick, gönnt mir Einen Blick nur auf etwas Vollkommenes, zu-Ende-Gerathenes, Glückliches, Mächtiges, Triumphirendes, an dem es noch Etwas zu fürchten giebt! Auf einen Menschen, der den Menschen rechtfertigt, auf einen complementären und erlösenden Glücksfall des Menschen, um desswillen man *den Glauben an den Menschen* festhalten darf!...¹⁹⁸

In this passage, we are given a picture of the Übermensch that hints at a different relationship between the Übermensch and ordinary humanity than that of master to slave. Some of the descriptive terms are martial, it is true: this “complete” human being will be “powerful,” “triumphant,” and even “fearsome.” At the same time, Nietzsche describes such a being as “complementary” to mainstream humanity, and even goes so far as to say that the advent of the Übermensch will be a “redeeming stroke of luck” that will “justify” the human species’

¹⁹⁷ Nietzsche, Z-I “Von den drei Verwandlungen.”

¹⁹⁸ Nietzsche, GM-I §12.

existence. The *Übermensch* will restore our respect for humanity by being a true individual: active, healthy, creative, *free*. The *Übermensch* will restore our sense of “awe,” but without going so far as to inspire a renewed “Schwärmerei in der Ehrfucht.”

4. The Relationship of the Super to the Human: Beyond *Herren-* and *Sklaven-Moral*

Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* transcends the master-slave dichotomy that, according to Nietzsche, has heretofore characterized all human beings’ relationships to others and themselves. Nevertheless, the notion that Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* would be at best *indifferent* to the average human being’s plight, or at worst outright *cruel* toward the “regular Joe,” is still prevalent in the field of comics studies today. In a 2016 essay “Where Have All the Supermen Gone?” A. G. Holdier maintains that, while Nietzsche would approve of Superman’s use of physical force to solve problems, he would actively despise Superman for adopting the Clark Kent persona and dedicating his life to the service and protection of those who are physically weaker than he is. “[N]ot everything about the Man of Steel would impress the philosopher of the *Übermensch*, for the very idea of ‘Clark Kent’ might disqualify Superman from being the superman,” writes Holdier. In spite of his powers, Superman “not only forgoes [...] setting up his own kingdom to rule the unpowered peasants, but goes so far as to allow himself to live as a subservient commoner: a model of Nietzsche’s ‘slave morality’ if ever there was one.”¹⁹⁹ Holdier, writing forty-one years after the debut of Roy Thomas’s Master Man, interprets Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* similarly. Holdier’s comment further suggests that, much like in Thomas’s comic-book worlds, Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* would be the *villain*, since the desire “to rule the unpowered peasants”²⁰⁰ is the mark of the comic-book supervillain.

¹⁹⁹ Holdier, “Where Have All the Supermen Gone?” 7.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

First of all, Holdier perpetuates the common misconception that Nietzsche's concept of *Herren-Moralität* and *Sklaven-Moralität* refers specifically to literal masters and slaves. As we have seen in the previous section, however, what Nietzsche calls "slave morality" is a moral *attitude* that can prevail in a society "even though it is no longer the morality of one segment of the population that is ruled by another."²⁰¹ A "slave morality" is any morality that seeks to inculcate a guilty conscience in the well-constituted and to extirpate the passions entirely, rather than sublimating the passions in service of life-enhancing creation and self-overcoming. Despite Nietzsche's insistence in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* that the *Übermensch* will transcend the master-slave moral opposition that has defined Western history, however, the fear remains the *Übermensch* will be so far removed from human concerns that he cannot help but *despise* ordinary humans.

There is certainly enough material in Nietzsche's corpus to warrant concern on this point. Late in the second part of *Zur Genealogie*, Nietzsche speaks again of a nascent "Mensch der Zukunft" who will be "der *erlösende* Mensch der grossen Liebe und Verachtung."²⁰² Although Nietzsche does not use the term here, it is clear that the "Mensch der Zukunft" is identifiable with the *Übermensch* from *Zarathustra* (Nietzsche's language in *Zur Genealogie* is overall less figurative and poetic than in *Zarathustra*). This coming *Übermensch* is said to be a human being of "salvation" ("Erlösung"), but this figure is also a person of great love *and contempt*. This apparently contradictory attitude is concerning, and even if the *Übermensch*'s contempt is reserved for those who preach *Sklaven-Moral*, the question remains as to *how* the *Übermensch*'s "Verachtung" will manifest itself. In the first part of *Zur Genealogie*, Nietzsche mentions Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), arguably the first modern dictator, in connection with the

²⁰¹ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 438.

²⁰² Nietzsche, GM-II §24.

Übermensch-ideal;²⁰³ however, he never unreservedly labels Napoleon an “Übermensch” in this section. Instead, he traces the development of *Skalven-Moral* in the Western world, from its origins in the religion of ancient Israel, through its rejuvenation in Christian theology, all the way to its most spectacular secular outburst during the French Revolution. At this point in history, Nietzsche writes, Napoleon appeared “[w]ie ein letzter Fingerzeig zum *andren Wege*”²⁰⁴—that is, Napoleon was the last great gasp of *Herren-Moral* in the West. Thus Napoleon represents for Nietzsche “das fleischgewordne Problem des *vornehmen Ideals an sich*,” or, reformulated: “Napoleon, diese Synthesis von *Unmensch* und *Übermensch* ...” Napoleon is not entirely Übermensch, for he is also an *Unmensch*, an inhuman being—there is still much of the “blonde Bestie” in him. As Kaufmann puts it: “What Nietzsche admired was not Napoleon’s prowess on the battlefield, but what Napoleon had made of himself.”²⁰⁵ Nevertheless, one might argue that “what Napoleon had made of himself” came at the expense of many millions of human lives, and so the fear that the Übermensch’s self-overcoming might prove similarly exploitative has not yet been entirely allayed.

²⁰³ The name “Napoleon” appears twenty-five times in all of Nietzsche’s published works (according to search results in nietzchesource.org). If Nietzsche’s *Nachlass* and letters are taken into account, however, that figure increases to 150. Nietzsche was clearly impressed by the late French emperor.

²⁰⁴ Nietzsche, GM-I §16.

²⁰⁵ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 315. The same, Kaufmann argues, can be said of other historical figures Nietzsche connects to the Übermensch-concept. Nietzsche did not admire Julius Caesar solely for his “military or political successes;” instead, he viewed Caesar as “the embodiment of the passionate man who controls his passions: the man who, in the face of universal disintegration and licentiousness [...] performs his unique deed of self-integration, self-creation, and self-mastery” (351). Finally, Kaufmann argues that when Nietzsche writes that “one should look ‘even for a Cesare Borgia rather than for a Parsifal’ (EH III 1),” he merely means that “there was more hope for the man of strong impulses [to make something of himself] than for the man with no impulses” (224). This interpretation is borne out by another passage in *Götzendämmerung* where Nietzsche writes: “ein Cesare Borgia sei, im Vergleich mit *uns*, durchaus nicht als ein ‚höherer Mensch‘, als eine Art *Übermensch*, wie ich es thue, aufzustellen...” (“Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen,” §37). Even interpreting a (less militaristic) example, like that of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as an Übermensch is complicated by some of Nietzsche’s later writings. Although Goethe carried the “stärkste Instinkte” of his century within him and represents “ein grossartiger Versuch, das achtzehnte Jahrhundert zu überwinden durch eine Rückkehr zur Natur,” and even though Goethe “concipte” an ideal type of human being who sounds quite like Nietzsche’s Übermensch, Nietzsche does not go so far as to apply this label to Goethe (*GD*, “Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen,” §49).

This fear is reinforced at first, given Nietzsche's repeated insistence that not all men are created equal. In *Der Antichrist* (1888), Nietzsche names the three natural divisions that will always exist in humankind: "die vorwiegend Geistigen, die vorwiegend Muskel- und Temperaments-Starken und [...] die Mittelmässigen."²⁰⁶ Nietzsche ranks the first group as the highest type of human being, noting that they attain this position "nicht, weil sie wollen, sondern weil sie *sind*." The second group "sind die Exekutive der Geistigsten," handling the everyday, nitty-gritty aspects of ruling the masses. In keeping with Nietzsche's emphasis on spiritual strength, the physically strong are ranked *higher* than the "Mittelmässigen" but *lower* than "die vorwiegend Geistigen." The mediocre masses, finally, account for the majority of human beings in any society and form the base of every civilization—but this base, Nietzsche writes, is *essential* to the development and functioning of a higher society: "Eine hohe Cultur ist eine Pyramide: sie kann nur auf einem breiten Boden stehn, sie hat zuallererst eine stark und gesund consolidirte Mittelmässigkeit zur Voraussetzung." And finally, Nietzsche explicitly states that while the "vorwiegend Geistigen" are „die *Stärksten*," that is, individuals who find "ihr Glück, worin Andre ihren Untergang finden würden," these highest types are *duty-bound* to treat their unexceptional counterparts with tenderness: "Wenn der Ausnahme-Mensch gerade die Mittelmässigen mit zarteren Fingern handhabt, als sich und seines Gleichen, so ist dies nicht bloss Höflichkeit des Herzens, — es ist einfach seine *Pflicht*..." Nietzsche is unequivocal on this point: transcending the master-slave moral dichotomy entails abandoning the cruelty and exploitation that typically characterizes both sides of this moral opposition.

Certain elements of Nietzsche's supposed attitude toward superheroes as postulated by Holdier can now be refuted. Superman is not an example of *Sklaven-Moral*, as Holdier claims,

²⁰⁶ Nietzsche, AC §57. All subsequent Nietzsche-quotations in this paragraph come from this aphorism.

because *Sklaven-Moral* does not mean choosing “to live as a subservient commoner.” *Sklaven-Moral* instead describes a moral state of affairs which begins when “das *Ressentiment* selbst schöpferisch wird und Werthe gebiert,”²⁰⁷ the ultimate aim of which being “aus dem Raubthiere ‘Mensch’ ein zahmes und zivilisiertes Thier, ein *Hausthier* herauszuzüchten.”²⁰⁸ Nietzsche *does* oppose this in the strongest terms; his objection, however, is not to the existence of the spiritually weak and mediocre *per se*, but rather the attempt (which in the Western world he traces back to the rise of Christianity) to enforce *Sklaven-Moral* on *everyone*, as though all human beings were the same. Furthermore, the *Übermensch*’s attitude toward the masses of mediocre humanity transcends that of master to slave—in Holdier’s language, the *Übermensch* does not view average humanity as “unpowered peasants” whom he has the right to rule. That Superman should deign to assist these “unpowered peasants” does not in itself disqualify him as a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, for Nietzsche insists that the truly higher natures of this sort will act with benevolence and grace toward those who are lower on the “*Ordnung des Ranges*”²⁰⁹ that he establishes in *Zur Genealogie*. As Schacht reminds us, the assertion that some human beings “rank” higher than others “is not to say that no value whatever is ascribable to all others, or that they are entirely unworthy of life;” but that this “does indeed carry the implication that some may fare very poorly, indeed.”²¹⁰

Holdier’s comment is still relevant given this last point, since it remains to be seen whether the relationship between Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* and altruism is compatible with the sort of selflessness that Superman exhibits (and that Holdier praises). Superman, seeing that many people “fare very poorly, indeed,” takes an immediate, hands-on approach. We can see

²⁰⁷ Nietzsche, GM-I §10.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, §11.

²⁰⁹ Nietzsche, JGB §59 and §219; in AC §57, Nietzsche refers to the “*Ordnung der Kasten*.”

²¹⁰ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 333.

this in several of his earliest Golden-Age adventures, wherein Superman not only fights crime but ends pointless wars (*Action Comics #2*), fights for worker safety (*Action Comics #3*), demolishes slums so that safer housing may be built in their place (*Action Comics #8*), reveals corruption and the mistreatment of inmates in a federal prison (*Action Comics #10*), and enforces traffic laws and automobile manufacturing regulations (*Action Comics #12*). He even helps a financially struggling circus by performing as a strongman in *Action Comics #7* and helps a young football player regain the respect of his girlfriend in *Action Comics #4*! While Superman has since gone on to assist humanity on a cosmic scale, no task is too small, no request for help too trivial, for the Man of Steel.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, adamantly argues in *Zur Genealogie* that it is not the higher individual's task to serve as doctors and nurses for the spiritually sick and ill-constituted:

Oder wäre es etwa ihre Aufgabe, Krankenwärter oder Ärzte zu sein?... Aber sie könnten *ihre* Aufgabe gar nicht schlimmer verkennen und verleugnen, — das Höhere *soll* sich nicht zum Werkzeug des Niedrigeren herabwürdigen, das Pathos der Distanz *soll* in alle Ewigkeit auch die Aufgaben aus einander halten! Ihr Recht, dazusein, das Vorrecht der Glocke mit vollem Klange vor der misstönigen, zersprungenen, ist ja ein tausendfach grösseres: sie allein sind die *Bürgen* der Zukunft, sie allein sind *verpflichtet* für die Menschen-Zukunft. Was *sie* können, was *sie* sollen, das dürften niemals Kranke können und sollen: aber *damit* sie können, was nur *sie* sollen, wie stünde es ihnen noch frei, den Arzt, den Trostbringer, den „Heiland“ der Kranken zu machen?...²¹¹

The “Pathos der Distanz” separating higher and lower types must be maintained at all costs, for the right of the higher natures simply to *exist* is a thousand times greater than that of the lower types. This does not mean that “lower” types have no right to exist, much less that they should be oppressed: it simply means that it is not the “higher” types’ responsibility to devote their lives

²¹¹ Nietzsche, GM-III §14.

to actively reducing the misery of their fellow humans. Tending to those lower on the order of rank would be a *renunciation* of the higher individual's task or purpose ("Aufgabe"), which is to a large extent self-oriented: the exceptional individual's primary goal should be his or her own self-overcoming. Truly higher, nobler types of human being (who are predecessors of, but not yet identical with, the Übermensch) will, in the process of becoming who they are, serve to enhance the species. This goal will not be served if everyone is forced to follow the dictates of *Sklaven-Moral*, according to which the greatest virtue is to make oneself a useful and harmless part of the social machine. Since Nietzsche ranks the strong in spirit as the highest (philosophers, artists, etc.), we can take this to mean that, if some such "higher" individuals wish to devote their lives to making great works of art, they should not be told that a better use of their time would be to work in (to use a contemporary example) a soup kitchen. Individuals with enough genuine talent to meaningfully contribute to the fields of art and human (self-)knowledge should be allowed to do so. The masses, which are *not* "great" enough to engage in such activities, would be more than welcome to focus their attention on the amelioration of their physical and spiritual existence—but *not at the expense of the "higher" types*.

This is not to say that higher human beings *should not* act altruistically, and it is certainly not to say that higher human beings should act with complete disregard for (let alone cruelty toward) the mediocre masses. When Nietzsche writes, for example, that "Härte, Gewaltigkeit, Sklaverei, Gefahr auf der Gasse und im Herzen, Verborgtheit, Stoicismus, Versüßerkunst und Teufelei jeder Art, dass alles Böse, Furchtbare, Tyrannische, Raubthier- und Schlangenhafte am Menschen so gut zur Erhöhung der Species ‚Mensch‘ dient, als sein Gegensatz,"²¹² he is not necessarily advocating a return or regression to such behavior. Instead, he is once again

²¹² Nietzsche, JGB §44.

countering the (hypocritical) Christian notion that humanity has only ever elevated itself through humility, contrition, and self-degradation. So, while Nietzsche writes that the “higher” types, and eventually the *Übermensch*, will treat the “lower” types well, he specifically rejects Christian pity (“*Mitleid*”²¹³) as the foundation for this benevolent behavior. This famous contempt for pity is, I believe, largely responsible for the impression that Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* would at best take a callously indifferent attitude toward the sufferings of his fellow human beings or, at worst, would actively *increase* the suffering of others in the pursuit of his creative self-overcoming.

Much ink has been spilled in attempts to correct this misunderstanding of Nietzsche (a misunderstanding that persists today both within and beyond superhero comics and comics studies). Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche opposes “*Mitleid*” because it distracts from the main task of self-mastery. We should not indulge those around us, for “[t]he best that a friend can do for a friend is to help him to gain self-mastery. And that cannot be done by commiserating with him or by indulging his weaknesses.”²¹⁴ Schacht adds first, that someone “who ‘preaches pity’ [...] is thereby covertly asking that pity be felt not only for others but also for himself,” and second, that those who preach pity tend to act as though “what matters most about people is the grievousness of their sufferings,” in which case humanity is “a contemptible lot, unworthy of any genuine esteem.”²¹⁵ Nietzsche, Schacht argues, strongly opposes this belittlement of human existence, using his own life as an example:

He was convinced that, great though his own sufferings were, they were not what mattered most about *him*; this, he believed, was rather what he had it in him to become

²¹³ Typically translated into English as *pity* or *compassion*, the German word encapsulates both, literally meaning *co-suffering*; *commiseration* might be closer to the original sense.

²¹⁴ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 367.

²¹⁵ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 460.

and to do, with his sufferings requiring to be turned to advantage, transcended, or in any event endured as best he could.²¹⁶

Kaufmann argues similarly that a “religion that preaches pity assumes that suffering is bad; [...] Self-perfection, however, is possible only through suffering, and the ultimate happiness of the man who has overcome himself does not exclude suffering.” Suffering, according to Nietzsche, is an unalterable fact of life and is *essential* “if life is to flourish, ‘higher cultures’ are to be created, and a higher humanity is to be attained.”²¹⁷ If we view every challenge we face in life as an opportunity for growth and self-overcoming, we might move the entire human species one step closer to the *Übermensch*. If, however, the most we are able to offer in the face of misery (“*Leiden*”) is commiseration (“*Mitleiden*”), then we as a species will never achieve anything of greatness.

This can rub us the wrong way if we confuse pity with compassion. Opposition to the former does not necessarily entail opposition to the latter. An aphorism from the second book of *Morgenröte*, an 1881 work that receives relatively little attention in Nietzsche scholarship, will serve to elucidate this point. Here, Nietzsche writes that someone who purposefully keeps as much suffering in mind as possible “wird unvermeidlich krank und melancholisch.” Thus, pity is counter-productive for every type of human being, even someone who *does* want to serve “als *Arzt in irgend einem Sinne der Menschheit*,” since pity “lähmt ihn in allen entscheidenden Augenblicken und unterbindet sein Wissen und seine hilfreiche feine Hand.”²¹⁸ Nietzsche supports this claim by revealing the contradiction between contemporary society’s attitude toward pity and *self*-pity. We often tell people who are suffering to look at their situation objectively, that is, as though it were happening to someone else. This is good advice, “denn wir

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 368.

²¹⁸ Nietzsche, M §134.

urtheilen über den Werth und Sinn eines Ereignisses objectiver, wenn es an Anderen hervortritt und nicht an uns.” And yet, continues Nietzsche, when someone *else* is suffering, we are constantly told to put ourselves in their shoes and commiserate with them. If we have recognized that *self*-pity does nothing to help the suffering person, and in many cases makes the situation even *worse*, then why would we ever encourage one another to view someone else’s pity as our own “und uns derart freiwillig mit einer doppelten Unvernunft beschweren, anstatt die Last der eigenen so gering wie möglich zu machen[?]”²¹⁹ Nietzsche opposes the “Religion des Mitleids”²²⁰ not because he is against people helping one another, but because *pity doesn’t help anyone*.

Like Nietzsche’s Übermensch, Superman’s altruism doesn’t seem to be motivated by pity. In fact, the prevailing attitude he demonstrates in the early years is contempt—for the “bad guys,” yes, but also for the indifferent, like the automobile manufacturer in *Action Comics #12* (1939) who continues to knowingly produce unsafe cars, and even the impotent bystander, as in *Superman #4* (1940):

²¹⁹ Ibid., §137.

²²⁰ Nietzsche, GM-III §25.



Fig. 2.09 Siegel, Jerry and Joe Shuster. *Superman #4*, panel 17.

Nevertheless, Siegel and Shuster's Superman never hesitates to lend a helping hand and never once entertains the thought of using his powers for purposes other than helping the ordinary people around him. Superman eventually loses his contemptuous edge, generally affirming the worth and dignity of non-superpowered bystanders who require his assistance (though he preserves his scorn for the villains he fights). Even as time went on and the threats to Earth grew in scale, Superman's urge to help was still based more on righteous indignation against the aggressors rather than on pity for a poor, benighted humanity too weak to fend for itself against aliens like Brainiac or Darkseid.

While Nietzsche's works do not preclude "higher" types or the *Übermensch* from working to ease the sufferings of the "lower" types, they do present the position that, as Kaufmann puts it, "[u]nless we have achieved self-mastery and self-perfection, we should be best advised to concentrate on this—by far the most important—task, instead of scattering our efforts. Running off to help others [...] is easier than making something of oneself."²²¹ The version of Superman presented in Wolfman and Castellini's *Man and Superman* (discussed in further detail in Chapter One above) strikingly models the importance of mastering oneself

²²¹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 371.

before attempting to help others. Wolfman and Castellini's Superman starts the book barely in control of his powers and finding himself in over his head in Metropolis. He bungles his first attempt at detective work and ends up curled in the fetal position on his bed (see Fig. 1.18 above). This posture visually reinforces the thematic point that Clark's identity as Superman is still in its infancy. Though he later saves numerous people from a burning building, he fails to stop a mysterious aircraft from bombing the building in the first place. In a striking two-page spread, Wolfmann and Castellini depict a defeated Clark Kent sitting in his dingy city apartment in the aftermath of said terrorist attack:



Fig. 2.10 Wolfman & Castellini, “Chapter One, in which He Leaves Smallville as a Boy,” n.p.

The sound effects and speech balloons overwhelm him, flowing like a stream from around his body in the top of the left-hand page, down through center and across the bottom edge of the right-hand page. Clark is much smaller than his shadow, which more closely resembles Superman in silhouette than Clark does in full detail. His Superman uniform spills out of his suitcase, disconnected from Clark's body but seeming to flow from his shadow. "It's too much. It's just too much..." he says, and we get the impression that he is referring to the expectations that come with the Superman uniform as well as to the flood of sensory information washing over him. Narratively as well as visually, Clark has not yet grown into his identity as Superman. Until he does, he is barely of any use to the people around him.

The breakthrough comes when Clark discovers that Lex Luthor is the mastermind behind the string of terrorist attacks that he has been unable to prevent and barely able to mitigate. Now, he takes a *proactive* rather than a *reactive* stance, operating on his own and discovering Luthor's stockpile of mysterious aircraft and rockets. After the warehouse is destroyed, Superman emerges from the flames, unhurt, hands on hips, eyes glowing red with power:



Fig. 2.11 Wolfman & Castellini, "Chapter Four, in which He Becomes a Man," n.p., panels 1-3.

He has discovered his purpose: to stop Lex Luthor and his ilk “from ever doing it again.” This leads him to his final conclusion (discussed in more detail in Chapter One above) that he must do everything in his power to help humanity achieve a “better world,” but that it is ultimately up to *us* to focus our energies in that direction. Having clarified his own moral stance relative to humanity, the impotent Clark Kent has become the omnipotent Superman.

Superman helps humanity not because he considers them a pitiful lot, but rather because he believes that human beings possess greater potentialities than they tend to exhibit, even if this realization was accompanied by a hefty dose of frustration in the Golden Age years. Superman helps because he *can*, because his own power is so overwhelmingly great that he *must* act. To refrain from action would be to deny his own nature. This insight dovetails neatly with Nietzsche’s thoughts on action motivated by something other than a shared feeling of misery. Nietzsche suggests that the actions of higher, nobler individuals are motivated by an overfullness of life and strength. Their entire existence is not dedicated to increasing the material wellbeing of others, but this does not mean that they do not help the less fortunate, only that, when they do, they are not motivated by pity:

Im Vordergrund steht das Gefühl der Fülle, der Macht, die überströmen will, das Glück der hohen Spannung, das Bewusstsein eines Reichthums, der schenken und abgeben möchte: — auch der vornehme Mensch hilft dem Unglücklichen, aber nicht oder fast nicht aus Mitleid, sondern mehr aus einem Drang, den der Überfluss von Macht erzeugt.²²²

Individuals who experience this overflowing of power *want* to spend their energy bestowing boons upon others. Such an individual “is not so blinkered by suffering and so hobbled by his own weakness and distress that they frame his manner of seeing himself and others and set the

²²² Nietzsche, JGB §260.

tone of his thought and action,” writes Schacht.²²³ Free of all pity, the exceptional individual is able to *act* and is not only more effective than those who preach and practice pity but also far more respectable.

The question for superhero comics is whether Superman’s actions (or those of the superhero in general) spring from pity or from the hero’s own sense of overabundant strength and power. Superman—even the Golden Age Superman—falls into the latter category. The first Superman story treats it as a given that Superman would use his powers to become the “champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!”²²⁴ He helps because he has the power to do so. No further rationalization is required. This could be a manifestation of Siegel and Shuster’s “New Dealism,” a social idealism that permeated US-American society in the 1930s as a result of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s sweeping “New Deal” initiatives. Everyone had to pitch in and help out, and the active care that Superman demonstrates would have presented readers with a stark contrast to “the laissez-faire entrepreneur whose ideology brought on the upheaval of the Depression.”²²⁵ Superman’s actions are literal, physical manifestations of the “Überfluss von Macht”²²⁶ that Nietzsche believes underlies the actions of higher individuals. It is simply Superman’s natural duty to use his physical power to help those weaker than he, much as it is the higher individual’s “Pflicht” when he treats those “lower” than himself “mit zarteren Fingern [...] als sich und seines Gleichen.”²²⁷

²²³ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 459.

²²⁴ Siegel & Shuster, *Action Comics #1*, p. 4. See **Fig. 1.06**, panel 7.

²²⁵ Coogan, *Superhero*, 325. The contrast is made all the more evident in episodes like *Action Comics #3* (1938) where Superman uses his powers to convince a mining magnate to institute sweeping safety reforms. Other superheroes will take up this mantle from time to time. Wonder Woman, for example, leads a strike for better wages at a women’s department store in *Sensation Comics #8* (1942). Her adventure is purposely less action-packed than Superman’s hijinks in the diamond mines.

²²⁶ Nietzsche, JGB §260.

²²⁷ Nietzsche, A §57.

Superman, like Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, does not extend his help to the "Missrathenen"—the criminals and supervillains—that he encounters in his adventures. Against them he is ruthless, even letting several die through inaction on his part in a few early issues. In this sense, Superman does not play "den Arzt, den Trostbringer, den ‚Heiland‘ der Kranken"—but the eighty years' worth of writers and artists behind Superman differ markedly from Nietzsche on the types of people who *qualify* as "the sick." For Nietzsche, the term is spiritual and includes many types of people beloved by the mediocre masses—those who offer them metaphysical comfort and physical security and demand that all higher types conform to *Sklaven-Moral*, for example. In Superman comics (and those of other superheroes), on the other hand, the sick and wayward are those whose actions *threaten* the security and comfort of the honest, hardworking masses. This raises a disturbing question: to what extent do Superman's *foes* exhibit qualities of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*? To answer this question, we will turn to Superman's most infamous and determined opponent.

5. Lex Luthor: *Übermensch*?

Lex Luthor debuted in *Action Comics #23* (April 1940). War correspondent Clark Kent discovers that the war in Europe (between the two fictional countries of Galonia and Toran) is being masterminded by an orange-haired villain named Luthor (no first name). It's not clear at first what or who Luthor is—his face appears in "a huge slab of rock" and this "incredibly ugly vision" is capable of hypnotizing onlookers or cutting them down with green energy rays.²²⁸ The reader first sees Luthor in person when a captured Lois Lane is delivered to the villain, and he looks like a mystic: with a shock of orange hair topping a stern yet bland face, he is dressed in a

²²⁸ Siegel & Shuster, *Action Comics #23*, p. 35.

long red robe and seated in a throne-like chair. We soon find out, however, that he himself does not possess the superpowers that his “slab of rock” face does. Instead, he declares himself to be “[j]ust an ordinary man—but with th’ brain of a super-genius! With scientific miracles at my fingertips, I’m preparing to make myself supreme master of th’ world!” (See **Fig. 2.12** below.) He is no mystic, but rather an Oz-like figure whose superpowers are technological. By means of his super-intelligence, Luthor seeks to compensate for his lack of super-strength.

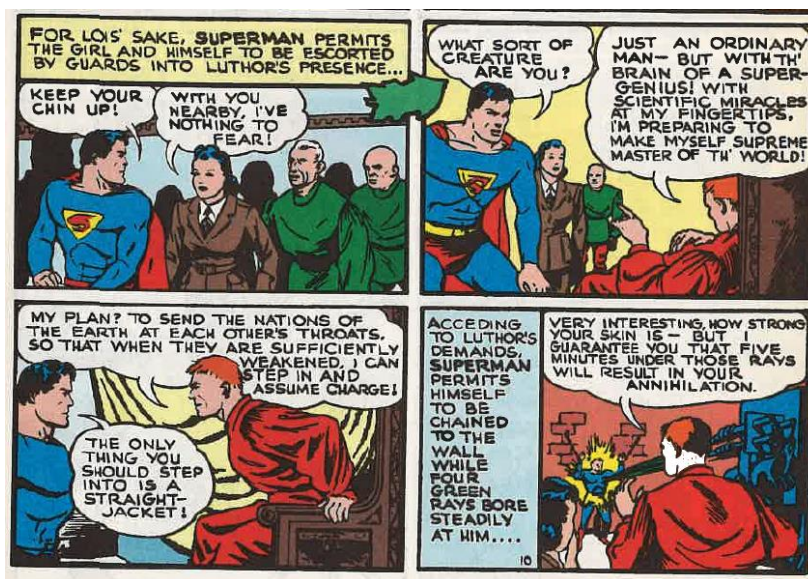


Fig. 2.12 Siegel & Shuster, *Action Comics* #23, 41, panels 5-8.

Of course, Luthor always loses to Superman (at least in the early years). That Luthor always loses is necessitated by the good-versus-evil narrative at the heart of Golden-Age Superman comics. Beyond this surface morality, however, these comics reveal a deeper message when read with Nietzsche in mind. Luthor’s only arguable superpower is his intelligence. Relative to Superman he is almost as physically unimpressive as his predecessor the Ultra-Humanite (Luthor, unlike his predecessor, is ambulatory). As was the case with the Ultra-Humanite, this physical lack has made Luthor all the cleverer, and in 1940 alone he devises around a dozen machines and traps in vain attempts to defeat Superman. In this fact we find an

echo of Nietzsche's formulation in the first essay of the *Genealogie*: "Eine Rasse solcher Menschen des Ressentiment wird nothwendig endlich *klüger* sein als irgend eine vornehme Rasse, sie wird die Klugheit auch in ganz andrem Maasse ehren: nämlich als eine Existenzbedingung ersten Ranges[...]"²²⁹ Becoming clever is necessary if the "Menschen des Ressentiment" (that is, human beings who, because of their spiritual and/or physical weaknesses, hold fast to a *Sklaven-Moral*, of which *Ressentiment* is one possible manifestation) are ever to gain power over "eine vornehme Rasse" (that is, human beings whose physical and spiritual constitution cause them to exhibit *Herren-Moral*). Consequently, it is possible that the Golden-Age Luthor, though in comic-book parlance a *supervillain*, falls short of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* because he is still locked in the ages-old master-slave duality.

It is by means of subterfuge and the creation of values according to which the exercise of power is a sin that "Menschen des Ressentiment" succeed in creating "das schlechte Gewissen," a turning of humankind inward and against itself, a "Kriegserklärung gegen die alten Instinkte, auf denen bis dahin seine Kraft, Lust und Furchtbarkeit beruhte."²³⁰ Golden-Age Luthor, too, works in the shadows. He cannot best Superman in a physical fight, so instead he resorts to manipulation and subterfuge in his attempts to gain power and wealth. In *Action Comics #23*, Luthor works to extend the war between Galonia and Toran by hypnotizing high-ranking army officials and launching covert attacks against each side in the name of the enemy. In *Superman #5* (Summer 1940), Luthor is secretly controlling US-American businessmen in order to plunge the nation's economy into another depression (we are assured that, somehow, this will allow Luthor to seize political control; fortunately, Superman intercedes before Luthor is able to execute that nebulous phase of his plan). The comparison is not perfect, however, for Luthor

²²⁹ Nietzsche, GM-I §10.

²³⁰ Nietzsche, GM-II §16.

does not exhibit every characteristic of Nietzsche’s “Menschen des Ressentiment.” To begin with, Luthor rarely, if ever, engages in a battle over Superman’s conscience.²³¹ Furthermore, Nietzsche writes that the “Mensch des Ressentiment” “versteht sich auf das Schweigen, das Nicht-Vergessen, das Warten, das vorläufige Sich-verkleinern, Sich-demüthigen.”²³² While Luthor knows how to bide his time, waiting for the opportune moment to strike and never forgetting a defeat at Superman’s hands, he is not very good at the last two activities. His pride does not allow the slightest self-deprecation.

Luthor is further separated from the Übermensch-ideal because he never hesitates to sacrifice millions of people, whether directly or indirectly, in his pursuit of power. Prolonging the Galonia-Toran war in *Action Comics #23* and hoping it will spread to the rest of the world will result in countless deaths, and all “so that when they are sufficiently weakened, I can step in and assume charge!” (See **Fig. 2.12** above.) Even after the character has become a “respectable” businessman in later iterations, Luthor does not hesitate to sacrifice even the people who work for him. In a sequence from the *Superman vs. Sinbad* story arc (1990), Luthor’s specific statement to an employee caught in the wrong place at the wrong time is representative of his attitude toward his fellow human beings in general (see **Fig. 2.13** below). Luthor appears especially pugnacious in this sequence, reminding the reader that, despite his vast intelligence, his moral code is as flabby as his neck. His readiness to sacrifice anyone is often gratuitous, as in this instance—the employee does not *need* to die for the sake of Luthor’s operational security—and his cruelty to those whom he deems inferior proves that he does *not* treat those

²³¹ And when he does, it is usually in a non-canonical *Elseworlds* tale in which Superman is, for one reason or another, acting more like a villain than a hero. One such example of Luthor seeking to influence Superman’s mind will be discussed in more detail in Section 6 below.

²³² Nietzsche, GM-I §10.

around him “mit zarteren Fingern [...], als sich und seines Gleichen,” which Nietzsche asserts is the duty of the “Ausnahme-Mensch.”²³³



Fig. 2.13 Messner-Loebs et al., *Superman versus Sinbad*, 124, panels 5-7.

Luthor typically falls short of the Übermensch-ideal; nevertheless, he could still serve humanity’s enhancement even as he remains mired in a resentful *Sklaven-Moral* mindset. His determination and intelligence could benefit the rest of ordinary humanity, even if unintentionally. The question of Luthor’s effectiveness as an enhancer of humanity is a possibility that comic-book writers and artists have begun to explore in more recent (oftentimes non-canonical) versions of Lex Luthor’s character. These “What If?” versions of Luthor are far more complex—and consequently far more interesting—in their characterization of the infamous supervillain. Writer Brian Azzarello and artist Lee Bermejo present one such alternate take on the character in their five-issue miniseries *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* (2005). The miniseries retells the Luthor-Superman antagonism from Luthor’s perspective, but we are immediately

²³³ Nietzsche, AC §57.

clued in that the narrator is unreliable, for the narrative voice we “hear” in the blue-white narrative boxes throughout the series belongs to Luthor, himself. This is not a stream-of-consciousness narration; instead, it flows so coherently that we suspect Luthor has been *rehearsing* his version of events. At first, it may seem as though Luthor is somehow aware of the reader and feels he must justify his actions across all five issues, but as the story progresses it becomes increasingly clear that Luthor is trying to convince *himself* that his horrific actions are justified. The story that we are being told is the story that Luthor is telling himself, in which *he* is the good guy. The objective accuracy of his story cannot be determined, since his is the only voice we hear: Superman appears rarely and speaks only once, at the end of the final issue.

Azzarello and Bermejo’s Luthor begins by presenting himself as a humanitarian. The people of Metropolis adore him, for he is a businessman who employs tens of thousands, a philanthropist who cares for the less fortunate, and a scientist who works toward a brighter tomorrow. The first page of the first chapter shows a black building dominating the Metropolis skyline. On the second page, the building comes into focus, and the giant “L” on top identifies the building’s owner and the narrator whose voice we are “hearing.” The third page of the sequence depicts Luthor for the first time. What on the first and second pages could have been a sunrise is now shown to be a *sunset*: the office is empty save for Luthor and Stan the custodian; everyone has gone home for the day (see **Fig. 2.14** below). When Superman finally arrives on the scene in the final pages of the first chapter (see **Fig. 2.15** below), the sky has darkened to a twilight purple. Visually, the world is plunged into darkness when Superman arrives, reflecting the chapter’s thematic content. Luthor sees in Superman “something no man can *ever be*.” Because Superman’s state of being is unattainable, Superman represents “the *end* of our *potential*. The *end* of our *achievements*. The *end* of our *dreams*.” Superman appears quite



Fig. 2.14 Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #1*, second and third pages.



Fig. 2.15 Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #1*, n.p.

villainous, indeed: his eyes glow red and his muscular physique emphasizes the danger, rather than the saving power, that his strength represents to non-superpowered human beings. Luthor's view of himself and his own actions is, of course, precisely the opposite. Luthor is building a new science tower, a “staggering *tribute* to our *potential* [...] a symbol that I can *touch*, that represents the *dream* that's within us all. Of the heights *humanity* can aspire to... and the *depths* of human *sacrifice*... to *be*.”

Luthor presents his opposition to Superman as a valiant struggle for human freedom. He purports to believe that “*all men are created equal*,” going on to emphasize that this does not include Superman, who is an alien and not a man.²³⁴ In the story's third chapter, Luthor, unaware of his fellow billionaire's secret identity, confesses to Bruce Wayne his fear that Superman might one day seize political power for himself:

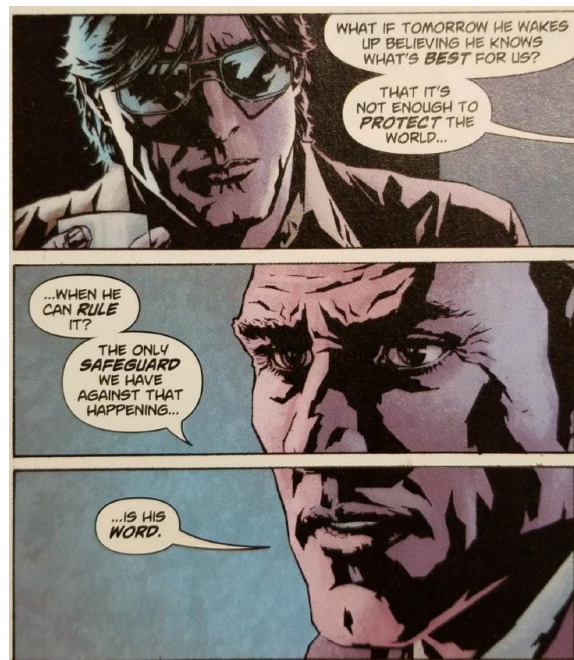


Fig. 2.16 Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #3*, n.p., panels 3-5.

²³⁴ Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #1*, n.p.

For all his faults, this version of Luthor genuinely believes that human progress is possible, and that the existence of Superman impedes that progress. Why this should be is not explicitly made clear in the series. Perhaps Luthor fears that humanity will cease striving to improve itself—in Nietzschean terms, to *overcome* itself—when faced with Superman’s unattainable physical perfection. With Superman always there to save us, why should we bother exercising any care or caution in our lives?²³⁵ Luthor fears that humanity will sink into complacency, and that doing so will rob it of its most powerful weapon—*hope*.

Even for this version of Luthor, however, the end justifies the means. He exhibits the trademark Luthor willingness to sacrifice countless lives in his efforts to destroy Superman, making this Luthor, like all other iterations of the character, fall short of *Übermensch*-status. Luthor invents (and apparently falls in love with) a superhuman android named Hope, giving the people of Metropolis a heavy-handed symbol of what humanity can achieve without Superman. Knowing that Superman will not kill, nor allow anyone to come to harm if he can help it, Luthor then hires (via an intermediary) the Toyman, a convicted pedophile and bombmaker, to blow up a children’s hospital. Controlling Hope, first on the scene, Luthor has her apprehend the Toyman and drop him from a lethal height. As the eyes of the city watch, Superman *saves* the criminal, handing him over to police and robbing the grieving city of the “justice” it desperately craves.²³⁶ (This “justice,” of course, is simple revenge, recalling Nietzsche’s apt formulation in

Zarathustra: “Und wenn sie sagen ‚ich bin gerecht,‘ so klingt es immer gleich wie:

‚ich bin gerächt!‘”²³⁷) Superman pursues Hope, whom Luthor causes to detonate in such a way

²³⁵ This theme is developed more deeply in Millar et al.’s *Superman: Red Son*, of which I will have more to say in Section 6 below.

²³⁶ Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #5*, n.p.

²³⁷ Nietzsche, Z-II “Von den Tugendhaften.”

that Superman appears responsible, destroying Luthor’s new tower and killing countless innocents in the process. All of this death and destruction will be worth it, Luthor tells Superman in the end, even “if it only *changes one* mind about what you *are...*”²³⁸ The series ends with an ambiguous statement, framed in two blue narrative boxes: “*I am a man,*” Luthor tells himself (and, by extension, the reader); “*I hope.*” (See **Fig. 2.17** below). These last two words can be read as an affirmation: Luthor is a man because he *hopes*—for human progress in a world finally free of Superman. They can also be interpreted as the smallest crack finally



Fig. 2.17 Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #5*, n.p., panel 2.

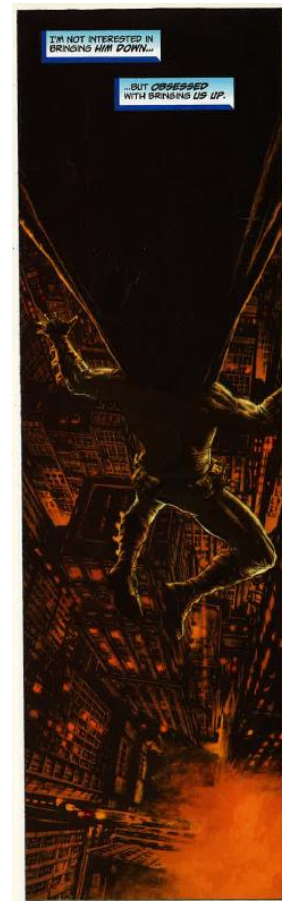


Fig. 2.18 Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #3*, n.p., panel 1.

²³⁸ Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel*, n.p.

appearing in Luthor's self-justification: he *hopes* that he is still a man after what he has done.

Azzarello and Bermejo leave the final interpretation to the reader, but it seems clear that through his actions Luthor has betrayed his principle of the equal value of each and every human life.

Nevertheless, this Luthor firmly believes he is serving the enhancement of the human species—a goal that Nietzsche strongly links not only to the *Übermensch*, but to the exceptional individuals that precede the *Übermensch*. Luthor claims that his primary goal is not to degrade Superman, but to uplift humanity (see **Fig. 2.18** above). Azzarello and Bermejo's Luthor also exhibits a number of behaviors and beliefs that resonate strongly with character traits that Nietzsche attaches to noble or "higher" human beings. First of all, Luthor recognizes that there is no such thing as absolute truth or justice. Furthermore, Luthor does not shirk from problems and difficulties when they arise. Instead, he accepts the truth that life itself "is a series of *problems*" and chooses to "*rise above* the truth... ..and lead a *good* life[.]" Rhetorically, he asks: "Shouldn't we all look at *problems* as a *chance* for us to find... ..*solutions*?"²³⁹ This attitude bears a striking similarity to a passage from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* in which Nietzsche asserts that, for certain stronger, higher natures, "[e]in Verlust ist kaum eine Stunde ein Verlust: irgendwie ist uns damit auch ein Geschenk vom Himmel gefallen — eine neue Kraft zum Beispiel: und sei es auch nur eine neue Gelegenheit zur Kraft!"²⁴⁰ Finally, Luthor recognizes that, to solve problems, he sometimes "must break off a chunk" of his pride and swallow it: "A *bitter* pill, for a *better* tomorrow."²⁴¹ Swallowing one's pride happens to be the first of the many "most difficult tasks" that Nietzsche's Zarathustra lists when describing the possible burdens of the human spirit in the camel stage.²⁴² The resonance between the way that

²³⁹ Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #2*, n.p.

²⁴⁰ Nietzsche, FW §326.

²⁴¹ Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #2*, n.p.

²⁴² Nietzsche, Z-I, "Von den drei Verwandlungen." The original phrasing is:

this version of Lex Luthor sees himself and the three metamorphoses in strengthened in the series' third issue/chapter, when Luthor says of Superman:



Fig. 2.19 Azzarello & Bermejo, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* #3, n.p., panel 6.

Here, Luthor would represent the second form of the human spirit, that of the lion with its “ich will” battling the dragon “Du-sollst.” Certainly, Luthor’s complete disregard for the lives of the less powerful qualifies him as a leonine “blonde Bestie” (Luthor’s bald pate reminding us once again that Nietzsche’s original use of the adjective “blonde” is metaphorical), and there is no indication that the metaphorical lion in *Zarathustra* would be any less bestial than its “blonde” counterpart in the *Genealogie*. But Luthor remains in this second phase by series’ end: he is still locked in combat with Superman, still willing to keep fighting the dragon regardless of the human cost. He has not transcended the lion and metamorphosed into the child, nor has he broken free of the dualistic “us versus them” moral mindset. Consequently, he cannot be a Nietzschean *Übermensch*.

Was ist das Schwerste, ihr Helden? so fragt der tragsame Geist, dass ich es auf mich nehme und meiner Stärke froh werde.

Ist es nicht das: sich erniedrigen, um seinem Hochmuth wehe zu thun? Seine Thorheit leuchten lassen, um seiner Weisheit zu spotten?

Luthor the “blonde Bestie” has, in fact, become even more harmful than the “dragon” he is fighting. This fate is foreshadowed at the end of the first chapter—though this foreshadowing hinges on the interpretation of a single word. On the final page of the first chapter, Luthor says to Superman: “But even staring at you—the *abyss*—I am *not afraid*” (see **Fig. 2.15** above). This could be a reference to the 146th aphorism of Nietzsche’s *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, which is widely quoted in popular culture²⁴³ and was famously introduced into the world of superhero comics by Alan Moore in the fifth chapter of *Watchmen* (1986). I think it highly probable that Azzarello and Bermejo had this reference in mind when they chose this particular word. Nietzsche’s original aphorism reads: “Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein.”²⁴⁴ Although the reference to the “abyss” is more widely recognized, the first half of the aphorism is also applicable to this version of Lex Luthor. He labels Superman an inhuman monster, but in the course of fighting this “monster” has become even more inhuman than his foe.

By the end of the miniseries, Luthor has fallen short of the ideal suggested by the title—and of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*-ideal, as well. Azzarello and Bermejo’s Luthor is not so far removed from Siegel and Shuster’s original, after all. He acts with a callous disregard for others, routinely threatening, endangering, and indirectly murdering them. Based on this metric alone, we can determine that this Luthor is not an *Übermensch*: he does not act with the grace and “zarteren Fingern” that Nietzsche claims is characteristic of the higher type of individual. Luthor’s relationship to Superman also reveals deep-seated insecurities that more closely

²⁴³ Even today, it is a popular text for use in memes on social media, commonly superimposed over images of black cats or dogs staring up at the camera in such a way that only their eyes are distinguishable from the blackness of their bodies—they appear to form an “abyss” that literally gazes back.

²⁴⁴ Nietzsche, JGB §146.

resemble the self-pitying “Mensch des Ressentiment” than the Übermensch. Luthor is not trying to help humanity as an expression of an overflowing sense of his own health and power. Instead, his actions stem explicitly from his own physical shortcomings relative to Superman. While he may be right to feel threatened by the existence of someone far stronger than he is—just as Nietzsche concedes that adherents of *Sklaven-Moral* have every justification to fear the “Rudel blonder Raubthiere”—his actions are determined in *reaction* to Superman’s own. Luthor does not decide what is “good” or “bad” based on his own sense of self; instead, he first labels Superman “evil” and *then* calls himself “good.” This is *precisely* the process by which, according to Nietzsche, *Sklaven-Moral* is formed: “die Sklaven-Moral bedarf, um zu entstehn, immer zuerst einer Gegen- und Aussenwelt, sie bedarf, physiologisch gesprochen, äusserer Reize, um überhaupt zu agiren, — ihre Aktion ist von Grund aus *Reaktion*.”²⁴⁵

Consequently, *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* presents not a recipe for a human (as opposed to alien) Übermensch, but rather a striking portrait of an all-too-human “Mensch des Ressentiment.” In Luthor’s hands, scientific instruments of human salvation become tools of manipulation and destruction as he employs against Superman without regard for anyone caught in the crossfire. In this, Luthor resembles the priest, and particularly the ascetic priest “mit seiner Radikalkur, dem *Nichts*,” who makes everything even worse than it would be without him: “Bei den Priestern wird eben *Alles* gefährlicher, nicht nur Kurmittel und Heilkünste, sondern auch Hochmuth, Rache, Scharfsinn, Ausschweifung, Liebe, Herrschsucht, Tugend, Krankheit.” Of course, in the very same breath, Nietzsche once again reminds us that “erst auf dem Boden dieser *wesentlich gefährlichen* Daseinsform des Menschen, der priesterlichen, der Mensch überhaupt *ein interessantes Thier* geworden ist, dass erst hier die menschliche Seele in einem

²⁴⁵ Nietzsche, GM-I §10.

höheren Sinne *Tiefe* bekommen hat und *böse* geworden ist.”²⁴⁶ Lex Luthor’s motivations in this series are much more interesting than his Kryptonian adversary’s boyscout-morality, and his misguided attempt to overcome an external obstacle (Superman) *could* help him develop the inner strength necessary for the far greater challenge of *self*-overcoming. The series closes on this tantalizingly open-ended note.

6. Superheroes, Übermenschen, and the State

The highest and most exceptional individuals are disconnected from human governance in both superhero comics and in Nietzsche’s philosophy. In superhero comic books, the idea that a superpowered tyrant (or an oligarchy of superpowered individuals) should rule over non-superpowered humanity is consistently rejected. In Nietzsche’s works this rejection is less explicit, but the Übermensch is never given a role in human government. The *reasons* for this disconnect, however, differ greatly between the two sources under consideration. In superhero comics, the issue revolves around conventional U.S.-American notions of human self-determination: superheroes (especially those with innate super-abilities like Superman) are so much more powerful than average human beings that their rule would necessarily devolve into tyranny, limiting the freedom and development of “normal” individuals. For Nietzsche, strict government is necessary for the formation of physically and spiritually strong citizens but inimical to the free development of exceptional individuals. Contrary to superhero comics, which espouse the egalitarian belief that all human beings carry within themselves the seeds of greatness, Nietzsche believes that *only* the exceptional are responsible enough to handle the freedom necessary for them to realize their highest potential: if the masses of humanity were

²⁴⁶ Ibid., §6.

truly liberated, as democratic and socialist forms of government seek to do, Nietzsche argues that the result would be disastrous.

Since the inception of superhero comics in 1938, the desire for world domination has been firmly associated with supervillains. The Ultra-Humanite, the first supervillain, debuted in *Action Comics #13* as the “head of a vast ring of criminal enterprises” whose goal is “*domination of the world!!*”²⁴⁷ The message is clear: a true superhero like Superman uses his powers to help law-abiding citizens, not to dominate them. The timing behind the first supervillain’s appearance is significant: the Ultra-Humanite debuted just three months before Hitler’s Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. By March 1941, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby’s *Captain America* would punch Hitler in the face on the cover of *Marvel’s Captain America Comics #1*. Before the United States had declared war on the Axis powers, comic book creators—many of them Jewish, like Siegel, Shuster, Simon, and Kirby—engaged in a mass-medium propaganda war against tyranny in general and the Third Reich in particular.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Superman did not just oppose dictators; comics dealt more and more with the question of what his direct intervention in political affairs might mean for “ordinary” people. Superhero comics generally took the attitude that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Even Superman, himself, expressed this opinion, as in the following exchange from “The Sinbad Contract: Part One” (published in October 1990, two months after the start of the Gulf War). Superman—as Clark Kent—responds to his colleague Keith’s contention that “we’d be a lot *safer* if Superman was given *total power!*” by suggesting that even Superman could be corrupted by too much power:

²⁴⁷ Siegel & Shuster, *Action Comics #13*, panels 73, 75. See **Fig. 1.17**.



Fig. 2.20 Messner-Loebs et al., *Superman versus Sinbad*, 101, panels 5-6.

This fear is borne out on those rare occasions when Superman *does* gain political power. This tends to only happen in alternate timelines (like the *Elseworlds*²⁴⁸ series) rather than to the canonical Superman. In Loeb et al.’s four-part Batman-Superman crossover story *Absolute Power*, for example, the 31st-century Legion of Supervillains travels back in time to formative moments in Batman and Superman’s respective childhoods. When the infant Kal-El crash-lands on Earth, the Legion murders the Kents and takes the Kryptonian child for their own. When Bruce Wayne’s parents are gunned down in Crime Alley, the Legion is there to avenge their deaths, imparting to the traumatized child a more ruthless approach to fighting crime. Under the Legion’s guidance, Batman and Superman come to rule the world. They speak with derision of “the hopeless cattle that do all of the *working*,”²⁴⁹ dividing their time between enjoying their economic and political spoils and fighting what few superheroes their jackbooted police squads can’t handle. The commentary isn’t exactly subtle: at one point Green Arrow refers to them both as “*The Hitler Twins*” (see **Fig. 2.21** below), and at the end of the first issue Wonder Woman

²⁴⁸ This series title covers a wide array of individual, often entirely disconnected stories that are not part of the DC Universe’s canon: “most *Elseworlds* stories instead take place in entirely self-contained continuities whose only connection to the canon DC continuity are the presence of familiar DC characters” (<https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Elseworlds>).

²⁴⁹ Loeb et al., *Absolute Power*, “I Pledge Allegiance...” n.p.



Fig. 2.21 Loeb et al., “I Pledge Allegiance...”
Superman/Batman: Absolute Power, n.p., full page.

teams up with strongman Uncle Sam to take down the two caped and cowled despots.²⁵⁰ In the end, the timeline is of course restored: twin statues of Batman and Superman no longer stand in place of the Statue of Liberty; Metropolis returns to its former glory, shining with equal promise for all; and Green Arrow affectionately calls the super-duo “*the Hardy Boys*.”²⁵¹ Overall, the story focuses less on the downtrodden and oppressed human beings living under this form of super-tyranny and more on the events in Batman and Superman’s respective histories that made

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid., “Thy Will Be Done...” n.p.

them the heroes we know and love. Nevertheless, the idea that the rule of the superpowered is inimical to human flourishing is clearly communicated in the story's first few pages. When superheroes embrace a "might makes right" philosophy, they become despots just as easily as an ordinary human would.

The consequences of superhuman rule are even more intricately explored in the three-part *Elseworlds* tale *Superman: Red Son* (2003) by Mark Millar et al. The Cold War conflict between U.S.-American capitalist democracy and Soviet Communism serves as the backdrop for Millar et al.'s alternate timeline, according to which the rocket carrying the infant who will become Superman crash-lands in the middle of the Soviet Union. Even though Superman acts and talks like the character we know, at least in the beginning, Millar does employ several visual elements that distinguish this Soviet Superman from the canonical version. The first image of Superman comes several pages into the graphic novel's first part. Drawn to look like an image on a 1950s



Fig. 2.22 Millar et al., "Rising." *Superman: Red Son*, n.p. full page.

television screen, Superman is rendered in black and white, holding a USSR flag in his right hand and sporting the hammer and sickle on his chest where an “S” would normally be (see **Fig. 2.22** above). When we finally see his costume in full color, it is red and gray instead of red, blue, and yellow. The new color scheme gives Superman a harder, more unapproachable, almost sinister appearance.

The way that Superman’s movements are depicted also differs from conventional representations of the character. Since the very first of Siegel and Shuster’s Superman stories, the focus is typically placed on Superman’s movement: the background changes dramatically from panel to panel, but Superman is always the focal point of each image. In Millar et al.’s *Red Son*, however, Superman’s motion is often depicted from the vantage point of those left behind,



Fig. 2.23 Millar et al., “Rising,” n.p., multi-panel excerpts.

as in the two examples given in **Fig. 2.23** above. Superman’s movement is too fast for the human eye. While conventionally the reader would be placed in a superhuman position from which Superman’s speed and strength would be visible, here the reader, like the characters in the story, is reduced to the status of passive witness. This artistic decision alienates the reader from Superman, visually underscoring the thematic importance of Superman’s literal alien-ness: this is not a human being, but ostensibly an alien from a faraway planet with powers so far beyond human experience as to be incomprehensible.

What Clark Kent feared in “The Sinbad Contract: Part One” comes to pass in Millar et al.’s tale: Superman seizes political control of the USSR after Stalin’s death and seeks to subsume all the nations of the globe under his single super-Soviet government. He does not do this because he believes that his own physical and mental superiority entitles him to govern all “inferior” beings. Instead, he falls into the ages-old trap that Nietzsche warns against: *Mitleid*. At the end of *Red Son*’s first act, Superman encounters his old hometown flame Lana Lazarenko (a play on the name “Lana Lang,” Clark Kent’s high-school love interest) waiting with her children in a bread line. His outrage builds, until he decides to act:

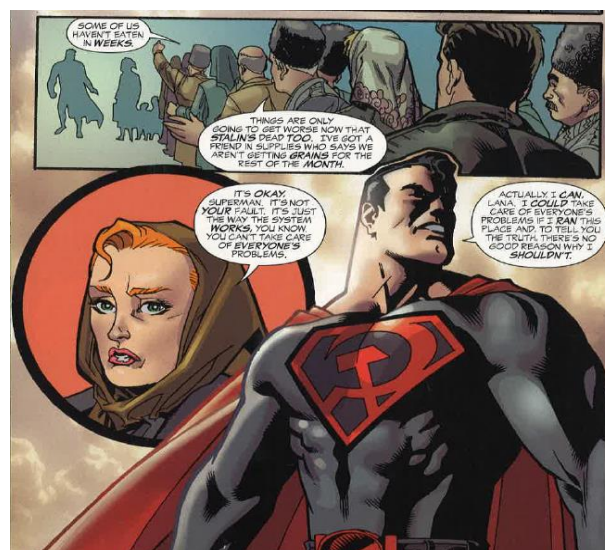


Fig. 2.24 Millar et al., “Rising,” n.p., panels 3-5.

After this exchange, Superman establishes a worldwide communist empire. The story's second act describes life in the Warsaw pact states under Superman's rule: "*Poverty, disease, and ignorance have been virtually eliminated from the Warsaw Pact States... Disobedience to the party has been virtually eliminated.*"²⁵² The third and final act begins with Superman's successful conquest of the entire world, save for a poverty-stricken United States. Superman has achieved Utopia: "Every adult had a job. Every child had a hobby. And the entire human population enjoyed the full eight hours' sleep which their bodies required. Crime didn't exist. Accidents never happened."²⁵³ Superman's actions suggest that he found *suffering* to be the most important thing about human existence, and set about to eradicate it—the mark, as we saw in Section Four above, of the "Religion des Mitleids."

This utopic existence, however, comes at the price of individual freedom. Where conformity to Superman-Soviet dogma is not willingly embraced, it is enforced: mind-control devices are implanted in the brains of political dissidents. Of course, only a few dissidents exist (Batman and Lex Luthor among them): the masses of humanity, having their every material need met, are happy and complacent under Superman's governance. The degree to which the populace takes their security for granted, however, begins to worry even Superman (almost as though the US-American sense of individual liberty were ingrained into Superman's very essence). As he and Wonder Woman soar through the air in *Red Son's* second act, having just saved the crew of a burning cargo ship, Superman muses aloud:

Sometimes I wonder if Luther and the Americans are *right*, Diana. Perhaps we *do* interfere with humanity too much. Nobody wears a *seatbelt* anymore. Ships have even stopped carrying *lifejackets*. I don't like this unhealthy way that people are *behaving*.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Millar et al., *Superman: Red Son*, "Ascendant," n.p.

²⁵³ Ibid., "Setting," n.p.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., "Ascendant," n.p.

In the story's final act, Superman chastises a newly brainwashed Brainiac for having shrunk the entire city of Stalingrad for preservation in the alien's collection of galactic civilizations. Even though Brainiac "cared for these cultures and tended to their every requirement to survive as a *species*," Superman argues that doing so "took away what made them human and there's *never* and excuse for that, Brainiac."²⁵⁵ Luthor finally defeats Superman when he brings the super-comrade's attention to the fact that Superman, in attempting to put the entire globe under his micromanagement, is doing the same thing: "Why don't you just put the whole WOLRD in a BOTTLE, Superman?" writes Luthor. These words bring the omnipotent dictator literally to his knees as Superman realizes that, though he "only wanted the *best* for everyone," he has eliminated human agency altogether:



Fig. 2.25 Millar et al., "Setting," n.p., panels 1-3.

Superman: Red Son argues that a communist dictator version of Superman would mean the end of human liberty, an argument that, on the surface, bears some similarity to Nietzsche's

²⁵⁵ Ibid., "Setting," n.p.

political thought. Nietzsche spoke often of his contempt for socialism (with a single exception, Nietzsche never wrote of communism or communists²⁵⁶), arguing that the instinct toward socialism springs from the sort of *Sklassen-* and *Ressentiments-Moral* that he analyzes in his *Genealogie*. Nietzsche frequently asserts that feelings of resentment toward the strong, noble, healthy, and even wealthy (though this last category is by no means synonymous with the first three) coupled with a desire for rest, peace, material and spiritual ease, and the cessation of all ennobling but challenging human labor form the basis of European socialist movements. “Wen hasse ich unter dem Gesindel von Heute am besten?” he asks rhetorically in *Der Antichrist*: “Das Socialisten-Gesindel, die Tschandala-Apostel, die den Instinkt, die Lust, das Genügsamkeits-Gefühl des Arbeiters mit seinem kleinen Sein untergraben, — die ihn neidisch machen, die ihn Rache lehren...”²⁵⁷ As I have already shown above, however, Nietzsche believed that a massive lower class was essential to every higher society and did not see the members of this class as valueless. Nietzsche writes in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I* that, if the lower types and classes “*wollen nun einmal ihres Glückes und Unglückes eigene Schmiede sein,*” and that if allowing them a certain degree „der Selbstbestimmung“ will make them so content with their lives, “dass sie die fatalen folgen ihrer Beschränktheit gern ertragen,” then “so ist wenig einzuwenden.”²⁵⁸ What he objects to is the sort of *Ressentiments-Moral* (of which socialism is one possible manifestation) that seeks to make the weak and lowly unhappy with their lot and that tries at every turn to bring the higher, exceptional types down to the same level. In this respect, socialism is “der phantastische jüngere Bruder des fast abgelebten Despotismus,

²⁵⁶ This exception is Nietzsche’s unpublished *Fünf Vorreden zu fünf ungeschriebenen Büchern* §3 “Der griechische Staat,” wherein he lumps together “Kommunisten und Socialisten und auch ihre blässeren Abkömmlinge, die weiße Race der ‘liberalen’ [...]”

²⁵⁷ Nietzsche, A §57.

²⁵⁸ Nietzsche, MA-I §438.

den er beerben will [...] Denn er [der Socialismus] begehrt eine Fülle der Staatsgewalt, wie sie nur je der Despotismus gehabt hat, ja er überbietet alles Vergangene dadurch, dass er die förmliche Vernichtung des Individuums anstrebt.”²⁵⁹ Millar et al.’s representation of Superman the despotic Super-Communist fits neatly into Nietzsche’s conception of the dangers of socialism for the individual.

This is not to say that Nietzsche favors liberal democratic governments over socialist ones (a belief which *Red Son*’s ending clearly espouses). In Nietzsche’s estimation, liberal democracy shares the same source as socialism. As early as *MA-I*, Nietzsche declares that “die moderne Demokratie ist die historische Form vom *Verfall des Staates*.”²⁶⁰ Modern democracy and majority rule simply ensure that the law of averages determines human government: the mediocre gain power in a democracy, not the exceptional. The energies of modern democratic governments can become consumed with the task of securing the greatest material welfare to the greatest number possible just as easily as socialist governments. Of course, even here Nietzsche does not see only one side to this problem. Nietzsche continues, stating that the deterioration of modern government into democratic forms

ist nicht in jedem Betracht eine unglückselige: die Klugheit und der Eigennutz der Menschen sind von allen ihren Eigenschaften am besten ausgebildet: wenn den Anforderungen dieser Kräfte der Staat nicht mehr entspricht, so wird am wenigsten das Chaos eintreten, sondern eine noch zweckmässigere Erfindung, als der Staat es war, zum Siege über den Staat kommen.²⁶¹

Similar to what he would later write of *Sklaven-Moral* in the *Genealogie*, Nietzsche asserts that cleverness and self-interest are the most developed human traits, and that if a modern democratic

²⁵⁹ Ibid., §473.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., §472. Nietzsche repeats this declaration, largely unchanged, in JGB §203 and GD, “Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen,” §39.

²⁶¹ Ibid., §446.

state does not satisfy these demands, the result will be not chaos, but an even more expedient form of government. Democracy has the advantage over despotic socialism in that the former allows for the possibility of its own self-overcoming.

Even socialism, however, can be useful as a means to an end, though not as an end in itself: one must simply ask “in welcher Modification er noch als mächtiger Hebel innerhalb des jetzigen politischen Kräftespiels benutzt werden kann.” Socialism is thus demonstrative of a prescriptive rule that Nietzsche sets for human governance in general: “Die Menschheit muss bei jeder grossen Kraft – und sei es die gefährlichste – daran denken, aus ihr ein Werkzeug ihrer Absichten zu machen.”²⁶² Something similar occurs in *Red Son*’s third act: Lex Luthor wins the US-American presidency and single-handedly revitalizes the failed economy by assuming “absolute control over every dollar bill” (see **Fig. 2.26** below). He is consequently able to use the “dangerous” power of centralized economic control in pursuit of his ultimate goal: the downfall of Superman’s Soviet state. Still, the Soviet Superman detests the fact that Luthor does not ameliorate the sufferings of the people for their own sake. This being the case, Millar et al.’s Luthor is not an example of Nietzsche’s Übermensch, but he *is* a good example of the “blond beast.” He does not hesitate to cause significant collateral damage to innocents on either side,



Fig. 2.26 Millar et al., “Setting,” n.p., panel 1.

²⁶² Ibid.

behaving with the same reckless abandon toward the lives of those he considers inferior and/or foreign that Nietzsche attributes to ancient races of noble barbarians. At one point in Part Two (“Ascendant”), Luthor even goes so far as to personally murder all the scientists and technicians who assisted in the creation of his first failed anti-Superman monster (see **Fig. 2.27** below). He also exhibits petty jealousy and his own brand of insecurity: he cannot stand that his wife loves her job as much as, if not even more than, she loves him; and he flies into a rage whenever anyone or anything demonstrates an intelligence greater than his.



Fig. 2.27 Millar et al., “Rising,” n.p., panels 1-2.

Millar et al. complicate their portrayal of Luthor with the fact that, once Luthor defeats Superman, human flourishing increases dramatically. From this point on, humanity’s development in *Red Son* closely resembles Nietzsche’s description of how a strong state—that is,

a tyrannical government founded not on pity but on the necessity of defending oneself against external threats—is a necessary *precondition* for the *eventual* existence of, first, exceptional individuals and, later on, the *Übermensch*. Scholar Simon Townsend argues in a 2020 essay that Nietzsche values strong states over weak states not as ends in themselves, but because they make it possible for exceptional individuals to develop. Relying largely on *Jenseits* and *Zur Genealogie*, Townsend writes that, according to Nietzsche, the “strength of a people develops in proportion to the hostility of their environment. [...] To survive in hostile environments communities must create inflexible values and institutions that prioritize long-term strengthening over individual freedom.”²⁶³ Townsend is in essential agreement with Kaufmann that “Nietzsche objects to the State because it appears to him as the power that intimidates man into conformity.”²⁶⁴ An aristocratic state enforces conformity just as much as a socialist or nationalist state, but Townsend argues that Nietzsche prefers the former type because it cultivates strong citizens, whereas the latter fills them with resentment in order to keep them in line. Citizens in an aristocratic society still conform to the harsh legal and moral codes of that society’s government, and as such are not yet full individuals. But because the embattled strong state channels its citizens’ conformity into the difficult tasks of defense and conquest, the values of a strong state “contribute to enhancing the vigor of its citizens.”²⁶⁵ It is more likely, then, that exceptional individuals will emerge from a strong state than a weak state once the strong state has become victorious and, consequently, tolerant of individual non-conformity.²⁶⁶

In *Red Son*, Luthor fights on behalf of an embattled United States and devotes all his intellectual and financial resources to Superman’s defeat. In response to the external threat of

²⁶³ Townsend, “Nietzsche on the Rise of Strong Political States,” 81.

²⁶⁴ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 164.

²⁶⁵ Townsend, “Nietzsche on the Rise of Strong Political States,” 86.

²⁶⁶ Tolerance is a sign of strength throughout Nietzsche’s works; see, for example, FW §149.

the Soviet Superman, Luthor's characteristic ruthlessness becomes an asset to a frightened society, who eventually surrender many of their freedoms to Luthor in exchange for his guarantee of their safety. Luthor rules the US government and economy with an iron fist, sacrificing the lives of soldiers and endangering the lives of civilians in his final offensive against Superman. After defeating Superman, however, Luthor eventually steps down, replacing himself with "a one world government composed of artists, writers, philosophers, and scientists..."²⁶⁷ Forged by hardship under Luthor (as opposed to materialistic indulgence under Superman), human culture flourishes and human wellbeing increases. Over the course of thousands of generations, advancements in medicine massively extend human longevity and the intense radiation from Earth's aging red sun greatly increases human physical strength. Many generations in the future, Superman is born of this enhanced human society. This most exceptional individual is not an alien, after all, but rather a distant descendant of Lex Luthor! His escape rocket travels through *time* instead of *space*.

Nietzsche makes it clear in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, however, that victory is a double-edged sword. Once a strong state is victorious over its external enemies and becomes more tolerant of internal nonconformity, "der Einzelne wagt einzeln zu sein und sich abzuheben." This development of individuals will have two very different outcomes:

An diesen Wendepunkten der Geschichte zeigt sich neben einander und oft in einander verwickelt und verstrickt ein herrliches vielfaches urwaldhaftes Heraufwachsen und Emporstreben, [...] und ein ungeheures Zugrundegehen und Sich-zu-Grunde-Richten, Dank den wild gegeneinander gewendeten, gleichsam explodirenden Egoismen, welche „um Sonne und Licht“ mit einander ringen und keine Grenze, keine Zügelung, keine Schonung mehr aus der bisherigen Moral zu entnehmen wissen.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Millar et al., *Superman: Red Son*, "Setting," n.p.

²⁶⁸ Nietzsche, JGB §262.

On the one hand, an individual can employ his or her strength (which, we recall from Chapter One, is primarily spiritual) in pursuit of their own self-overcoming, which will in turn enhance human culture more generally.²⁶⁹ On the other hand, Nietzsche warns that, at the same time, the wild and explosive egotism cultivated by a strong state will turn strong individuals against one another in a process of (self-)destruction. The result is that exceptional individuals do not survive throughout the ages—only “die unheilbar *Mittelmässigen*” endure eternally.²⁷⁰ Over time, the culture that had reached its peak after the dissolution of the strong aristocratic state now sinks inevitably into mediocrity, resentment, and weakness. Exceptional individuals appear rarely in such a state of human existence, and the hope for the existence-redeeming *Übermensch* appears more remote.

This is exactly what happens in the closing pages of *Red Son*. After human beings have vanquished all existential threats—including disease and the infirmities of old age—they become complacent. Even though Jor-L, “Luthor’s great-grandson to the power of fifty,”²⁷¹ warns his world that the Earth’s aging red sun is on the brink of collapse, the world government takes no action, causing the young scientist to exclaim in frustration: “It’s almost like they’ve nothing left to *do* but die. But I refuse to let their emptiness bring any harm to *you*, my little Kal-L. Why should *you* have to suffer for being born into a world with nothing left to *conquer*?”²⁷² A once-great species had become so complacent that it unable to act even for its own self-preservation. Human beings had ceased to *become* and were content merely to *be*. Out of this decadent time, however, arises a single saving grace: Kal-L, the infant who would come to be the Soviet

²⁶⁹ This can only happen once the strong state has relaxed its tyrannical grip, since “[d]ie Cultur und der Staat — man betrüge sich hierüber nicht — sind Antagonisten” (GD, “Was den Deutschen abgeht” §4).

²⁷⁰ Nietzsche, JGB §262.

²⁷¹ Millar et al., *Superman: Red Son*, “Setting,” n.p.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, n.p.

Superman, is sent back in time and crash-lands in Soviet Russia, and the story of the most exceptional individual who has ever been, begins again.

As we have seen in this section, the relationship between Nietzsche's Übermensch and the different forms of human government is complex; only a few select superhero comics, like Millar et al.'s *Red Son*, approach this complexity. Before concluding this section, I would mention that Nietzsche's insistence on the antipathy between the Übermensch and the State should not be misconstrued as a call for anarchy. Tony Spanakos, in his popular philosophical essay "Governing Gotham" (2008), makes exactly this mistake. After accurately positing that Nietzsche "sees the state as a threat to individual self-expression and self-overcoming," Spanakos leaps to the conclusion that "[n]o Batman villain sees this as clearly as Anarky, a teenager seduced by anarchist thought in 1999's *Batman: Anarky*."²⁷³ Nothing could be further from Nietzsche's position on anarchy. Nietzsche associates anarchism with Antisemitism, writing with contempt that the "Pflanze" of resentment blooms most agreeably among "Anarchisten und Antisemiten."²⁷⁴ Furthermore, it is simply not "against Nietzsche," as Spanakos claims, to assert that the state "does play a constructive role in providing order."²⁷⁵ While Nietzsche does adamantly state in Zarathustra's eleventh speech, "Vom neuen Götzen," that "die Brücken des Übermenschen" begin only "[d]ort, wo der Staat aufhört,"²⁷⁶ he emphatically states that the mediocre masses *need* someone to govern them. In Nietzsche's estimation, and contrary to the democratic-egalitarian message of superhero comics, very few individuals are strong and disciplined enough to attain self-mastery, and self-mastery is required if one's focus on oneself is to manifest as something more than petty selfishness, cruelty, and/or

²⁷³ Spanakos, "Governing Gotham," 63.

²⁷⁴ Nietzsche, GM-I §11.

²⁷⁵ Spanakos, "Governing Gotham," 65.

²⁷⁶ Nietzsche, Z-I "Vom neuen Götzen."

resentment. Most human beings are not strong enough and consequently require an organizing force—a secular or religious government—to prevent their regression to a state of pre-civilized selfishness.

Nietzsche maintains that the mediocre type of human being can find happiness in simply being a function of a higher society, and that this existence is both meaningful and rewarding.²⁷⁷ It is meaningful because it permits society to function in such a way that the development of higher, exceptional human beings—and, one day, the *Übermensch*—become possible. It is rewarding to the masses to recognize (according to Nietzsche) that they played a role in creating the conditions under which exceptional individuals come into existence. Only when the spiritually weak and ill (the priests and the socialists, the anarchists and the anti-Semites, for example) do their best to spread resentment do the mediocre masses express any discontentment with their role and develop a desire for revenge against the higher types, insisting that everyone be made equal—in other words, that everyone be brought down to their level. It may be that the vast majority of human beings “have a merely supporting role to play, as the ‘precondition’ and ‘base’ on which this exceptional type of man ‘can invent his higher form of being’ (*WP* 866).”²⁷⁸ But Nietzsche adamantly asserts that “[e]s würde eines tieferen Geistes vollkommen unwürdig sein, in der Mittelmässigkeit an sich schon einen Einwand zu sehn.”²⁷⁹

In an intriguing coincidence, the death of Master Man in *Cable #52* is roughly analogous to Nietzsche’s point concerning the happiness of the mediocre masses. Reflecting on his past, an aging Wilhelm Lohmer (the spelling changes between *Invaders* and *Cable #52*, which is *not*

²⁷⁷ Cf. Nietzsche, AC §57: “Dass man ein öffentlicher Nutzen ist, ein Rad, eine Funktion, dazu giebt es eine Naturbestimmung: *nicht* die Gesellschaft, die Art *Glück*, deren die Allermeisten bloss fähig sind, macht aus ihnen intelligente Maschinen. Für den Mittelmässigen ist mittelmässig sein ein Glück; die Meisterschaft in Einem, die Spezialität ein natürlicher Instinkt.”

²⁷⁸ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 330.

²⁷⁹ Nietzsche, AC §57.

written by Thomas) perceives that he was “a poor, pathetic boy” whose anger and resentment led him to embrace a new, chemically induced identity as “the *Übermensch* - - *Master Man* - - the supreme product of Nazi science.”²⁸⁰ But Lohmer eventually realized that this artificial “*Übermensch*” was something that he must overcome. Of course, Lohmer is motivated by guilt for his past actions, not the happiness that comes from simply achieving mastery in one’s small corner of the social machine.²⁸¹ Nevertheless, the old and frail Lohmer has discovered a new purpose in life:



Fig. 2.28 Casey et al., *Cable* #52, n.p., panel 2.

Similar to the way in which Nietzsche metaphorized his hopes for humanity’s future in the figure of the *Übermensch*, Cable represents for Lohmer a time-traveling hope incarnate for a better

²⁸⁰ Casey et al., *Cable* #52, n.p.

²⁸¹ Cf. note 256 above.

humanity. Lohmer wants to play whatever small part he can in the completion of Cable's mission. Lohmer's death at the end of the episode is, of course, a more extreme sacrifice than what Nietzsche's Übermensch would require of the masses, but beneath the melodramatic comic-book action can be found the underlying metaphor of an unexceptional human being finding purpose in his small contribution to the realization of an exceptional individual's mission. Whether or not we agree with the assertion, put forth in Nietzsche's works and in *Cable #52*, that the "Mittelmässigen" can find happiness and satisfaction in fulfilling their unexceptional roles with dignity and accomplishment and without aspiring to anything more, it's worth noting that in neither text do exceptional individuals *force* ordinary people to assume this supporting role.

Chapter Three

Human, Superhuman: Superheroes, Übermenschen, and the Question of a “Master” Race

1. Introduction

Superheroes are typically solitary figures, fighting crime, injustice, and villainy largely on their own. A cast of supporting characters may accumulate around a central superhero, but these figures—love interests, friends, employers, rivals—are usually not superpowered. Even sidekicks, when they appear, need not be superpowered (although they usually are, whether naturally or by means of the same process that gives the original superhero his powers). Occasionally, superheroes will assemble to form a super-team. The most prominent superhero group in the DC “universe” is the Justice League of America, or JLA; for Marvel superheroes, it is the Avengers. Such groups are coalitions, and they do not constitute anything like a tribe, nation, or race of superbeings. No two members of these assemblages are exactly alike, as each hero possesses their own unique powers and origins. Some are aliens, some are human beings, some are robots and artificial intelligences, some are even magicians. Some are born with their powers, others acquire them through contact with radioactive stars or spiders, and still others never acquire “biological” powers and must invent gadgets, gizmos, and super-suits. Finally, the members of these confederacies remain largely autonomous, and most superhero organizations routinely break into their component parts as soon as the committee meetings are over.

Every so often, an entire species of like-minded and like-powered superbeings emerges. When such a species appears, however, more likely than not it will prove to be “evil” and attempt to physically dominate (or eliminate outright) the human species, and a superhero must step in and save humanity from this self-proclaimed “master race” of would-be conquerors. In

single issues or entire series depicting such events, the fear expressed by any number of unpowered human characters—namely, that a race of superbeings who *could* take power for themselves *would* do so without hesitation—is usually borne out. Never is it considered that this fear may be more indicative of what these “normal” human beings would do if *they* suddenly found themselves possessed of superpowers.²⁸² Instead, many comic-book narratives depict these fears as well-founded, for when a superhuman species appears, it—or at least a faction within it—asserts its right to rule based solely on its members’ physical superiority.

Such is often the case particularly for Kryptonians other than Superman who occasionally arrive on Earth. Over the past 80 years, sundry Kryptonian survivors have emerged from the void, recounting escape stories as incredible as Superman’s own. Unlike Superman, however, these Kryptonians—and they almost always emerge in groups, not individually—typically harbor malevolent intentions toward the physically inferior *homo sapiens* and cannot understand why Superman acts as a public servant rather than a god. Perhaps the most widely recognized character in this regard is General Zod, a Kryptonian warrior and war criminal exiled from Krypton and consequently not present when the planet and all its inhabitants were destroyed. Zod, along with his villainous comrades (who, depending on the requirements of the narrative, can be few or legion), believes in the absolute superiority of Kryptonians over weaker species. The perceived superiority of Kryptonians rests entirely on their physical powers: they are able to physically dominate weaker species, and so they claim that it is their *right* to do so. Zod’s political-philosophical justifications vary from issue to issue, creator to creator, but his speech in

²⁸² Lex Luthor is a prominent example of this fear—see his reaction to Superman as presented in *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel*, discussed in Chapter Two above. Villains like Lex Luthor aren’t the only ones who look at Superman and perceive a threat to humanity, however; Batman, for example, is famously also wary of the Man of Steel’s vast power. Other human characters often express this fear as a struggle for existence, typically in terms of a vulgarized Darwinian “survival of the fittest” in which a race of superpowered individuals would naturally excel (more on this below). Unpowered human beings would be left with scraps at best, after superhumans had seized control of government, culture, industry, and all natural resources.

Johns et al.'s *Superman: Last Son* can be taken as representative of his general position. "But all along, Kal-El should have done what *I* have done," Zod informs his son, who wishes to join Superman and defend humanity against Zod's campaign for domination (see **Fig. 3.01** below). "He should have forced these sub-Kryptonians to take their place *beneath* him. And make them understand, that when they look up into the sky they do not see their *savior* - - [continued in next panel] - - they see their *better*. *Ruling* over them." Each of the last two lines from the quote above is its own speech balloon, giving each sentence visual emphasis that underscores their thematic significance. Zod's words are further underscored by the perspective of the panels in which they appear. The panel itself is shown from a worm's-eye view: the reader is situated beneath the Kryptonians. Visually, then, this calls attention to the directional preposition *over* in the phrase "*ruling* over them." The Kryptonians are literally and figuratively *above* humanity. They are not simply super-human, they are *over*-human.

At this point we recall that the very word *Übermensch*, if each part of the compound noun is translated literally, becomes in English *over-man* or *over-person*. Walter Kaufmann argues in favor of the term "overman" rather than "superman" because the German prefix *über-* plays such a prominent role in Nietzsche's philosophical works.²⁸³ The concept of self-overcoming ("Selbstüberwindung") is central to Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, as I have shown in Chapter One. Zarathustra's assertion that "[d]er Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll,"²⁸⁴ means that, conceptually *and* linguistically, "the man who has overcome himself has become an overman."²⁸⁵ Nietzsche also employs metaphors involving heights, as in the preface to *Der Antichrist* (1888) where he lists the necessary preconditions

²⁸³ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 309. Nietzsche's later works in particular are replete with "over-" words.

²⁸⁴ Nietzsche, Z-I "Vorrede" §3.

²⁸⁵ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 309.

under which a reader may understand him. Among these qualifications is the following: “Man muss geübt sein, auf Bergen zu leben — das erbärmliche Zeitgeschwätz von Politik und Völker-Selbstsucht *unter sich* zu sehn.”²⁸⁶ Overcoming one’s own limitations, as well as the limitations of one’s historical context—seeing one’s times *beneath* oneself, being *above* the popular concerns of one’s time—is central to Nietzsche’s concept of “higher” humanity. As we saw in Chapter Two, however, Nietzsche is not speaking primarily of political or physical power *over* others. General Zod’s race of Kryptonian over-humans understand themselves in this latter sense and indulge their every violent whim. As such, they do not embody Nietzsche’s standard of the Übermensch as, above all, masters of *themselves*.

Nevertheless, many writers and artists of superhero comic books return to the idea that a superhuman species would pose a threat to humanity. As recently as 2017-18, Frank Miller helmed the creative team behind *The Dark Knight: Master Race* (the threequel to the originally standalone *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986), which once again depicts a race of militant Kryptonians seeking world domination. In this story, Superman and Wonder Woman have a teenage daughter, Lara, and an infant son. Lara cannot understand why her father grew despondent over humanity’s rejection of superbeings and withdrew to his Fortress of Solitude. In her words: “Why did you let the *ants* knock you from the sky?”²⁸⁷ Lara is attracted to the message of Kryptonian theocrat Quar, who leads an army of Kryptonians freed from Brainiac’s control²⁸⁸ in a quest for world domination. Where Superman preaches self-discipline and restraint, Quar encourages Lara to indulge in the free exercise of her powers and to exert her right to rule over those who are physically weaker than she (and consequently inferior to her). In

²⁸⁶ Nietzsche, AC “Vorwort.”

²⁸⁷ Miller et al., *DKMR*, Book 1, n.p.

²⁸⁸ It’s a long story; see *DKMR*, Books 2 and 3.

a sequence from the third book of *Master Race*, Quar, like Zod in *Last Son*, emphasizes the Kryptonians' status "above" humanity—and, consequently, above humanity's "rules" (see Fig. 3.02 below). I will deal with what it means to be "above" common morality or, in Nietzschean language, to be "beyond good and evil," in greater detail in Chapter Four. For the moment, our focus is on Quar's assertion that the physical superiority of the Kryptonian species qualifies them to be humanity's masters. In Nietzschean terms, Quar's worldview is firmly grounded in the moral opposition between master and slave. This disqualifies Quar as an Übermensch-candidate, since Nietzsche's Übermensch transcends *both* moral perspectives and embodies a future in



Fig. 3.01 Johns, Donner, Kubert, *Superman: Last Son*, 114. Quotations are taken from top right and bottom left panels.



Fig. 3.02 Miller et al., *Dark Knight: Master Race*, n.p.

which this ages-old opposition is overcome in favor of a new moral understanding (as we saw in Chapter Two).

Nietzsche asserts that the Übermensch is a *metaphor*²⁸⁹ for an individual who embodies new and healthier values, but the question that superhero comic books pose is: what if the superman were really to arrive one day, and what if he didn't come alone? When a race of superbeings is an alien species from another planet, the results are usually disastrous, but the aliens' actions are unambiguously presented as "evil" or "bad" (superhero comics do not distinguish between the two negative terms like Nietzsche does). Far more interesting, however, are those superhero comic-book series that dare to look a little more deeply and less one-sidedly into the problem of a species or "race" of superbeings. One of, if not *the* superhero comic-book series that foregrounds the tensions between humanity and a superhuman species is *The Uncanny X-Men* (1963-2011²⁹⁰). In this series, the titular characters are a team of "evolved" human beings—that is, instead of being extraterrestrials, they are the results of "natural" genetic mutation. In the years since its inception, the *Uncanny X-Men* series has become a touchstone for creators, critics, and fans on the topic of race relations in the United States. My reading of the series, however, will focus on two interrelated topics that have less to do with historical and current US-American race relations and more to do with questions that are central to our understanding of Nietzsche's Übermensch, namely: how do exceptional individuals come into existence, and how would a "race" of Übermenschen relate to "ordinary" humanity? Several

²⁸⁹ Nietzsche explicitly calls the "Übermensch" a metaphor in a fragment from 1887. Describing "eine stärkere Art, ein höherer Typus" of human being, "der andre Entstehungs- und andre Erhaltungsbedingungen hat als der Durchschnitts-Mensch," he states: "Mein Begriff, mein *Gleichniß* für diesen Typus ist, wie man weiß, das Wort 'Übermensch'" (eKGWB/NF-1887,10[17]).

²⁹⁰ The series has undergone four relaunches/reboots between 2011 and the present; we are currently in the fifth iteration ("Volume 5") of the *Uncanny X-Men* series. Due to the vast amount of material involved, I have restricted my analysis to the original run of the series. In order to further narrow down this 544-issue series, I focus specifically on the issues created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (1963-66) and those written by Chris Claremont (1975-91).

other superhero comic book series and one-off stories draw our attention to this question of the biological development of exceptional individuals, but because *The Uncanny X-Men* represents an explicit, sustained examination of this topic, I will primarily rely on this series as we develop a deeper understanding of the development of Nietzsche's Übermenschen and their relationships in community with others.

2. Mutants, the Übermensch, and Human Evolution

Originally titled simply *The X-Men*, the *Uncanny X-Men* series debuted in 1963 and was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. It would be headed in subsequent years by a who's who of Marvel writers and artists. The premise is straightforward: under the leadership of Professor X (Charles Xavier), the mutant X-Men protect humanity from similarly "uncanny" threats, from other mutants to aliens, birdmen, robots, and even monsters of legend. But the X-Men are not rewarded with humanity's gratitude; instead, their appearances are met with suspicion, unease, and often outright hostility. They are feared and persecuted by "normal" human beings, and consequently the series is often read allegorically. In the words of Swedish scholar Martin Lund, "mutantcy [sic] is often read as a coded Jewishness, but mutants have also been called stand-ins for LGBTQ or disabled people or for people of color."²⁹¹ Lund goes on to note that while creator Stan Lee (who was Jewish) "has said that he eventually came to see mutants as a good metaphor for bigotry, he denies ever having viewed them in terms of Jewishness."²⁹² The clearest connection between the *Uncanny X-Men* and the socio-political context of 1960s America can be found in the connection between the fight for "mutant rights" and the civil rights

²⁹¹ Lund, "Beware the Fanatic!" 143.

²⁹² Ibid, 144.

movement, though scholars and critics disagree on the extent to which Marvel's comics have meaningfully engaged the topic.²⁹³

My focus on the X-Men is admittedly more academic than socio-cultural. The concept of the X-Men is reminiscent of a question that persists within the reception of Nietzsche's works today: is the *Übermensch* to be understood as the next step in human biological evolution? In *The Uncanny X-Men*, mutants and their powers are "explained" in evolutionary terms: they are the inevitable result of natural genetic mutation. The scientific accuracy of the mutant premise is rather beside the point (what gene could allow Magneto to control magnetic fields or enable Storm to control the weather?). Rather, the series poses a Darwinian question: if life is continually evolving, what will come after *homo sapiens*? By the 1960s, the existential threat of the hydrogen bomb had raised doubts as to whether *anything* would come after *homo sapiens*, but the *Uncanny X-Men* series suggests that the human species will survive long enough to evolve into something "higher." In fact, the series posits this not as a future possibility, but as a present reality. In Nietzsche's works, the *Übermensch* remains something anticipated, but it is not entirely clear at first glance *how* the *Übermensch* can come into being. Is he the product of genetic mutation and evolution? Of a specific biological breeding program? Or is some other mechanism at play here?

The *Uncanny X-Men* presents superhumans explicitly in terms of biological evolution. The first issue makes it clear that the X-Men—and all mutants—are a separate species from the rest of humanity. This difference is presented as fact and is acknowledged not only by Magneto

²⁹³ Lund argues that, while "Marvel did not completely ignore the civil rights movement," "Marvel comics from the 1960s are largely quiet about the decade's social and cultural unrest" (144-145). Scholar Adilifu Nama offers a different interpretation in his 2011 monograph *Superblack: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, asserting that, while comic-book engagement with issues of race and racial justice in America was (and is) far from perfect, nevertheless "[s]uperheroes were no longer constrained to fighting imaginary creatures, intergalactic aliens, or Nazis from a distant past. Now they would grapple with some of the most toxic real-world social issues that America had to offer" (15).

(as we will see in *Magneto #0*) and his “Brotherhood of Evil Mutants,” but also by the eponymous X-Men (that is, by the “good guys”). In fact, it is an X-Man who first references this difference in *The X-Men #1*:

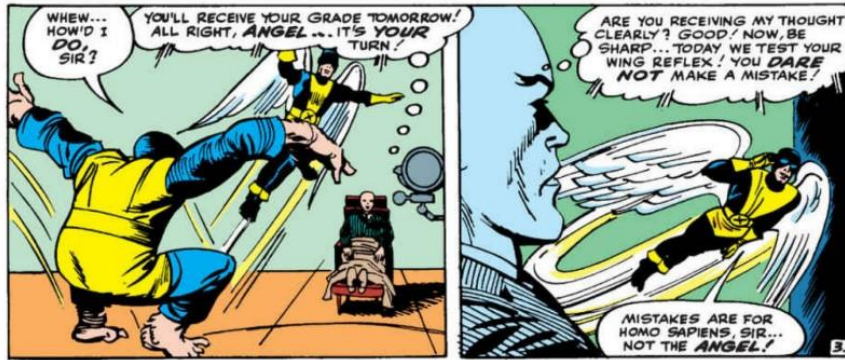


Fig. 3.03 Lee et al., *The X-Men #1*, 4, panel 6.

That this X-Man’s code name is “Angel” is particularly striking, since angels (at least in Judeo-Christian mythology) possess superhuman powers and dwell in a realm (Heaven) located above the Earth and, consequently, *over* humanity. At the same time as this over-human character is introduced, his comrade Beast lumbers onto the scene (see the left-hand panel of **Fig. 3.03** above). Beast appears to be an ape-man, but this does not mean that mutation takes humanity “lower” as well as “higher.” While apes are popularly understood to represent a previous phase in human evolution, existing, as it were, beneath or behind *homo sapiens* on the evolutionary ladder, Beast is as intelligent (if not on occasion more so) than the average human being. And despite their rivalry, Beast and Angel are equals in the hierarchy of the X-Men. The other original X-Men are, in appearance at least, somewhere in between Angel and Beast: they are “human-passing,” so to speak, but possessed of abilities every bit as extraordinary as Angel and Beast’s. These superhuman abilities are explicitly what set mutants apart from *homo sapiens*:

the very name “X-Men,” Professor X informs the newly arrived Jean Grey, stands for “*ex-tra* power!”²⁹⁴

Professor X and his X-Men view themselves as a race apart from *homo sapiens* in Lee and Kirby’s original run of the series. Writer Chris Claremont continued this trend, frequently showing that mutants view themselves as the inevitable result of natural genetic mutation.²⁹⁵ In *UXM #138* (October 1980), for example, the X-Man Scott Summers (aka “Cyclops”) recounts how an army of anti-mutant robots called “Sentinels” were defeated and mentions in passing that “all life on Earth is the result of ongoing natural genetic mutation[.]”²⁹⁶ The X-Men typically refer to themselves as “mutants,” but the villain Magneto goes a step further, calling himself and his fellow mutants “*homo superior*” toward the midpoint of Lee and Kirby’s *The X-Men #1*.²⁹⁷ When Magneto uses the word “super-human” to describe mutants a few pages later, the word choice feels especially deliberate: the fictional, Latin-sounding taxonomic designation “*homo superior*” reminds us that, etymologically, “super” can mean “better,” but also “over, above.”²⁹⁸ Magneto considers himself “above” ordinary humans, a belief reinforced visually whenever Magneto uses his powers to hover or even fly over/above the frightened humans beneath him (as he does at the end of “I Magneto;” refer to **Fig. 3.06** below). This pseudo-scientific term “*homo superior*,” along with its less common variant “*homo sapiens superior*,” is used every so often throughout the series, and while the evolutionary angle is not explicit in *every* story arc, it crops up quite frequently.

²⁹⁴ Lee et al., *UXM #1*, 9.

²⁹⁵ Human characters share the same view, but they do not always see the evolution of mutants as a positive development, as in in *UXM #96* (December 1975), one of the first issues written by Claremont. Here, the villainous Dr. Lang makes the same analogy as Magneto does in **Fig. 3.06** below, comparing human beings to the Cro-Magnon and mutants to the superior Neanderthal (Claremont et al., *UXM #96*, 86).

²⁹⁶ Claremont et al., *UXM #138*, 141.

²⁹⁷ Lee et al., *UXM #1*, 12. Specifically, he states that he intends to use his powers to “make *homo sapiens* bow to *homo superior*!”

²⁹⁸ Merriam-Webster, “superior.”

I will turn now to the special-issue story *Magneto #0* (1990), which proves essential to our understanding of mutants as a separate species while also providing a clear framework according to which the entire run of *The Uncanny X-Men* can be read with specific reference to Nietzsche's Übermensch. *Magneto #0* is a compilation of three stories: the first two are written by Chris Claremont, who famously and popularly wrote X-Men stories from 1975 to 1991 (longer than any other individual); the third is written by Fabian Nicieza. The two Claremont stories ("A Fire in the Night" and "I, Magneto") were originally published in 1988 and 1987, respectively,²⁹⁹ whereas the Nicieza story is original to this special issue. My focus is on the two issues written by Claremont, because by the end of "I Magneto," the title character will refer to himself as an "Übermensch [*sic*]." Magneto's adoption of this title enables us to reread Magneto's character, and by extension all mutants, in terms of Nietzsche's Übermensch-concept.

"A Fire in the Night" is a story-within-a-story: the "present-day" Magneto, hiding out in Paris, is troubled by dreams of his past. Four panels detail his time in the Auschwitz death camp, and this sequence is drawn in black-and-white with a solid red background. The effect is decidedly hellish. Then, Magneto's dream shifts to memories of his struggle to survive after escaping Auschwitz: on the run with his love, Magda, Magneto (though at the time he did not go by this name) demonstrates the iron will to live that will eventually fuel his campaign against non-mutant humanity. But then the dream turns peaceful: although he must work hard, Magneto and Magda build a life for themselves in Ukraine, eventually having a daughter, Anya. Unfortunately, Magneto draws the ire of a corrupt labor representative and is attacked by the latter's goons at the worst possible moment. The building in which he and his wife live has

²⁹⁹ Curiously, the first story in *Magneto #0*, entitled "A Fire in the Sky," was originally published *after* the second story, "I Magneto." I believe they are arranged this way in *Magneto #0* because, in the X-Men world, the flashback events of "A Fire in the Sky" chronologically precede those of "I Magneto."

caught fire, and their daughter perishes in the flames as Magneto is beaten by the labor representative's thugs. Enraged, Magneto's latent mutant powers are activated, and he kills the labor racketeers—and numerous innocent bystanders. Magda is horrified and flees, crying: “You're not the man I loved! You've become a *monster!*”³⁰⁰

At this point in the dream, Magneto awakes to the sound of another fire—this one across the street from his Paris hideout. Initially, Magneto is unmoved by the plight of a mother and daughter trapped in an upper-story apartment:



Fig. 3.04 Claremont et al., *Magneto #0*, 11, panels 3-6.

Magneto's thoughts reinforce that central aspect of the X-Men universe: namely, that the exceptional individuals—mutants—are an entirely separate species: “*homo sapiens superior.*” *Homo sapiens*, on the other hand, are “merely *human.*” Magneto does eventually rescue the

³⁰⁰ Claremont et al., “A Fire in the Night,” 10.

mother and daughter, informing the grateful family that they can repay him by “telling the world how your family was saved by *Magneto*. Magneto the terrorist, Magneto the super-villain, Magneto the *mutant*. [...] I could have let them perish - - but I chose *life!*” This final line is reminiscent of the “überschwänglich-übermüthigste Ja zum Leben”³⁰¹ expressed by Nietzsche’s life-affirming “higher” human being—even if, in the context of Nietzsche’s original, the higher individual in question does not hold someone else’s life or death in hand quite as literally as Magneto does in this story. “A Fire in the Night” ends with the grateful husband and father’s assertion that, terrorist and villain though Magneto may be, he is “first and foremost” “a *man!*” (See **Fig. 3.04** below.) Even as Magneto uses his magnetic powers to fly away, appearing to be literally above or over the “mere” humans shown in the panel, the super-human’s underlying *humanity* is suggested to be his most defining characteristic.



Fig. 3.05 Claremont et al., *Magneto #0*, 12, panels 6-7.

The events of the next story—“I Magneto”—contradict the grateful Frenchman’s assertion and emphasize Magneto’s status as a super-human being. The narrative takes place at some unspecified time between the death of Magneto’s daughter and his emergence on the world

³⁰¹ Nietzsche, *EH* “Geburt der Tragödie” §2. See also *AC* §61, in which Nietzsche praises those who express “das grosse Ja zu allen hohen, schönen, verwegenen Dingen!...” in contrast to the Christians and other nihilists who express their disdain for this-worldly existence with an emphatic “Nein.”

stage as a full-fledged supervillain at the start of *The Uncanny X-Men*. Working for a mysterious US government agency called “Control,”³⁰² Magneto attacks a South American stronghold full of “Fourth Reich” soldiers. As their bullets are harmlessly deflected by the “Master of Magnetism’s” mutant powers, the Nazi defenders cry out in desperation:



Fig. 3.06 Claremont et al., *Magneto #0*, 15, panels 1-2.

There is a certain historical irony in this statement. Claremont has written a story in which National Socialists, who in the real world were known to regard themselves as racially superior “Übermenschen,” unwittingly call a mutant born of Jewish parents the same thing! At this point in the story, the label “Übermensch” is applied to Magneto by others; he does not yet identify himself as such. After successfully defeating the “Fourth Reich” Nazis, Magneto returns to his hotel in Rio de Janeiro. He shares accommodations with Isabelle, his personal physician and lover, but their room is invaded by agents of Control, who murder Isabelle and prepare to do the same to their former employee. Control is secretly in cahoots with the “Fourth Reich” holdouts, uniting with their former enemies to combat Soviet Russia—the “real” enemy.

³⁰² I assume that this is shorthand for the “Mutant Control Agency” that makes the occasional appearance throughout *The Uncanny X-Men*, but I may be wrong.

Magneto is enraged by this betrayal, but even more devastating is the fact that, for the second time in his life, someone he loves has died at the hands of non-mutants. Magneto easily defeats the Control agents and, in the story's concluding six panels, delivers a summation of his new worldview:



Fig. 3.07
 Claremont et al., *Magneto* #0, 24, panels 3-8.

Magneto now self-identifies as an “Ubermensch” (Claremont omits the umlaut), reformulating the Nazi moniker so that it applies not to their delusions of Aryan racial superiority but to Magneto’s status as a truly new type of human being. Magneto refers to himself in language that is meant to evoke both evolutionary science and political monarchism: “I am *homo superior* - -

the next generation of humanity, heir apparent to this paltry planet.” Magneto believes that mutantkind will inevitably replace humankind “as Cro-Magnon supplanted Neanderthal,” and that they will come to dominate ordinary humans physically and politically. Magneto is an “Übermensch” who has come to rule, and he justifies his desire for worldly power on the perceived evolutionary superiority of mutantkind.

A disclaimer is necessary at this point: I do not know whether or to what degree Claremont is familiar with Nietzsche’s philosophical works. The word “Übermensch” in *Magneto #0* is only ever explicitly connected to its National-Socialist connotations.

Nevertheless, the term carries distinct Nietzschean significance (and the Nazis themselves were aware of Nietzsche’s use of the word), and so its use is suggestive of a connection regardless of Claremont’s familiarity (or lack thereof) with Nietzsche’s works. As theology professor and X-Men enthusiast Tim Perry writes in “Mutants That Are All Too Human” (2005), in this particular story, Magneto “believes he has transcended the morality that defined the world in which he and they [the Nazis] once lived,” but in reality, his “adoption of the same Nietzschean vocabulary of the superman as his erstwhile Nazi oppressors signals that far from transcending it, he has merely begun again in a recapitulation of the cycle of violence.”³⁰³ Perry’s awareness that Magneto has adopted the methods of his erstwhile persecutors is shared by the character himself: a remorseful Magneto expresses this same sentiment in *The Uncanny X-Men #150* (1981):³⁰⁴

³⁰³ Perry, “Mutants That Are All Too Human,” 184.

³⁰⁴ This issue is significant not only as a turning point in Magneto’s attitude toward humanity and the mutants who fight to defend it, but as the issue that establishes Magneto’s identity as a Holocaust survivor. This has become such an integral part of the character, both in comic books and film adaptations, that it’s hard to believe it wasn’t introduced until twenty-four years after Magneto’s debut in *X-Men #1*. Claremont’s twist informs all subsequent iterations of the character, but it also forced a rereading of Magneto’s character in previous issues. I was a newcomer to the *Uncanny X-Men* comic books when I began this dissertation, but I was familiar with Magneto’s origins as a Holocaust survivor thanks to Brian Singer’s trilogy of *X-Men* films (2000-2006) and Matthew Vaughn’s 2011 reboot-cum-origin-story *X-Men: First Class*. In a sense, my reading of the first *X-Men* comic books was already a rereading: I read of the early Magneto’s villainous exploits with Magneto’s origin story already in mind.

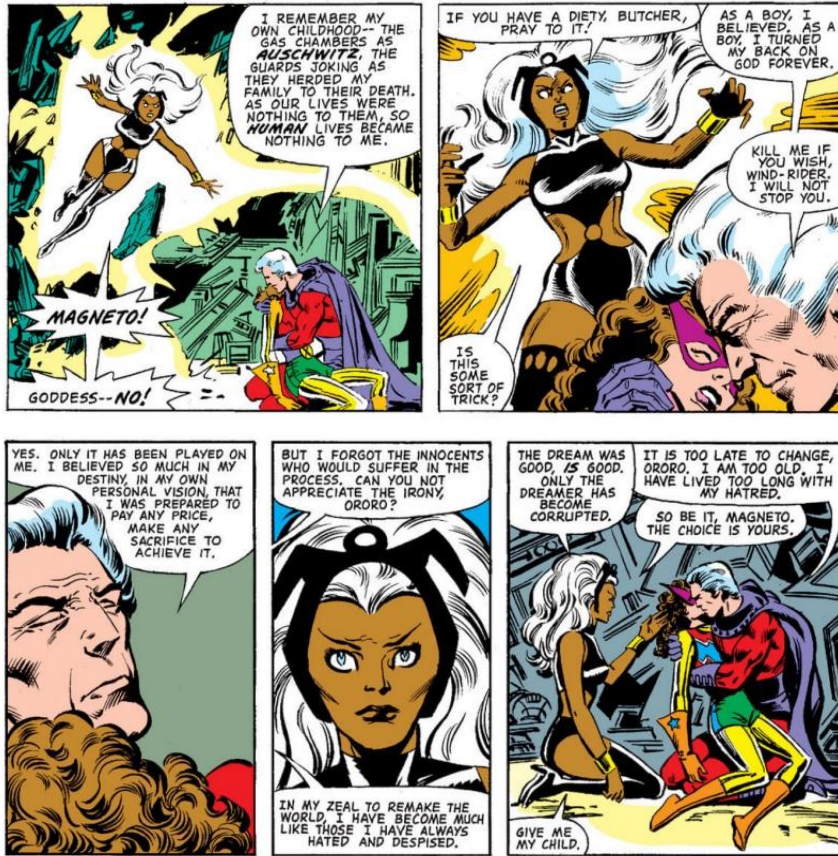


Fig. 3.08 Claremont et al., *The Uncanny X-Men* #150 249, panels 5-6, and 250, panels 1-3.

Although *UXM* #150 and *Magneto* #0 frame Magneto’s Übermensch-status primarily with reference to National Socialism, I believe Perry is right to also draw our attention back to the term’s Nietzschean origins. Although Perry is quite correct when he writes that Magneto needs to “transcend” his self-identification as an “Übermensch” in the Third Reich sense, we have seen already that Nietzsche’s Übermensch is very different from the Nazi Übermensch. We will address the question of whether or not Magneto’s attitude toward “normal” human beings is commensurate with Nietzsche’s Übermensch in Section 5 below; for now, we will focus on the question of evolution as a factor in the Übermensch’s development. The conflicts that arise in *The Uncanny X-Men* are predicated upon the existence of superhumans as a separate race or

Interpreting the concept of superpowered mutant humans in relation to Nietzsche’s Übermensch, as I propose to do here, is a third rereading of the series—a process for which Claremont has already set a precedent.

species. Before we can ask whether or not a race of Nietzschean Übermenschen would be in conflict with “normal” humanity, however, we must first investigate whether Nietzsche conceives of the Übermensch as a “higher” race of human beings or even as an entirely separate species. The answer is not nearly as simple as it is in the *Uncanny X-Men*.

On the one hand, when Nietzsche first introduces the concept of the Übermensch in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the language Zarathustra uses to introduce the people of the marketplace to the idea of the Übermensch heavily implies evolutionary development:

Ich lehre euch den Übermenschen. Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll. Was habt ihr gethan, ihn zu überwinden?

[...]

Was ist der Affe für den Menschen? Ein Gelächter oder eine schmerzliche Scham. Und ebendas soll der Mensch für den Übermenschen sein: ein Gelächter oder eine schmerzliche Scham.

Ihr habt den Weg vom Wurm zum Menschen gemacht, und Vieles ist in euch noch Wurm. Einst wart ihr Affen, und auch jetzt noch ist der Mensch mehr Affe, als irgend ein Affe.³⁰⁵

In U.S.-American popular consciousness today, the ape is symbolically representative of Darwin’s entire theory of natural selection and the evolution of species.³⁰⁶ The radical idea that homo sapiens is ultimately descended from “apes” was also enormously controversial and widely known in Nietzsche’s day, and so his choice of words in the above passage would certainly have evoked Darwin—or, at least, popularizations of Darwinian theory—in the minds of his contemporary readers. And if the analogy of “ape : human :: human : Übermensch” did not imply an evolutionary progression on its own, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra adds that humans have made their way “vom Wurm zum Menschen,” calling the reader’s attention to the entire

³⁰⁵ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vorrede” §3.

³⁰⁶ In the United States, the 1925 case *The State of Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes* is commonly referred to even today as the “Scopes Monkey Trial;” references to Darwinian evolution abound in most popular media, not just superhero comic books.

evolutionary chain of life on Earth. The subsequent section of the prologue evokes evolution again, when Zarathustra proclaims: “Der Mensch ist ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Thier und Übermensch, – ein Seil über einem Abgrunde.”³⁰⁷ Here, Zarathustra’s language has become more figurative, but the character still locates the present-day human being between the animal and the Übermensch, heavily implying that the Übermensch is to be understood as the next stage in human evolution.

On the other hand, this evolution-based understanding of the Übermensch is complicated by Zarathustra’s statement in the above passage that “auch jetzt noch ist der Mensch mehr Affe, als irgend ein Affe.” This suggests that Zarathustra’s entire speech here is to be understood figuratively. “Der Mensch” is even more uncivilized, primitive, and unthinking than an ape—an insult, certainly, but one that gives us to understand that the Übermensch represents a higher plane of human intellectual and cultural existence rather than a physical “improvement” on existing human beings. Furthermore, Nietzsche insists several times in his later works that to view him as a Darwinist is to deeply misunderstand him. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche disparages the “gelehrtes Hornvieh” who has misunderstood the word *Übermensch*, declaring that this sort of reader “hat mich seinethalben des Darwinismus verdächtigt[.]”³⁰⁸ Many of Nietzsche’s

³⁰⁷ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vorrede” §4.

³⁰⁸ Nietzsche, EH “Bücher” §1. It is worth noting at this point that Nietzsche’s use of the words “Darwin” and “Darwinismus” is *not* unambiguous. Whether Nietzsche ever read Darwin’s original works is a matter of some dispute in current scholarship on the subject. John Richardson writes that Nietzsche “seems not to have required of himself a direct acquaintance with Darwin’s own writings before addressing his attacks. He knows the movement primarily by way of the English and German Social Darwinists. So, in particular, he refers more often to Spencer than to Darwin; he has Spencer but not Darwin in his library. He also relies on several critics of Darwinism, in particular Wilhelm Roux and William Rolph” (*Nietzsche’s New Darwinism*, 16). In response, Dirk R. Johnson writes that while he believes that Richardson “systematically downplays the significance of Nietzsche’s objections to Darwin and his theories” (*Nietzsche’s Anti-Darwinism*, 10), he also acknowledges that “Nietzsche himself chooses not to distinguish between Darwin, his followers, and compatible thinkers.” This is because, philosophically (and not necessarily scientifically), “Nietzsche clearly saw Darwin operating within the same tradition, school of thought, and perspectives as his British predecessors and contemporaries [...]” (5). I will discuss this distinction in further detail below. Finally, for the sake of transparency, I will add that I side with Johnson over Richardson insofar as I believe we should take Nietzsche at his word when he rejects a Darwinian interpretation of his philosophy.

references to and renunciations of Darwin are similarly oblique, but he does take direct aim at Darwin in a prominent passage from *Götzendämmerung*. Entitled “Anti-Darwin,” this fourteenth aphorism of the work’s “Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen” subsection begins with the assertion that the Darwinian “,Kampf um’s Leben“” does not regularly appear in nature like Darwin posits. Instead, Nietzsche claims that “wo gekämpft wird, kämpft man um *Macht*...” This is a reminder of Nietzsche’s concept of the “Wille zur Macht,” which he argues is the primary motivator for all forms of life above and beyond the will to simply survive.³⁰⁹

Nietzsche continues this critique by further positing that when the Darwinian struggle for existence *does* take place, “so läuft er leider umgekehrt aus als die Schule Darwin’s wünscht, als man vielleicht mit ihr wünschen *dürfte*: nämlich zu Ungunsten der Starken, der Bevorrechtigten, der glücklichen Ausnahmen.”³¹⁰ Nietzsche suggests that we (and he) might *like* to believe that Darwinism (“die Schule Darwin’s”) is correct in concluding that the strong and exceptional—the “fittest”—survive, but that this is, unfortunately, not at all the case. Instead, the weak and mediocre consistently outlast the strong and exceptional: “Die Gattungen wachsen *nicht* in der Vollkommenheit: die Schwachen werden immer wieder über die Starken Herr, — das macht, sie sind die grosse Zahl, sie sind auch *klüger*...” Here, Nietzsche does appear to be speaking of the *physically* mediocre who, because they are weaker than the stronger types (although the former outnumber the latter), must resort to cleverness and subterfuge if they are to survive. Because they are weaker, existence to them is all about survival—and so they are the ones who focus on surviving and propagating. As always, however, Nietzsche’s pronouncements on strength and weakness end with a consideration of *spirit*. He writes that Darwin’s theory simply overlooks

³⁰⁹ See, for example, FW §349: “Der Kampf um’s Dasein ist nur eine Ausnahme, eine zeitweilige Restriktion des Lebenswillens; der grosse und kleine Kampf dreht sich allenthalben um’s Uebergewicht, um Wachstum und Ausbreitung, um Macht, gemäss dem Willen zur Macht, der eben der Wille des Lebens ist.”

³¹⁰ This and all subsequent quotations in this paragraph are drawn from Nietzsche, GD “Streifzüge” §14.

the fact that “*die Schwachen haben mehr Geist* [...] Ich verstehe unter Geist, wie man sieht, die Vorsicht, die Geduld, die List, die Verstellung, die grosse Selbstbeherrschung und Alles, was mimicry ist[.]” These spiritual qualities allow the weak to increase in number. *They* are the ones who propagate the species.

The exceptional individual, on the other hand, does not value mere survival above all else. “The *Übermensch*,” writes Nietzsche scholar Dirk R. Johnson, “courts risks and danger and embraces adventure and the very real possibility of extinction. It is not survival he craves; it is maximum self-affirmation and expression regardless of external conditions and obstacles.”³¹¹ Johnson’s observation is borne out by another aphorism from the “*Streifzüge*” section of *Götzendämmerung*. Here, Nietzsche explains his “*Begriff der Genie*,”³¹² arguing that great individuals are typically followed by periods of “*Sterilität*.” “*Der grosse Mensch ist ein Ende*,” he writes, for “[d]as Genie – in Werk, in That – ist nothwendig ein Verschwender[.]” Geniuses—the epitome of the exceptional individual for Nietzsche—do not conserve their mental and physical energies in order to attain a higher level of “*fitness*” in the Darwinian sense. Instead, the *Genie* “*strömt aus, er strömt über, er verbraucht sich, er schont sich nicht, — mit Fatalität, verhängnissvoll, unfreiwillig, wie das Ausbrechen eines Flusses über seine Ufer unfreiwillig ist.*” The higher types focus on their own self-overcoming, and their overfullness of life necessitates that they expend their energies in directions that they consider more important than mere survival. From the perspective of the weak, such incredible self-dissipation makes exceptional individuals squanderers (“*Verschwender*”). Consequently, we may conclude with Johnson that “the *Übermensch* is the *least* likely to survive in the Darwinian ‘struggle for

³¹¹ Johnson, *Nietzsche’s Anti-Darwinism*, 59.

³¹² Nietzsche, GD “*Streifzüge*” §44.

existence' and to propagate."³¹³ This is certainly not a mark against the *Übermensch*, for such an individual lives a fuller life than weaker, survival-oriented natures are capable of living.

We have come to see that Nietzsche's objection to Darwinian evolution is "not based on Darwinism qua biological science,"³¹⁴ but rather on the philosophical premise that those individuals most fit to survive and procreate are *not* the ones most fit to elevate humanity above its default level of mediocrity. But if Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is not a product of biological evolution, why, then, does Nietzsche have Zarathustra present the *Übermensch* in language that seems to *invite* precisely this misunderstanding by so clearly referencing the evolutionary development from ape to man to overman? Johnson suggests that this largely has to do with the narrative circumstances surrounding Zarathustra's initial announcement of the *Übermensch*. Zarathustra proclaims the coming of the *Übermensch* in the third part of the prologue, when he has just descended from his mountain and entered the marketplace. Upon his arrival, Zarathustra "proclaimed his message as a common vision for humanity. But he tailored it to his audience." In speaking to the people gathered in the marketplace, Zarathustra "has had to compromise his vision in order to reach the widest possible number."³¹⁵ Johnson further interprets the scene as a figurative representation of Nietzsche's own attempts to disseminate his philosophical ideas among his contemporaries. Zarathustra's struggle to get the marketplace crowd's attention is, according to Johnson, analogous to Nietzsche's own struggle to find an audience for his books. Consequently,

³¹³ Johnson, *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism*, 59-60.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4. Johnson's full statement reads: "[...] Nietzsche's reservations concerning Darwin were *philosophical*: he did not approach his ideas as unimpeachable science. [...] His antagonism emerges from his foundational critique of Darwin's cardinal assumptions, including his understanding of 'nature'; his adoption of the altruism-egoism model; his assumptions about 'man' and 'human nature'; his prioritization and understanding of competition and struggle; his belief in self-preservation; even his belief in causality, to name but a few. His critique was not based on Darwinism qua biological science."

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

in order for it to be understood, the message had to be couched in a language and embellished with images that the marketplace could understand. For the *Übermensch* to become a universal goal, it had to be encapsulated in a standard evolutionary narrative. In short, the *Übermensch*'s message of transcendence could only succeed if it chimed in with the audience's vulgar perceptions of Darwinian evolution.³¹⁶

Bearing in mind that the figure of Zarathustra is not simply a stand-in for Nietzsche, this is a convincing interpretation of the marketplace scene that explains Zarathustra's imprecise attempt to communicate the idea of the *Übermensch* to the vulgar crowd. After the crowd rejects his message, Zarathustra realizes he is not "der Mund für diese Ohren,"³¹⁷ and from this point on he seeks companions, friends, and disciples with whom he does not need to resort to such blunt, inaccurate Darwinist language.

3. "Breeding" the *Übermensch*

While Nietzsche's works reject natural selection as the path to the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche continues to use language that appears at first glance to imply that the *Übermensch* can be realized by means of selective breeding. This is especially true of Nietzsche's use of the words "Zucht" and "Züchtung" in *Also sprach Zarathustra* and subsequent works. These words, which translate to "breeding" in English, have proven problematic for Nietzsche's philosophy of "higher" individuals since the turn of the 20th century, when eugenicist "thinkers" and, eventually, the fascist propagandists of the Third Reich began appropriating Nietzschean language and concepts in support of their racist and genocidal agendas. Since Walter Kaufmann's translations of Nietzsche's works into English in the 1950s and 1960s, English editions of Nietzsche's works typically use the word "cultivation" to translate these words.³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Ibid., 55.

³¹⁷ Nietzsche, Z-I "Zarathustra's Vorrede" §5.

³¹⁸ Cf. Bernasconi, "Nietzsche as a Philosopher of Racialized Breeding," 59.

Even still, it is difficult for us today to read Nietzsche's works, in which variations of the word *Züchtung* frequently appear in connection with the creation of higher types, without eugenic notions of racial breeding. Although Nietzsche's works are meant to show how human physiology *complements* the spirit and the intellect, the importance of physiology in Nietzsche's understanding of human nature perpetuates the suspicion that Nietzsche may indeed be claiming that some aspect of biological breeding is necessary to the development of exceptional individuals.

Nietzsche scholar Gerd Schank's 2000 monograph *'Rasse' und 'Züchtung' bei Nietzsche* is a remarkable and comprehensive examination of Nietzsche's use of these two terms and their relationship to one another. Schank's work helps alleviate the fear that Nietzsche advocates for the selective biological breeding of a race of *Übermenschen*. First of all, Schank observes that the word *Züchtung* "hatte aber jahrhundertlang, vor allem im Bezug auf Menschen, die Bedeutung 'erziehen'. Diese dürfte auch bei Nietzsche noch in den allermeisten Fällen vorliegen."³¹⁹ Schank also notes that, on occasion, Nietzsche does use *Züchtung* in its present-day sense of selective breeding. In such passages, however, Nietzsche is actually *criticizing* the idea that humanity can be improved via racial breeding. Such is the case for instance in the *Götzendämmerung* subsection "Die 'Verbesserer' der Menschheit." In this relatively short section of the book (five medium-length aphorisms), Nietzsche identifies two primary methods via which human beings have attempted to "improve" humanity: Christianity and the Law of Manu. Christianity, according to Nietzsche, aims for "die *Zähmung* der Bestie Mensch" and the "*Züchtung* einer bestimmten Gattung Mensch" "durch den depressiven Affekt der Furcht, durch Schmerz, durch Wunden, durch Hunger[.]"³²⁰ This "Züchtung" is primarily psychological, and

³¹⁹ Schank, *'Rasse' und 'Züchtung' bei Nietzsche*, 336.

³²⁰ Nietzsche, GD "Die 'Verbesserer' der Menschheit" §2.

so has more in common with “cultivation” than “breeding.” Nietzsche describes the “,Gesetz des Manu‘,” on the other hand, as a moral code that aims specifically at the “*Züchtung einer bestimmten Rasse und Art.*”³²¹ Although Nietzsche is relieved to step out of the “Kranken- und Kerkerluft” of Christian morality discussed in the preceding aphorisms and into this “gesündere, höhere, *weitere Welt*,” he acknowledges that this attempt at racial breeding also fails to noticeably enhance humankind, and in fact leads to egregious violence against people of both sexes and of sundry races:

Der Erfolg einer solchen Sanitäts-Polizei blieb nicht aus: mörderische Seuchen, scheussliche Geschlechtskrankheiten und darauf hin wieder „das Gesetz des Messers“, die Beschneidung für die männlichen, die Abtragung der kleinen Schamlippen für die weiblichen Kinder anordnend.³²²

In these aphorisms, Nietzsche is critical of racial breeding as exemplified by his understanding of the “,Gesetz des Manu‘;” consequently, we can conclude with Schank that “‘Züchtung’ im modernen Sinn kann also nach Nietzsches Einschätzung nicht zur Erhöhung des Menschen beitragen. [...] Es ist der falsche Weg.”³²³

The disastrous consequences of racial breeding programs are also depicted quite literally in *UXM #141* (January 1981; this is the first issue of the “Days of Future Past” story arc adapted into the 2014 Brian Singer film of the same name), in which strict eugenic laws have been enacted that forbid the “breeding” of anyone who carries the mutant gene; only “baseline humans” are allowed to have children. This, coupled with mutant concentration and even death camps, has led to the gradual extermination of all but a few mutants:

³²¹ Ibid., §3.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Schank, *‘Rasse’ und ‘Züchtung’ bei Nietzsche*, 346.

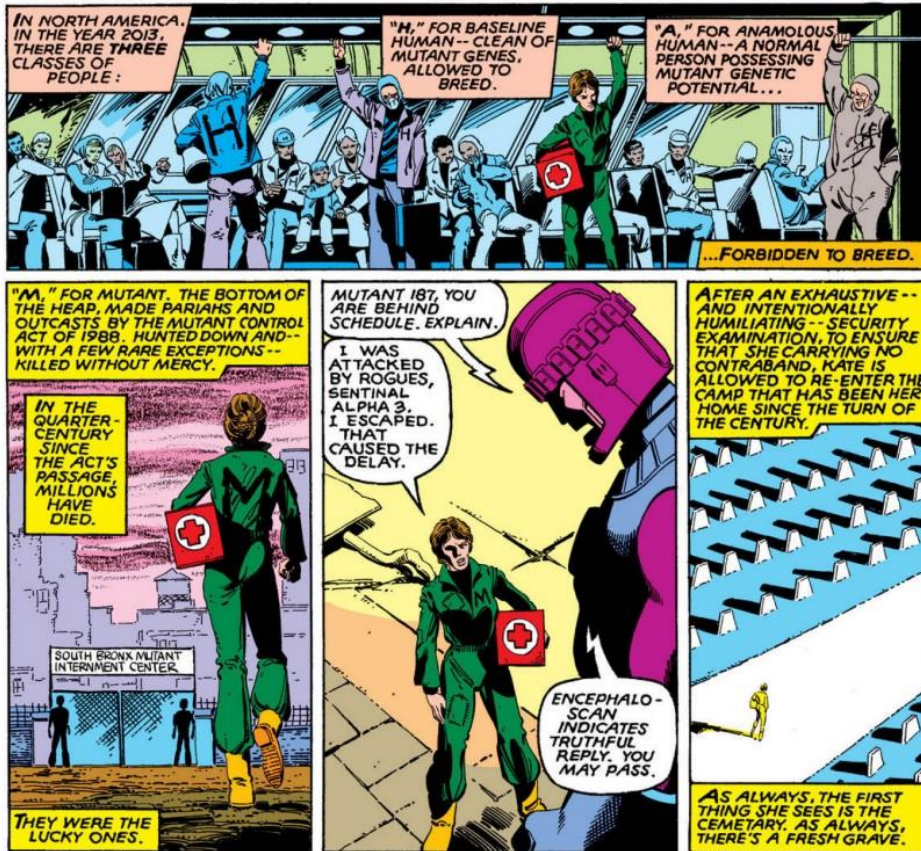


Fig. 3.09
 Claremont et al., *The Uncanny X-Men* #141, 12, panels 1-4.

This breeding program is a curious mixture of the extreme methods of the Law of Manu (as described by Nietzsche) and the goals of Christian “Verbesserer der Menschheit,” which is to *prevent* the enhancement and elevation of the human species. Ordinary humanity is the only acceptable standard, and deviation from or development above and beyond this standard is punishable by death.

Thus, Nietzsche clearly saw that eugenic breeding programs lead to actively genocidal procedures, yet he nevertheless chose to use words that could invite a misinterpretation of his works in a eugenic-Darwinist vein. Schank proposes the following explanation for this choice:

Es könnte sich hier bei Nietzsche wiederum um eine bewußte Anlehnung an darwinistisches Vokabular handeln, mit der einerseits eine gewisse Nähe zu Darwin angedeutet werden soll, mit der aber andererseits umso nachdrücklicher das Unterscheidende hervorgehoben werden soll: daß es Nietzsche um die Bewahrung und

Pflege von ‚Tugenden‘ geht, wozu seiner Auffassung nach die darwinistischen Methoden nicht geeignet sind.³²⁴

Schank argues that Nietzsche wanted to emphasize how “breeders” in his sense are working toward a “planmässige Höherentwicklung” of the human species in a way similar to how their scientific counterparts attempt to breed “higher” types of plants. That is, the Nietzschean project of human enhancement is not to be undertaken arbitrarily, haphazardly, and without conscious intention. The difference lies in method—and, consequently, in results. Whereas a eugenicist would apply pseudoscientific principles in an attempt to biologically breed a racially and physically “desirable” human being, “breeding” in Nietzsche’s sense of the term aims to foster and preserve desirable *virtues* (“Tugenden”). This calls for an entirely different sort of “Züchtung,” one far more in keeping with ideas of education and cultivation than biological manipulation but that still implies rigor and purposefulness.

We find evidence of this throughout Nietzsche’s oeuvre. The earliest use of the word “Zucht” that I can find in Nietzsche’s published works comes in Nietzsche’s five-part lecture series “Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten” (1873). The word occurs in four of the five lectures and is used exclusively to indicate cultivation via educational institutions. Throughout his middle and late works, Nietzsche uses the word “Zucht” in conjunction with other words and concepts that clearly indicate spiritual development: in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I*, he praises Buddhism for valuing that which Christianity cursed, namely “die Erhebung über die anderen Menschen durch die logische Zucht und Schulung des Denkens;”³²⁵ in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, he refers to rationality and intellectual discipline as “Zucht des Kopfes;”³²⁶ in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* he provides a negative example, asserting that the tyranny of the

³²⁴ Schank, *‘Rasse’ und ‘Züchtung’ bei Nietzsche*, 342.

³²⁵ Nietzsche, MA-I §144.

³²⁶ Nietzsche, FW §79

Christian church in intellectual as well as political matters reveals “Sklaverei” to be “das unentbehrliche Mittel auch der geistigen Zucht und Züchtung.”³²⁷ A little further on in *Jenseits*, Nietzsche asserts that “eine neue Art von Philosophen und Befehlshabern” is necessary to the “grosse Wagnisse und Gesamt-Versuche von Zucht und Züchtung” that will bring about an enhancement of the human type.³²⁸ Nietzsche’s “breeders” are in fact a new type of philosophers and commanders, respectively the educators and organizers of the mind and spirit.

Nietzsche does occasionally use the word “Zucht” in conjunction with physiological terminology, but in ways that illustrate mental and spiritual processes by analogy to physical processes. As early as the second *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtung*, Nietzsche emphasizes that every society is a product of its *intellectual* heredity. Societies and time periods wherein a critical attitude is taken toward one’s own history are necessary, but these are “gefährliche und gefährdete Menschen und Zeiten.” Nietzsche cautions his contemporaries, writing that,

da wir nun einmal die Resultate früherer Geschlechter sind, sind wir auch die Resultate ihrer Verirrungen, Leidenschaften und Irrthümer, ja Verbrechen; es ist nicht möglich sich ganz von dieser Kette zu lösen. Wenn wir jene Verirrungen verurtheilen und uns ihrer für enthoben erachten, so ist die Thatsache nicht beseitigt, dass wir aus ihnen herkommen.³²⁹

Here, Nietzsche asserts that every age, the present one included, is “descended from” (“herkommen”) the “Verirrungen, Leidenschaften und Irrthümer, ja Verbrechen” of earlier peoples and times. Nietzsche’s focus is not on genetic heredity, but on an “inheritance” of ideas, moral codes, and belief systems. Overcoming this intellectual heritage is a difficult task: Nietzsche believes that, at best, we can come “zu einem Widerstreite der ererbten, angestammten

³²⁷ Nietzsche, JGB §188. The formulation “Zucht des Geistes“ also occurs in GM-III §4 and AC §36, 37, 47, 53. This list is by no means exhaustive; interested readers should turn to Schank, *‘Rasse’ und ‘Züchtung’ bei Nietzsche*, 335-57, for more instances of Nietzsche’s use of the word “Zucht,” and to 357-403 for, among other topics, the overlap between Nietzsche’s concept of “Erziehung” and that of “Züchtung.”

³²⁸ Nietzsche, JGB §203.

³²⁹ Nietzsche, UB-II “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben” §3, p. 270.

Natur und unserer Erkenntnis, auch wohl zu einem Kampfe einer neuen strengen Zucht gegen das von Alters her Angezogene und Angeborne, wir pflanzen eine neue Gewöhnung, einen neuen Instinct, eine zweite Natur an, so dass die erste Natur abdorrt.”³³⁰ Our “ererbten, angestammten Natur”—the practices, beliefs, and even ways of thinking that we have inherited from our cultural ancestors—struggles against our increasing knowledge of the world (“Erkenntnis”). This leads us to develop a strict “Zucht” against intellectual and spiritual instincts that are both *adopted* (“Angezogene”) and *inborn* (“Angeborne”). Surely, such a “Zucht” would have more to do with education and spiritual discipline than eugenics. In fact, the Stanford Edition of Nietzsche’s complete works translates “Zucht” and “anpflanzen” in this context as “discipline” and “cultivate,” respectively.³³¹ Such a translation, however, loses part of the distinct biological connotations of the original German: Nietzsche’s language reminds us that, although spiritual education and discipline are essential to what it means to be human, we are still beings of flesh and blood. Thus, even when Nietzsche’s writings stress spiritual processes, his works still emphasize physical aspects of human existence (which he does specifically to contradict Christianity, which he criticizes for neglecting or even negating the physical self).

There are times when Nietzsche appears to take the mind-body connection too far—as when, for example, he connects vegetarianism and the overconsumption of rice with “Denk- und Gefühlsweisen, die narkotisch wirken.”³³² This claim that a vegetarian diet can have narcotic effects on our intellectual wellbeing comes across today as outdated, at best. Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s consideration of the body-mind relationship cannot be entirely discounted. More convincing than his literal proclamations on diet and the body are those passages in which a level

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations*, 107.

³³² Nietzsche, FW §145.

of analogy is involved, as in the example from *UB-II* above and the following example from the seventh part of *Jenseits*.

In an aphorism from “Siebentes Hauptstück: unsere Tugenden,” Nietzsche elaborates upon a “Grundwillen des Gesites,” by which he means a “befehlerische Etwas, das vom Volke ,der Geist‘ genannt wird,” and that “will in sich und um sich herum Herr sein [...]”³³³ This will of the spirit has the same “Bedürfnisse und Vermögen” that physiologists have attributed to “Alles, was lebt, wächst und sich vermehrt[;]” namely, the desire “auf Wachstum also; bestimmter noch, auf das Gefühl des Wachstums, auf das Gefühl der vermehrten Kraft.” There are two ways in which the “Grundwillen des Gesites” fosters its sense of growth and power, according to Nietzsche. One type of spirit assimilates foreign material into itself by simplifying what is multifaceted, overlooking or tossing out contradictory elements, and at times deliberately closing itself off from new knowledge and retreating into itself. Against this “Willen zum Schein, zur Vereinfachung, zur Maske, zum Mantel, kurz zur Oberfläche,” Nietzsche posits “jener sublimen Hang des Erkennenden [...], der die Dinge tief, vielfach, gründlich nimmt und nehmen will[.]” Nevertheless, purposeful closing of the self to knowledge is necessary to *every* spirit, “je nach dem Grade seiner aneignenden Kraft, seiner ,Verdauungskraft‘, im Bilde geredet — und wirklich gleicht ,der Geist‘ am meisten noch einem Magen.” The “Grundwillen des Geistes” is analogous to a stomach, and the degree of its digestive power (“Verdauungskraft”) determines how much of the contradictory and irreducible complexities of existence it can ingest before it is overwhelmed and must seek refuge from knowledge in reassuring illusions. The implication is that, although even the “*sehr* freien Gesiter” might need to take occasional recourse to comforting illusions, these higher types have stronger stomachs than most human

³³³ Nietzsche, JGB §230.

beings—metaphorically speaking (“im Bilde geredet”). Such a stronger type is one who “an strenge Zucht, auch an strenge Worte gewohnt ist.” Ultimately, the free spirit is “hart geworden in der Zucht der Wissenschaft.” Science and the pursuit of knowledge “breed” the free spirit. While this analogy of the spiritual to the physiological reminds us that the process of Nietzschean self-overcoming is neither solely one nor the other, Nietzsche’s use of the word “Zucht” ultimately refers to the education and enhancement of the *spirit*.

Self-overcoming is, in the end, “eine leiblich-geistige Disziplin,”³³⁴ and although the body is not to be entirely discounted when considering how new and higher individuals—Übermenschen—are to be “bred,” racial characteristics as we understand them today do not seem to factor into Nietzsche’s considerations on this point.³³⁵ If anything, Nietzsche argues for the mixing of races and peoples in Europe, arguing that variation enables the development of individual identity in the first place. It is true that Nietzsche refers specifically to a number of different races throughout his works, as in his discussion of “master” castes in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, for example (see Chapter Two, Section 3). His comments on the Jewish race are particularly loaded, reading them as we do today through a historical lens that includes the Third Reich’s genocidal anti-Semitism. Nietzsche’s comments on the Jewish race, however, are best understood in the context of his larger hopes for a united European “race.” As early as *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I*, Nietzsche writes that “das ganze Problem der *Juden* ist nur innerhalb der nationalen Staaten vorhanden[.]”³³⁶ The “problem” of the Jews is artificial and consequently does not need solving; instead, it can be easily obviated by casting off the petty

³³⁴ WM §981; eKGWB/NF-1887,10[68].

³³⁵ Cf. Schank, *‘Rasse’ und ‘Züchtung’ bei Nietzsche*, 29: “Es kann also hier schon festgestellt werden, [...] daß das Wort ‚Rasse‘ bei Nietzsche nur in wenigen Ausnahmefällen eine moderne Bedeutung hat, von der er sich aber immer klar distanciert.”

³³⁶ Nietzsche, MA-I §475.

nationalisms that pit Europeans against one another. “Sobald es sich nicht mehr um Conservirung von Nationen, sondern um die Erzeugung einer möglichst kräftigen europäischen Mischrasse handelt, ist der Jude als Ingredienz ebenso brauchbar und erwünscht, als irgend ein anderer nationaler Rest.” Once again, Nietzsche begins with unmistakably biological language: a powerful European race is to be sired (“erzeugt”). In the same aphorism, however, Nietzsche also emphasizes the blending of Europe via the exchange of business, culture, and *ideas*. All of these factors are, in Nietzsche’s estimation, leading to a breakdown of European nation-states, “so dass aus ihnen allen, in Folge fortwährender Kreuzungen, eine Mischrasse, die des europäischen Menschen, entstehen muss.” This mixing is inevitable, and all attempts to instill a sense of nationalism in a given people does *not* represent “das Interesse der Vielen (der Völker), wie man wohl sagt, sondern vor Allem das Interesse bestimmter Fürstendynastien, sodann das bestimmter Classen des Handels und der Gesellschaft[.]” Once we have recognized this fact, Nietzsche encourages his readers to embrace a new, pan-European identity: “hat man diess einmal erkannt, so soll man sich nur ungescheut als *guten Europäer* ausgeben und durch die That an der Verschmelzung der Nationen arbeiten[.]” This new identity will transcend arbitrary political, cultural, economic, *and* racial boundaries.

This concept of a “good European” (which occurs for the first time in the published works in the aphorism from *MA-I* quoted above) recurs several times in Nietzsche’s late works, and the emphasis is clearly *not* placed on physical racial attributes. In the foreword appended to *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches II* in 1886, Nietzsche addresses his book to imagined like-minded readers, calling them “ihr Vorherbestimmten, ihr Siegreichen, ihr Zeit-Überwinder, ihr Gesundesten, ihr Stärksten, ihr *guten Europäer!* - -”³³⁷ These companions that Nietzsche

³³⁷ Nietzsche, MA-II “Vorrede” §6.

imagines for himself must be sick, as he was, and then overcome their illness and discover “den Weg zu einer *neuen* Gesundheit.” This is a spiritual, psychological, moral health, of the sort he extolls in the introduction to *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (see Chapter One, Section 4), and not a health based on some imagined purity of race. Indeed, in the fifth book of *FW*, written expressly for the 1887 second edition, Nietzsche decisively asserts that the “Ehrenwort” “*gute Europäer*” applies to people who no longer have any national or racial identity:

Wir Heimatlosen, wir sind der Rasse und Abkunft nach zu vielfach und gemischt, als „moderne Menschen“, und folglich wenig versucht, an jener verlognen Rassen-Selbstbewunderung und Unzucht theilzunehmen, welche sich heute in Deutschland als Zeichen deutscher Gesinnung zur Schau trägt und die bei dem Volke des „historischen Sinns“ zwiefach falsch und unanständig anmuthet.³³⁸

This passage decisively rejects the presence of any racial component in Nietzsche’s “higher” humanity, as Nietzsche openly rejects any sort of racial self-congratulation as untruthful, dishonest, even hypocritical (“verlognen”). Passages such as I have quoted here lead us to conclude, with Schank, “daß Nietzsches Denken grundsätzlich auf eine Überschreitung des Rassekonzepts gerichtet ist, denn nur auf diesem Weg erscheint ihm eine Erhöhung des Menschen—wenn überhaupt—möglich.”^{339,340}

³³⁸ Nietzsche, *FW* §377. The aphorism is entitled “Wir Heimatlosen.”

³³⁹ Schank, *‘Rasse’ und ‘Züchtung’ bei Nietzsche*, 44.

³⁴⁰ Of course, not every reader of Nietzsche agrees. Robert Bernasconi, writing for the *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, directs our attention to an aphorism in *Morgenröthe* bearing the title “*Die Reinigung der Rasse*.” Bernasconi claims that in this aphorism, Nietzsche’s “hope for a ‘pure European race and culture’ was founded on the model of the Greeks as a ‘race and culture that had become pure’ after being formed from a number of different sources” (“Nietzsche as a Philosopher of Racialized Breeding,” 57). This is true, but it is not the entire story: for Nietzsche, “die gekreuzten Rassen” (which are the majority of races and peoples) exhibit not only a “Disharmonie von Körperformen,” but also “Disharmonien der Gewohnheiten und Werthbegriffe” (*Morgenröthe*, §272). The road to “Reinigung” involves the restriction and channeling of “die in einer Rasse vorhandene Kraft,” a process that “will vorsichtig und zart beurtheilt sein,” as it involves “eine *Verarmung*” as well as a restriction of this racial “Kraft.” If successfully accomplished, however, “[dann] steht alle jene Kraft, die früher bei dem Kampfe der disharmonischen Eigenschaften daraufgieng, dem gesammten Organismus zu Gebote, wesshalb reingewordene Rassen immer auch *stärker* und *schöner* geworden sind.” This process *might* lead to a physical strengthening and beautification of a given race, since Nietzsche does include physical characteristics in his considerations of what constitutes a “Rasse,” but it is not limited to physical qualities: we must remember that these “disharmonischen Eigenschaften” include “Gewohnheiten” and “Werthbegriffe.” A “Reinigung der Rasse” would involve reconciliation between competing customs and values—and even the creation of new moralities that *transcend*

Nietzsche's hopes for human enhancement do not rest on a foundation of selective racial "breeding." In fact, he rejects the idea that "progress" in this sense represents any enhancement or strengthening of humanity. Early on in *Der Antichrist*, Nietzsche dismisses the idea of "progress" in its modern sense: "Fortentwicklung ist schlechterdings *nicht* mit irgend welcher Nothwendigkeit Erhöhung, Steigerung, Verstärkung."³⁴¹ Nevertheless, Nietzsche does profess to believe that there is "ein fortwährendes Gelingen einzelner Fälle an den verschiedensten Stellen der Erde und aus den verschiedensten Culturen heraus, mit denen in der That sich ein *höherer Typus* darstellt: Etwas, das im Verhältniss zur Gesamt-Menschheit eine Art Übermensch ist." The higher type of human being—which Nietzsche here describes in softer language as "eine Art Übermensch" instead of simply "ein Übermensch"—is not a result of human evolution or sociocultural "progress," but rather something realized primarily in "einzelner Fälle." At the same time as Nietzsche makes it clear that not everyone has the potential to become "eine Art Übermensch," he asserts equally clearly that what Übermenschen there are occur "an den verschiedensten Stellen der Erde und aus den verschiedensten Culturen heraus." That is to say: the Übermensch could come from *anywhere*—no single culture or race holds a monopoly on exceptional individuals.

In this, at least, Nietzsche's works and *The Uncanny X-Men* series agree, as mutants appear seemingly at random, all around the globe, and almost always singly.³⁴² Mutants, however, seek one another out and come together, even though they are not born or bred en

previously incompatible social codes (like we see in *Zarathustra*). Bernasconi appears to be interested only in the physiological component mentioned *as one among others* in this aphorism from *Morgenröthe*. Consequently, when he goes on to connect this aphorism to a fragment from Nietzsche's notebooks, he overlooks the significance of the prefix *Über*: "The same idea lay behind Nietzsche's hopes that Europeans would eventually constitute a super-race, an over-race (*Über-Rasse*)" (57). The term *Über-Rasse* of course recalls Nietzsche's metaphoric *Übermensch*. If the *Übermensch* represents an overcoming of everything that a *Mensch* has heretofore been, then the term *Über-Rasse* could similarly indicate a transcendence of all previous conceptions of *Rasse*.

³⁴¹ Nietzsche, AC §4.

³⁴² Or, in the case of the Maximoff twins, as sibling pairs, but this is extremely uncommon.

masse. Gradually, they form groups—Professor Xavier’s X-Men and Magneto’s Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, for example.³⁴³ And it is in forming these groups, which are to a certain extent culturally and religiously diverse, that the X-Men become capable of achieving their full potential by constantly challenging and assisting one another to strive for ever greater physical and spiritual heights. Although Nietzsche’s works emphasize individual self-overcoming, a similar aspect of community is not entirely lacking therein. In fact, as we will now see, both friends and adversaries play integral roles in the development of Nietzschean *Übermenschen*. The *Übermensch* is achieved not through any program of racial breeding, but in large part through the productive and challenging relationships that an exceptional individual forms with others of a similar spiritual caliber.

4. Best Frenemies: The Importance of Friend and Foe in Nietzsche’s Writings and *The Uncanny X-Men*

All life is will to power; thus, all life is the will to overcome, and so all life includes the will to *self-overcoming*. What begins with the individual can expand to the institutional: human

³⁴³ In fact, in this respect both Professor X and Magneto bear a striking resemblance more to the character of Zarathustra than to the concept of the *Übermensch*. Toward the end of the prologue, Zarathustra awakens to a new dawn and a new realization: “Gefährten brauche ich und lebendige, – nicht todte Gefährten und Leichname, die ich mit mir trage, wohin ich will. Sondern lebendige Gefährten brauche ich, die mir folgen, weil sie sich selber folgen wollen – und dorthin, wo ich will” (Z-I “Zarathustra’s Vorrede” §9). Although the extra powers that differentiate the mutants from the rest of humanity are certainly not the sort of capabilities that distinguish Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* from the mediocre masses, they do seek one another out and are most comfortable when they are around these chosen compatriots. The X-Men are a peculiar blend of companion, disciple, and friend to Charles Xavier, just as Zarathustra refers to his listeners variously as “Gefährten,” “Freunde,” “Brüder,” and even “Jünger.” And while Magneto rules his “Brotherhood” with an iron fist, these mutants are the only individuals he considers his companions. Finally, Professor X repeatedly states that his goal is to prepare his mutant team for the day when they no longer need him, much as Zarathustra encourages his listeners to overcome him and his teachings in order to become who they are:

Ihr sagt, ihr glaubt an Zarathustra? Aber was liegt an Zarathustra! Ihr seid meine Gläubigen: aber was liegt an allen Gläubigen!

Ihr hattet euch noch nicht gesucht: da fandet ihr mich. So thun alle Gläubigen; darum ist es so wenig mit allem Glauben.

Nun heisse ich euch, mich verlieren und euch finden; und erst, wenn ihr mich Alle verleugnet habt, will ich euch wiederkehren. (Nietzsche, Z-I “Von der schenkenden Tugend” §3)

cultures, religions, and moral valuations can and must overcome themselves if stagnation and decline are to be avoided—or at least delayed. As the epitome of the self-overcoming *individual*, however, the *Übermensch* does not exist in a vacuum. While Nietzsche repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of periodic loneliness and withdrawal from society to the development of exceptional individuals, his writings also promote the idea that “self-perfection is best sought not in seclusion, nor through excessive preoccupation with oneself, but in community with others.”³⁴⁴ Nietzsche devotes considerable ink to the *types* of communal relationships that he considers productive. *Also sprach Zarathustra* in particular (though not exclusively) contains a number of speeches on the importance of *friendship* and also stresses the importance of seeking out strong *enemies* as a means of testing and increasing one’s strength. Both friends and enemies are valuable insofar as each has the potential to challenge individuals to overcome themselves. As we will see, the presence of challenging friends and enemies is also central to *The Uncanny X-Men*. In fact, the series stresses that what mutants are able to make of themselves has less to do with their “*ex-tra* power” and more to do with the courage, resilience, and self-mastery that they develop through continuous interaction with both friends and enemies.

Also sprach Zarathustra explicitly links friendship to the development of the *Übermensch*, but we can find important precursors to this idea in the preceding work, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. Early on there is an aphorism entitled “*Was alles Liebe genannt wird*,” in which Nietzsche presents friendship as the highest and most productive form of love. This may strike the reader as counterintuitive at first, since human sexual love (“*die Liebe der Geschlechter*”) can be literally productive (i.e. procreative). According to Nietzsche, however, friendship (“*Freundschaft*”) is “*eine Art Fortsetzung der Liebe, bei der jenes habsüchtige*

³⁴⁴ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 365.

Verlangen zweier Personen nach einander einer neuen Begierde und Habsucht, einem gemeinsamen höheren Durste nach einem über ihnen stehenden Ideale gewichen ist[.]”³⁴⁵

In sexual relationships,³⁴⁶ each individual becomes the object of the other’s love and sexual covetousness. In friendships, however, Nietzsche proposes that the object of each friend’s love is not the other, but a common ideal that exists above and beyond either friend. This is not to say that friends do not love each other, but that the love of friends for one another is not rooted in the desire to possess the other (as is the case in romantic/sexual love), but rather in a common goal that the two share. Nietzsche does not specify the nature of this goal or ideal here—in fact, there is a sense in this aphorism that any number of elevating ideals could be the object of a friendship. In *Zarathustra*, however, this ideal *is* given a name, and that name is: Übermensch.

Friendship as conceived in Zarathustra’s speech “Vom Freunde” is a challenging, active relationship. Friends must not take each other for granted; instead, each should put their best foot forward for the other: “Du kannst dich für deinen Freund nicht schön genug putzen: denn du sollst ihm ein Pfeil und eine Sehnsucht nach dem Übermenschen sein.”³⁴⁷ By always giving each other their best, friends may serve to inspire one another to ever greater heights of spiritual achievement. The Übermensch is the individual engaged in constant self-overcoming, and so to posit the Übermensch as the ideal of friendship is to transform friendship into an active, productive relationship of mutual self-overcoming. To do this, however, one must be hard, and at times even *unfriendly*: “Man soll in seinem Freunde noch den Feind ehren. Kannst du an deinen Freund dicht herantreten, ohne zu ihm überzutreten? [¶] In seinem Freunde soll man

³⁴⁵ Nietzsche, FW §14.

³⁴⁶ Presumably heterosexual relationships, though at times (as in this aphorism) Nietzsche does not specifically make this distinction. When the genders of sexual partners *are* explicitly stated in Nietzsche’s works, they are heterosexual pairings. Whether this same distinction applies to those rare instances where Nietzsche writes only of “one” and “the other” would merit further analysis that is not within the scope of this chapter’s investigation.

³⁴⁷ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vom Freunde.”

seinen besten Feind haben. Du sollst ihm am nächsten mit dem Herzen sein, wenn du ihm widerstrebst.”³⁴⁸ One must honor the enemy within one’s friend; we must struggle against (“widerstreben”) those who are closest to us. Kaufmann explains this apparently contradictory definition of friendship thusly: “In friendship man can sublimate his jealousy into a keen spiritual competition, and the friends may vie with each other to make something of themselves that will delight, inspire, and spur on the other.”³⁴⁹ Friends not only support and encourage one another, they *challenge* one another. One friend sees that the second has enhanced himself, and so that friend sublimates whatever initial jealousy he might feel into a desire to better himself; the second friend, seeing what the first has done, does the same—and so on.

It is also important that one not *coddle* one’s friends. When our friend is struggling, we must be supportive, certainly—but we must also retain an element of hardness, of the enemy. As Zarathustra says in the second part of the work: “Hast du aber einen leidenden Freund, so sei seinem Leiden eine Ruhestätte, doch gleichsam ein hartes Bett, ein Feldbett: so wirst du ihm am besten nützen.”³⁵⁰ This speech, entitled “Von den Mitleidigen,” expresses an aversion to pity similar to that found in Nietzsche’s other works (see Chapter Two, Section 4). Pity helps no one—so why should we pity our friends? The figure of Zarathustra encourages his listeners to aid their friends when they suffer, but not to indulge the sufferer’s inclination toward perpetual ease. The word “Feldbett” is in keeping with Zarathustra’s generally martial language: self-overcoming is a series of battles and struggles both within a given individual and between the individual and mass society. A military cot or camp bed is a place for soldiers to get only that quality and quantity of rest that is necessary for them to return to the fight. The “grosse Liebe”

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 389.

³⁵⁰ Nietzsche, Z-II “Von den Mitleidigen.”

of one friend to another must be “noch über all ihrem Mitleiden: denn sie will das Geliebte noch – schaffen!”³⁵¹ The true friend is one who challenges another to an act of mutual self-creation. Each friend must, of course, encourage and support the other, but each must also *challenge* the other: “Alle Schaffenden aber sind hart.”³⁵² This requires friends to be, at least from time to time, firm in their dealings with one another.³⁵³

A similar principle underlies the bonds of friendship that develop among the X-Men. The X-Men frequently train together in Charles Xavier’s specially outfitted mansion—in fact, this is the first thing the reader sees the X-Men do in *UXM #1*. The competition in these training sessions is mostly—but not always—friendly, and the X-Men do fulfill Zarathustra’s requirement that friends always challenge one another to enhance themselves. Of course, their training represents a much more action-heavy, *physical* self-overcoming than the kind of spiritual and moral overcoming that Nietzsche emphasizes. On the other hand, Nietzsche also relies on action-oriented words and metaphors—his (in)famous predilection for martial terminology—which have the undeniable effect of making his works more exciting to read. But both Nietzsche and comic books have come under attack by their respective critics for their use of violent imagery. In the realm of superhero comics, this has caused comic-book writers like Stan Lee to claim that, while the action in superhero tales is meant to entertain, the real value of such stories lies in the moral lessons they seek to impart. Chris Claremont even has X-Men

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Zarathustra, and by extension Nietzsche, is very careful to avoid saying that friends should “improve” or “better” one another. This is likely due to Nietzsche’s distaste for self-styled “Verbesserer‘ der Menschheit.” Nietzsche’s works also involve a “revaluation” of “good” and “evil” (a topic I deal with in greater detail in Chapter Four, Section 5), and so it stands to reason that Nietzsche would avoid phrasing human enhancement in terms of someone making themselves “better,” since “better” implies a standard of the “good” that Nietzsche no longer takes for granted.

³⁵³ Cf. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 367-68: “The best that a friend can do for a friend is to help him to gain self-mastery. And that cannot be done by commiserating with him or by indulging his weaknesses. [...] In short, Nietzsche thought that friends should be educators to one another; and educators must not be sentimental.”

characters express this ethos in *UXM #148* (August 1981). Speaking of the unstable Wolverine's penchant for wanton violence, Storm says that her fellow X-Man "is not an X-Man because of his perfect, sterling character. It is because of his potential for good. Our duty as X-Men is to help him achieve that potential. To deny Wolverine would be to deny our true reason for being." (See **Fig. 3.10** below).



Fig. 3.10 Claremont et al., *The Uncanny X-Men #148*, 175, panel 6.

What counts as "good" is much more complicated in Nietzsche's works than in the *Uncanny X-Men* and superhero comics in general (see Chapters Two and Four). For now, what matters is that Storm's speech illustrates a strikingly Nietzschean point: it is mutants' spiritual potential that makes them X-Men, and it is the duty of each of the X-Men to help the others achieve their full spiritual potential.

If an element of the foe resides in every Nietzschean friendship, then it follows that even the bitterest of enemies can also facilitate the exceptional individual's self-overcoming. Indeed, Nietzsche's works encourage readers to actively seek out worthy enemies, for a strong foe is an opportunity for individuals to increase their strength. Here again, Nietzsche's starting point is the ancient aristocratic model: "Er [der vornehme Mensch] verlangt ja seinen Feind für sich, als seine Auszeichnung, er hält ja keinen andren Feind aus, als einen solchen, an dem Nichts zu

verachten und *sehr Viel* zu ehren ist!”³⁵⁴ According to Nietzsche, contempt (“Verachtung”) can only take place between an individual of a higher “order of rank” and one of a lower, whereas hate (“Hass”) is an emotion that can take place only between equals: “Der Hass dagegen stellt gleich, stellt gegenüber, im Hass ist Ehre, endlich: im Hass ist Furcht, ein grosser guter Theil Furcht.”³⁵⁵ One can only benefit from having an enemy that one can *respect* and *fear*,³⁵⁶ for one can only increase one’s strength by challenging an enemy of equal or greater strength. Consequently, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra encourages his disciples and companions to seek out only such enemies as they can hate: “Ihr dürft nur Feinde haben, die zu hassen sind, aber nicht Feinde zum Verachten.”³⁵⁷ This speech bears the title “Vom Krieg und Kriegsvolke,” but Zarathustra is not exhorting his listeners to wage war for land or riches or political power. Instead, he encourages them to fight for their “höchsten Gedanken,” which is the idea that “der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll.” Zarathustra’s listeners fight their enemies for the same reason they challenge their friends: to overcome themselves, so that humanity can overcome itself in the form of the Übermensch. If one’s enemies are one’s equals, then one’s contest with them can lead to productive self-overcoming.

This is a lesson that Xavier’s X-Men must learn in almost every encounter. Although they know they must constantly improve if they are to overcome the villains they constantly encounter, the X-Men typically exhibit self-righteous contempt when facing their foes, rather than respectful hate (or respectful fear—“Ehrfurcht” in German). Magneto, on the other hand, respects both Charles Xavier and his team of mutant do-gooders even as he bitterly opposes

³⁵⁴ Nietzsche, GM-I §10.

³⁵⁵ Nietzsche, FW §379.

³⁵⁶ A concept encapsulated by the German word “Ehrfurcht.” See Chapter Two, Section 3.

³⁵⁷ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vom Krieg und Kriegsvolke.”

them. Upon learning of Jean Grey’s death (at the end of the *Dark Phoenix* storyline), Magneto expresses his condolences and the high regard in which he holds his fellow mutants:



Fig. 3.11 Claremont et al., *The Uncanny X-Men* #150, 216, panel 7.

Magneto’s posture clearly indicates that he means to console Scott “Cyclops” Summers, and the similar colors in Magneto and Cyclops’ respective costumes suggest that the two are more alike than Cyclops would like to admit. In fact, this scene takes place in the same issue in which Claremont introduces Magneto’s origins as a survivor of the Third Reich’s death camps. The issue ends not only with this revelation to the reader, but with Magneto’s own realization that he has adopted the methods of those whom he despises. Magneto has begun the transformation from villain to tormented hero in this issue. This represents the X-Men’s greatest victory—indeed, their only *real* victory—over Magneto. They did not triumph by being more skilled in the use of their powers than the “Master of Magnetism.” Rather, their victory is a *moral* one, as Charles Xavier explains in the issue’s penultimate panel:



Fig. 3.12 Claremont et al., *The Uncanny X-Men* #150, panel 7.

Magneto has gained a new understanding of himself and his place in the world (while the heroes have not, as Professor X's speech in **Fig. 3.12** makes clear). He faced an enemy that was his equal, and though he did not "win," he *overcame himself*. In subsequent issues, he will stand trial for his crimes and eventually become another mentor to the X-Men, blurring the line between friend and foe by challenging them as much, if not more, than Charles Xavier ever did.

5. Superman and Man in *The Uncanny X-Men* and Nietzsche's Works

Such are the relationships *inter pares* of exceptional individuals: productive even when they are hostile, and with an adversarial element even in friendship. Nietzsche's pronouncements on the importance of friend and foe, either through the figure of Zarathustra or more directly in other works, create a more nuanced impression of the "solitary" Übermensch. But if there can be communities of Übermenschen or Übermensch-precursors, how are these communities to relate to the masses of "normal" human beings? As we answer this question with the help of *The Uncanny X-Men*, we shall find that relationships between the exceptional and the average, while not necessarily hostile, are nevertheless undermined by fear and mistrust—sometimes justifiable, other times less so—on the part of "normal" human beings.

In *Der Antichrist* (1888), Nietzsche writes that "selbst ganze Geschlechter, Stämme, Völker können unter Umständen einen solchen *Treffler* darstellen."³⁵⁸ This is, as far as I can tell, the only time that he refers to an exceptional race (*Geschlecht*), tribe (*Stamm*), or people (*Volk*). Small communities of exceptional friends and enemies are generally the rule in Nietzsche's works; nevertheless, Nietzsche asserts toward the end of his productive life that a tribe of exceptional individuals—of Übermenschen—*is* possible. How, then, should a "tribe" or group of Übermenschen relate to the rest of humanity? The question also goes the other way: how should or will the ordinary human majority react to the emergence of entire tribes (or, in the case of *The Uncanny X-Men*, of an entire species) of Übermenschen? In the *Uncanny X-Men* series, two complementary conflicts emerge simultaneously: one that takes place between different mutant factions, and another that occurs between mutants and non-mutants. Although the two conflicts are not entirely separate from one another, I will discuss the former conflict first,

³⁵⁸ Nietzsche, AC §4.

looking specifically at the opposing perspectives of Magneto and Professor X. Turning then to Nietzsche's works, I will show that, even should a tribe or race of Übermenschen in the Nietzschean sense emerge, the relationship between such a tribe and its more ordinary neighbors is not primarily one of physical and political domination.

A. Relation of the Superhuman to the Human

From the mutant perspective, the question in the *Uncanny X-Men* is whether mutants should coexist alongside ordinary human beings or rule over them. Professor X believes the former, while Magneto attempts to accomplish the latter. This is clear from the very first issue of the series, but *UXM #4* (March 1964) contains a scene wherein Professor X and Magneto's respective viewpoints are presented quite literally face to face. Magneto has stolen an armored cargo ship and commenced bombardment of the fictional island republic of Santo Marco. Using his telepathic powers, Professor X attempts to dissuade Magneto from his goal of conquest, and the two converse telepathically (see **Fig. 3.13** below). This conversation accounts for two thirds of the page, and for our purposes, the first panel in the bottom row is the most significant. Professor X argues that mutants "must use our powers to bring about a Golden Age on Earth - - side by side with ordinary humans!" Magneto, on the other hand, asserts that "human beings must be our *slaves!* They are not *worthy* to share dominion of the Earth with us!" That this conversation takes place on a "*mental plane*" underscores the point that the battle between Magneto's Evil Mutants and Xavier's X-Men is primarily one of *ideas*. Their physical appearance on the mental plane further emphasizes this point, as their transparent, ephemeral forms allow them to literally embody their respective beliefs. Thus, the physical opposition between the two figures becomes symbolic of the spiritual war waged between them.



Fig. 3.13 Lee et al.,
The X-Men #4, 11,
panels 3-7.

In this issue (created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby), Magneto does not yet have the tragic backstory given him by Chris Claremont in the 1980s. Nevertheless, his claim that humans are “not *worthy* to share dominion” with mutants is still based largely on the cruelty that “ordinary humans” exhibit toward mutants. In 1963, readers have not been introduced to the Magneto who suffered devastating personal losses at the hands of “ordinary humans,” but at least one member of Magneto’s “Brotherhood of Evil Mutants” (introduced in *UXM #4* for the first time) has: Wanda Maximoff, a.k.a. “Scarlet Witch.” In a two-panel flashback sequence narrated by Magneto, the reader learns that Magneto rescued Wanda from “superstitious villagers” who were about to burn her at the stake:



Fig. 3.14 Lee et al.,
The X-Men #4, page
 9, panels 6-7 and
 page 10, panels 1-2.

Wanda and her brother Pietro, a.k.a. “Quicksilver,” believe (quite rightly, in their case) that “ordinary humans” are the aggressors, and that they owe their lives to Magneto. Therefore, they have sworn to serve him. Their experience is all the evidence Magneto needs to brand *homo sapiens* as the “natural enemies” of “*homo superior*.”

Magneto holds that only when a mutant submits to human judgment, as Wanda Maximoff appears to have done in her remote village, do “ordinary humans” possess any power over mutants. Mutants consequently have every right to use their superior mutant abilities to dominate the physically weaker “ordinary” people who persecute them. Professor X, on the other hand, believes that the mutants’ “*ex-tra* power” means that they have a responsibility to protect, and potentially even uplift, “ordinary” human beings. Professor X’s position is unambiguously the “good” point of view in the story, and falls perfectly in keeping with Stan Lee’s personal philosophical attitude toward the super-human as famously formulated in the

Amazing Spider-Man's first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy #15* (August 1962, one year before the debut issue of *The X-Men*):



Fig. 3.15 Lee and Ditko, *Amazing Adventures #15*, n.p., panel 8.

On the other hand, Magneto is such a compelling villain in large part because readers cannot entirely discount his motivations (even before Claremont's rewriting of the character). Magneto has a point: "ordinary humans" fear, and even hate, mutants, and repeatedly go to extraordinary lengths to control, imprison, and even murder them. Magneto is right that mutants need to defend themselves; where he goes wrong, according to the series, is in using mutantkind's impressive physical powers to justify his *conquest* of, rather than coexistence with, "ordinary humans."

Because they are stronger, faster, and possessed of "ex-tra powers" that "ordinary humans" do not have, this species of comic-book superhumans poses a geopolitical threat to the rest of humanity in a way that Nietzsche's spiritually superior *Übermensch* simply does not. Mutants' superpowers give them a physical advantage over their unpowered contemporaries (even Professor's X's telepathic powers can be used to control and subjugate others). For

Nietzsche, on the other hand, physical strength is not the primary characteristic of an Übermensch.³⁵⁹ We should also remember that, contrary to Magneto’s repeated assertion that *homo superior* should dominate *homo sapiens*, Nietzsche writes on several occasions that the higher types will treat lower types with more tenderness than they (the higher types) show themselves.³⁶⁰ An Übermensch does so not out of pity, but out of an “Überfluss” of individual strength and energy.³⁶¹ Furthermore, the Übermensch is not primarily interested in acquiring political power to any degree, let alone in becoming a dictator.³⁶² Consequently, we can assume that any tribe or race that attains Übermensch-status would be similarly disinterested in conquering others, opting instead to direct their collective “Wille zur Macht” primarily toward the enhancement of themselves and their culture.

Nevertheless, there remain several pronouncements on “higher” humanity in Nietzsche’s works that still give us pause. He asserts at the beginning of the ninth part of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* that

[j]ede Erhöhung des Typus „Mensch“ war bisher das Werk einer aristokratischen Gesellschaft — und so wird es immer wieder sein: als einer Gesellschaft, welche an eine lange Leiter der Rangordnung und Werthverschiedenheit von Mensch und Mensch glaubt und Sklaverei in irgend einem Sinne nöthig hat.³⁶³

If enhancement (*Erhöhung*) is only possible as the result of an aristocratic society that requires some form of slavery in order to function, we should be very worried indeed if “ganze Geschlechter, Stämme, Völker” can become *übermenschlich*. Of course, we should remember

³⁵⁹ As I have shown to be the case in Chapters One and Two above.

³⁶⁰ Nietzsche, AC §57: “Wenn der Ausnahme-Mensch gerade die Mittelmässigen mit zarteren Fingern handhabt, als sich und seines Gleichen, so ist dies nicht bloss Höflichkeit des Herzens, — es ist einfach seine *Pflicht*...” See Chapter Two, page 129 for further discussion of this aphorism and its significance to Nietzsche’s concept of the Übermensch.

³⁶¹ Nietzsche, JGB §260. This aphorism is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Two, Section 3 above.

³⁶² See Chapter Two, Section 6, “Superheroes, Übermenschen, and the State.”

³⁶³ Nietzsche, JGB §257. See also Chapter Two, Section 3.

right away that Nietzsche adds to this statement the qualification that every higher culture attempts to mediate between aristocratic “master” morality and common “slave” morality.³⁶⁴ Schank argues that, when Nietzsche praises past aristocracies like that of ancient Greece, he is suggesting that humanity should first seek to regain the “‘Vornehmheit,’ ‘Wohlgerathenheit’ und ‘Ganzheit’ des früheren aristokratischen Menschen[.]”³⁶⁵ The aristocratic society is simply the stepping stone from which individual human enhancement becomes possible, rather than the end goal of human enhancement.³⁶⁶ Furthermore, the modern world requires modern solutions, and Nietzsche is not endorsing a return to “the good ol’ days.” As Schank puts it: “Jedoch kann die neuerliche Erhöhung nicht bei dieser ‘Wieder’-Erhöhung stehen bleiben. Die neue Vornehmheit soll vielmehr auf einer ‘umfänglicheren’ Basis errichtet werden.”³⁶⁷

This “‘umfänglicheren’ Basis” includes, of course, Nietzsche’s concepts of self-overcoming and self-mastery as expounded in Chapters One and Two above. As has been shown, these Nietzschean terms should not be understood as primarily referring to increases in the physical strength of the individual or to increases in the political or military strength of an entire tribe or race. According to Schank, what’s important is “in welcher Richtung die Kraft ihre Entladung findet (nach außen, nach innen), oder aber ob sie ‚Herr‘ über sich selbst wird und sich sammelt, wie im Falle der ‚Starken‘, um eine ‚Zusammenordnung‘ zu ermöglichen und diese gegen äußere Feinde zu behaupten.” Even in the latter case “werden die gesammelten

³⁶⁴ Nietzsche, JGB §260. “Bei einer Wanderung durch die vielen feineren und gröberen Moralen, welche bisher auf Erden geherrscht haben oder noch herrschen, fand ich gewisse Züge regelmässig mit einander wiederkehrend und aneinander geknüpft: bis sich mir endlich zwei Grundtypen verriethen, und ein Grundunterschied herausprang. Es giebt *Herren-Moral* und *Sklaven-Moral*; — ich füge sofort hinzu, dass in allen höheren und gemischteren Culturen auch Versuche der Vermittlung beider Moralen zum Vorschein kommen, noch öfter das Durcheinander derselben und gegenseitige Missverstehen, ja bisweilen ihr hartes Nebeneinander — sogar im selben Menschen, innerhalb Einer Seele.”

³⁶⁵ Schank, *‘Rasse’ und ‘Züchtung’ bei Nietzsche*, 320.

³⁶⁶ See Chapter Two, Section 6.

³⁶⁷ Schank, *‘Rasse’ und ‘Züchtung’ bei Nietzsche*, 320.

Kräfte zur Grundlage eines ‚Willens zur Macht‘, der im von Nietzsche herangezogenen Beispiel zunächst einmal auf die Sicherung der eigenen ‚Zusammenordnung‘ gerichtet ist, und vielleicht erst in zweiter Linie auf Ausbreitung nach außen, also auf Eroberung.’³⁶⁸ The primary contribution of a tyrannical aristocratic caste to social enhancement is the enforcement, harsh though it may be, of a program of social self-discipline. This is necessary for the formation and maintenance of a society in the first place. True, if a nascent society cannot protect itself from external threats, it will soon cease to exist—but in order to protect itself, such a society must forge citizens capable of defending it. The citizens’ efforts must be directed toward mastering their passions and drives and sublimating these energies in service of a secure society. Once safety is assured, these sublimated energies can be redirected toward the formation of higher culture and spiritually richer citizens.

Still, one final thorn of an aphorism remains when we consider the higher type’s relationship to the lower. Early in *Der Antichrist*, Nietzsche writes: “Die Schwachen und Missrathnen sollen zu Grunde gehn: erster Satz *unsrer* Menschenliebe. Und man soll ihnen noch dazu helfen.”³⁶⁹ This single passage from a longer aphorism is often all the justification some interpreters needed in order to co-opt Nietzsche’s writings for eugenic and/or fascist causes.³⁷⁰ What on the surface appears to be a call to genocidal extermination takes on a new meaning if we remember that by the “Schwachen and Missrathnen,” Nietzsche means not the physically weak and disabled, but the spiritually crippled: ascetic priests, Christians, and other “nihilists” who believe in an afterlife or any metaphysical system that displaces the meaning of this world

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 247.

³⁶⁹ Nietzsche, AC §2.

³⁷⁰ Cf. Stone, *Breeding Superman*, 87-92. Stone refers specifically to the early British response to Nietzsche when he writes that “all early writers on Nietzsche, whether pro or contra, took for granted the fact that Nietzsche and eugenics were synonymous” (92), but as I have shown, this impression of Nietzsche is widespread even today.

into an imagined Beyond.³⁷¹ Nietzsche is essentially calling the nihilists' bluff: if existence in this world is as meaningless as the nihilists claim, then they should welcome the end of their own existence in it. Of course, they do not, and so these "Prediger des Todes"³⁷² set up elaborate religions and moral codes with the hypocritical goal of gaining power over others in *this* life. Neither in this aphorism nor any other does Nietzsche assert that a cabal of Übermenschen has any right to exterminate others.³⁷³

Nietzsche's phrasing is also important to consider here: he writes that the weak and maladjusted "sollen zu Grunde gehen." Nietzsche uses this expression numerous times in his later works, and not only in connection with "undesirable" human traits. Sometimes "zu Grunde gehen" is something to be avoided;³⁷⁴ at other times, it is something to be welcomed.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra praises those who expend their energies to the point of exhaustion in pursuit of the Übermensch:

Ich liebe alle Die, welche wie schwere Tropfen sind, einzeln fallend aus der dunklen Wolke, die über den Menschen hängt: sie verkündigen, dass der Blitz kommt, und gehn als Verkündiger zu Grunde.

Seht, ich bin ein Verkündiger des Blitzes und ein schwerer Tropfen aus der Wolke: dieser Blitz aber heisst Übermensch. —³⁷⁵

There is a clear sense in *Also sprach Zarathustra* that old attitudes, moralities, and types of human being must pass away in order for new values and individuals to develop. All great things, whether they have been beneficial or harmful, eventually pass away in the perpetual act of self-overcoming: "Alle grossen Dinge gehen durch sich selbst zu Grunde, durch einen Akt der

³⁷¹ Cf. Chapter Two, Section 4.

³⁷² Nietzsche, Z-I "Von den Predigern des Todes."

³⁷³ Except, perhaps, in a letter written to Franz Overbeck after Nietzsche's mental collapse, in which he casually writes: "Ich lasse eben alle Antisemiten erschiessen..." (KGB 8.1249).

³⁷⁴ As in FW §331, in which Nietzsche writes that a thinker in contemporary society "muss lernen, zwischen zwei Lärmen noch seine Stille zu finden, und sich so lange taub stellen, bis er es ist. So lange er diess noch nicht gelernt hat, ist er freilich in Gefahr, vor Ungeduld und Kopfschmerzen zu Grunde zu gehen."

³⁷⁵ Nietzsche, Z-I "Zarathustra's Vorrede" §4.

Selbstaufhebung: so will es das Gesetz des Lebens, das Gesetz der *nothwendigen* ‚Selbstüberwindung‘ im Wesen des Lebens[.]”³⁷⁶ What is true of great things is also true of “weak” or “sick” things. When Nietzsche writes that “we” help along the passing away of what is weak and malformed, he is not suggesting that his like-minded readers should actively be oppressing or even exterminating “undesirable” people. Instead, we can read this as Nietzsche’s encouragement to help weak and maladjusted individuals, institutions, and moral systems overcome themselves instead of simply pitying them or indulging their delusions and resentments.

B. Relation of the Human to the Superhuman

Both Nietzsche and the various creative teams behind the *Uncanny X-Men* series depict a reality in which the exceptional are feared and resented by the mediocre and the ordinary. We have seen examples of this already, in Magneto’s origin stories in *Magneto #0* and in the brief flashback concerning Wanda Maximoff in *UXM #4*. Professor X’s “cardinal rule” may well be that mutants “never consider normal humans as our inferiors,”³⁷⁷ but the “normal humans” repeatedly evince the belief that they *are* inferior to mutants. This belief in their own inferiority makes human characters uneasy and insecure in the presence of mutants, and many express the fear that *all* mutants will inevitably do what Magneto is trying to do. Consequently, certain human characters decide to take violent preemptive action against mutantkind.

Bolivar Trask is one such “normal human” character, and his narrative arc in *UXM #14-16* (November 1965-January 1966) is one of the most famous storylines from the pre-Claremont

³⁷⁶ Nietzsche, GM-III §27. In this section, Nietzsche presents as an example Christianity’s “*Wille zur Wahrheit*” overcoming itself.

³⁷⁷ Lee et al., *UXM #14*, 2.

era. Bolivar Trask is an anthropologist, a fact which he believes uniquely situates him to see the danger posed by mutantkind. He is a fear-mongering public figure of the McCarthy variety (in a comic book published a mere eleven years after Senator Joseph McCarthy was censured by the U.S. Senate in 1954), shrewdly utilizing the press to spread his alarmist anti-mutant message. With brown hair, a short, neatly trimmed mustache, and a tendency to pound his fists when he speaks, Trask's character is also reminiscent of a certain German dictator:



Fig. 3.16 Lee et al., *The X-Men #14*, 4, panels 2-5.

He is also, apparently, a robotics engineer decades ahead of his time, for he develops an army of robots called Sentinels whose sole purpose is to protect humanity from the mutant “threat.” His grasp of robotics proves incomplete, however, and the sentinels turn on their maker within the span of a single page.³⁷⁸ As they incapacitate their creator, the sentinels announce:

³⁷⁸ A cautionary tale, perhaps, of an academic who overextended himself beyond his area of expertise?



Fig. 3.17 Lee et al.,
The X-Men #14, 9,
 panel 4.

Like Magneto, the Sentinels believe that their superior mental and physical abilities mean that it is their “destiny to *command*.” The Sentinels follow the “logic” of their assignment to a conclusion that Trask did not anticipate: “We were created to be the *guardians* of mankind! And to guard them properly, we must *rule* them completely!”³⁷⁹ Trask’s fear of one threat led him to create an even greater one. In fact, in *UXM* #15, the Sentinels are repeatedly referred to as “unhuman,” placing them in direct opposition to both “normal humans” and superhuman mutants. The true threat, this storyline suggests, is not the superhuman, but rather the all-too-human intolerance of the Other that leads to “unhuman” behaviors and attitudes. The Sentinels are an embodiment of man’s inhumanity to man.

When *The X-Men*, which ended its initial run in 1970, was revived as *The Uncanny X-Men* in 1975, Chris Claremont and the artists he worked with maintained this same dynamic between mutants and ordinary humans. The third issue written by Claremont (*UXM* #96,

³⁷⁹ Lee et al., *UXM* #14, 12.

December 1975) features a nefarious human scientist named Dr. Lang, a character whose grotesque facial expressions and overwrought language immediately reveal his unhinged state of mind to the reader (see **Fig. 3.18** below). Lang, like Magneto, sees the mutant-human conflict in vulgarized evolutionary terms: “[W]e are the ancient *Neanderthals* facing the mutant *Cro-Magnon*- - - It is *us* or them, kill or *be killed*- - There is *no other way!*”³⁸⁰ Lang creates a new army of Sentinel robots in *UXM* #98, but is ultimately defeated in *UXM* #100. His defeat is, of course, physical—no superhero comic is complete without climactic fisticuffs—but it is also moral. The mutant X-Men recognize that they are different from ordinary human beings, but Claremont and his team emphasize that Lang was wrong to fear and hate the mutant “race” based on these differences. Cyclops’s accusation is meant to be devastating: “You’d *hound* us without mercy, *exterminate* us- - -for *no* other reason than that we’re *different* from your conception of *humanity!*”³⁸¹ Lines of dialogue such as these lend Claremont’s *Uncanny X-Men* a clear anti-racist message, one broad enough to be extended to other forms of bigotry (as in Brian Singer’s *X-Men* film trilogy, which features a mutant “coming out” to his family in the second installment). This in turn lends a new dimension to Nietzsche’s denunciations of lesser



Fig. 3.18 Claremont et al., *The Uncanny X-Men* #96, 85, panels 5-7.

³⁸⁰ Claremont et al., *UXM* #96, 86.

³⁸¹ Claremont et al., *UXM* #100, 162.

individuals' attempts to enforce conformity to their own mediocre standards. We are reminded by both that no single individual, nor even the majority of human beings, has the right to dictate what are and are not "acceptable" manifestations of human existence.

Drs. Trask and Lang fear that mutants will use their extra powers to enslave humankind, and so they dedicate their lives to exterminating this perceived threat. This fear could be grounded in the characters' own feelings of inferiority and resentment—certainly, their behavior is similar to that of the "Menschen des Ressentiment" that Nietzsche describes in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*.³⁸² Villainous characters like Trask and Lang are certainly clever, an attribute that Nietzsche ascribes to the "Menschen des Ressentiment." Their methods are similarly insidious: Trask seeks to sway public opinion, and Lang has clandestinely secured government funding and military support. Although their plans ultimately involve a "showy" aspect (Lang even improves on Trask's original robot designs and creates "*X-Sentinels*" that possess mutant powers of their own³⁸³), both villains are waging war on the moral plane, presenting a sort of *Sklaven-Moral* according to which the strong, active types are "tamed" until "der *ungefährliche Mensch*" is universally achieved.³⁸⁴

This impulse of characters like Trask and Lang to eradicate mutant superhumans is remarkably similar to the instinct of the "Menschen des Ressentiment" to reduce any Nietzschean *Übermensch* to the level of the mediocre herd. The characters of Trask and Lang also resonate strongly with Nietzsche's understanding of the ascetic priest as the resentful human being *par excellence*. Dr. Trask, for example, dies in *UXM #16*, and the final narrative caption accompanying the image of his crumpled body in the issue's closing moments declares that

³⁸² Nietzsche, GM-I §10. See Chapter Two, Section 4 for further discussion of this term in the context of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*.

³⁸³ Claremont et al., *UXM #100*, 160.

³⁸⁴ Nietzsche, JGB §260. See Chapter Two, Section 3 for further discussion of this aphorism.

Trask's "last earthly lesson proved to be: *Beware the fanatic! Too often his cure is deadlier by far than the evil he denounces!*"³⁸⁵ (See **Fig. 3.19** below). Regarding the priestly caste, Nietzsche writes in the *Genealogie* that there is "etwas *Ungesundes* in solchen priesterlichen Aristokratien und in den daselbst herrschenden, dem Handeln abgewendeten, theils brütenden, theils gefühls-explosiven Gewohnheiten[.]"³⁸⁶ True to form, Nietzsche first indicates the physiological consequences of these priestly habits (namely, "jene den Priestern aller Zeiten fast unvermeidlich anhaftende intestinale Krankhaftigkeit und Neurasthenie") before moving on to examine their spiritual influence on the rest of humanity. Nietzsche finds that priests—especially of the Judeo-Christian variety—invent ailments (which they call "sins") and then prescribe remedies of their own making (i.e. the expiatory rituals of organized religion). Examining the multitude of cures proposed by the priestly caste for said spiritual ailments, Nietzsche rhetorically asks: "muss man nicht sagen, dass es [das priesterliche Heilmittel] sich zuletzt in seinen Nachwirkungen noch hundert Mal gefährlicher erwiesen hat, als die Krankheit, von der es erlösen sollte? Die Menschheit selbst krankt noch an den Nachwirkungen dieser



Fig. 3.19 Lee et al.,
The X-Men #16, 21.

³⁸⁵ Lee et al., *UXM #16*, 21. Such moralizing is common, especially in early Marvel comics: Stan Lee built Marvel's reputation around superhero narratives that function as cautionary tales designed both to entertain and to impart moral lessons to their young readers

³⁸⁶ This and subsequent quotations in this paragraph come from Nietzsche, *GM-I* §6.

priesterlichen Kur-Naivetäten!” These “Kur-Naivetäten” include priestly restrictions on diet, sexuality, and other physical processes, but Nietzsche adds to this list “die ganze sinnenfeindliche, faul- und raffinirtmachende Metaphysik der Priester, [...] und das schliessliche, nur zu begreifliche allgemeine Satthaben mit seiner Radikalkur, dem *Nichts* (oder Gott: — das Verlangen nach einer unio mystica mit Gott ist das Verlangen des Buddhisten in’s Nichts, Nirvâna — und nicht mehr!)” This is precisely what happens with Trask: after stirring up anti-mutant sentiment (ostensibly on the basis of mutant-on-human violence, overlooking the fact that said violence is a reaction to human-on-mutant violence), he proposes a “cure” in the form of his mutant-killing Sentinels. Trask’s “solution” proves to be even worse for humanity than the exaggerated original “problem” that Trask used to gain support in the first place. While Nietzsche ends this section of the *Genealogy*’s first essay with an important caveat—that “erst auf dem Boden dieser *wesentlich gefährlichen* Daseinsform des Menschen, der priesterlichen, der Mensch überhaupt *ein interessantes Thier* geworden ist”—the idea that certain types of people can introduce cures or solutions that are worse than the problems they purport to solve is present both in Nietzsche’s works and in *The Uncanny X-Men*.³⁸⁷

Villains like Trask and Lang show how easy it is to exploit the deep-seated fear and resentment that “normal humans” feel toward the “superior” mutants. The series’ very first issues (reinforced by the events of Magneto’s past as written by Claremont) make it clear that ordinary humanity’s antipathy toward mutantkind includes even the “good” mutants and has led to preemptive anti-mutant violence. Charles Xavier explains to Jean Grey in the first issue that his home is both a school and “a haven,” which he built after he “realized the human race is not

³⁸⁷ Nietzsche also uses the word “Fanatiker” occasionally, particularly in his later works, and the word is generally used pejoratively. See, for example, JGB §10 and §256, as well as AC §31-32 and §54.

yet ready to *accept* those with extra powers!”³⁸⁸ Figures like Magneto may give the masses a somewhat justifiable target upon which to vent their rage, but *The Uncanny X-Men*—under the direction of both Lee and Claremont—suggests that ordinary people overall are always looking to “vent the anti-mutant hatred they’ve kept hidden within themselves.”³⁸⁹ Claremont in particular returns frequently to this theme throughout his tenure as the series’ writer, as in the fan-favorite “Days of Future Past” story arc (*UXM #141-42*, January-February 1981),³⁹⁰ with which I will conclude this chapter’s analysis.

This two-issue story arc begins thirty-two years in the future (the year 2013), and readers must slowly piece together what has happened. In the past (which is actually the present day), U.S. Senator Robert Kelly introduced the “Mutant Control Act of 1988” because he feared that there might not be “any place for *ordinary* men and women” in a world with superhuman mutants (see **Fig. 3.20** below). In response to this discriminatory legislation, Mystique led a band of evil mutants and successfully assassinated the senator. This in turn precipitated massive support among ordinary human beings for even more repressive measures, culminating in an army of new Sentinel robots, concentration camps, and a strict eugenic breeding program (see **Fig. 3.09** above). As the story progresses, the consciousness of Kitty Pryde, one of the few surviving mutants (including a paraplegic Magneto who has succeeded the deceased Charles Xavier as leader of the mutant resistance), is sent back through time. Inhabiting her younger self, Pryde helps the X-Men thwart the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants’ assassination attempt, and the timeline is altered. Consequently, Senator Kelly does not become a martyr and the general US population is not incited to a fervor of anti-mutant sentiment. The X-Men succeed in saving

³⁸⁸ Lee et al., *UXM #1*, 11.

³⁸⁹ Claremont et al., *UXM #200*, 3.

³⁹⁰ First introduced in Section 3 of this chapter.

Senator Kelly's life, but they do not convince him to change his anti-mutant position, nor do their actions do anything to improve mutant-human relations in the broader population. Kelly still fears mutants and their abilities at the end of *UXM* #142, since he still fears that “ordinary men and women” will eventually go extinct as the mutant gene is allowed to proliferate. The mutant problem he introduces in #141 has not been resolved to his satisfaction.



Fig. 3.20 Claremont et al., *The Uncanny X-Men* #141, 29, panel 2.

The anxiety that “ordinary men and women” are somehow inferior and mutants superior is never resolved in the course of the series, and the masses of ordinary humanity continue to fear the more physically impressive mutants. In the famous “Trial of Magneto” double issue (*UXM* #200, Dec. 1985), again by Claremont, an angry mob forms outside the Palais de Justice in Paris, France and attacks—verbally and even physically—any mutant that crosses its path. Faced with the mob’s blind hatred of all mutants, Kitty Pryde wonders aloud, “How can people be so cruel?” Magneto’s defense attorney, Gabrielle Haller, replies: “A mob isn’t people, Kitty. It’s perhaps the wildest of animals.” (See **Fig. 3.21** below). We find a similar estimation of the masses in

Nietzsche—although he typically calls the herd the “tamest,” rather than the “wildest,” of animals:

Auf der anderen Seite giebt sich heute der Heerdenmensch in Europa das Ansehn, als sei er die einzig erlaubte Art Mensch, und verherrlicht seine Eigenschaften, vermöge deren er *zahn*, verträglich und der Heerde nützlich ist, als die eigentlich menschlichen Tugenden: also Gemeinsinn, Wohlwollen, Rücksicht, Fleiss, Mässigkeit, Bescheidenheit, Nachsicht, Mitleiden.³⁹¹

The “Heerdenmensch” views itself as the only acceptable type of human being and seeks to enforce universal conformity to its standards. Similarly, the masses of “ordinary” human beings in *The Uncanny X-Men* cannot tolerate the existence of superhumans in their midst. While some mutants—most notably Magneto—pose a real threat to “normal” humans by adopting a “blonde Bestie” attitude toward those they deem “inferior,” both Claremont and Lee before him unmistakably present “ordinary” humans as the original aggressors.



Fig. 3.21 Claremont et al., *The Uncanny X-Men* #200, 19, panel 3.

³⁹¹ Cf. Nietzsche, JGB §199 (emphasis added).

The intolerance of the “average” human being for anyone who deviates from the norm is thus present in both *The Uncanny X-Men* and in Nietzsche’s works, and both bodies of work present this tension as perennial. In *The Uncanny X-Men*, however, Charles Xavier believes it is superhumanity’s responsibility to mollify the fears of “normal humans.” Nietzsche’s Übermensch bears no such responsibility. In fact, Nietzsche’s Übermensch is a decisively nonconformist presence who embodies the opposite of the herd’s values of “Gemeinsinn, Wohlwollen, Rücksicht,” and “Mitleid.” This is *not* because the Übermensch is a conqueror like Magneto. Instead, as we will now see in Chapter Four, Nietzsche’s Übermenschen will challenge prevailing moral customs in every society in which they appear, revealing cherished beliefs to be metaphysical illusions without regard for the spiritual distress and fear that such actions cause the “Heerdenmensch.”

Chapter Four

God and Superman Are Dead: The Crisis of Nihilism and the Search for Values in Superhero Comics and Nietzsche's Philosophy

1. Introduction

“Gott ist todt.” Perhaps no other single sentence from Nietzsche’s works remains as controversial. For Nietzsche, however, this statement means more than simply acknowledging that continuing to believe in the Christian God in light of the advancement of scientific knowledge is intellectual hypocrisy. With the collapse of the Christian worldview’s credibility, the moral system that had prevailed in Europe for more than 1500 years has been shorn of its foundation and consequently lost its legitimacy. Nietzsche asserts, however, that most people fail (perhaps willfully) to see or acknowledge this crisis of moral values, and he even accuses some philosophers and scientists of contributing to the maintenance of this decaying system. Scientific and philosophical attempts to shore up existing metaphysical moral presuppositions will only delay the inevitable: the advent of *nihilism*. Traditional moral values cannot simply be secularized, for faith-based values run directly contrary to this-worldly experience, and the latter is the only value-foundation that is possible anymore. Nietzsche recognizes that this state of affairs is enormously dangerous, but he also realizes that with this danger comes perhaps the greatest opportunity yet for humanity’s self-overcoming. It is time, Nietzsche asserts, for an “Umwertung aller Werthe.”

Superhero comics, on the other hand, generally portray no such crisis of values, nor do they give any indication that they perceive “die Moral *als* Problem,” as Nietzsche puts it in *Die*

fröhliche Wissenschaft.³⁹² The vast majority of superhero narratives past and present accept contemporary value standards as given. Any threat to established social, political, and moral values is external: the superhero's job is to counter the threat that a supervillain poses to the social and moral order. No single factor entirely explains this conformity of superhero comics to the reigning mores and norms of a given time, but the Comics Code Authority certainly played a major role. This was the self-regulating comic-book censorship board that came into existence in 1954 as a result of the "great comic-book scare." Among a number of stipulations ranging from the decidedly prudish ("Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions") to the ludicrously frivolous ("No magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title"), there are several that are straightforwardly authoritarian: "Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority," runs one provision; "Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered," reads another.³⁹³ For nearly three decades, the Comics Code determined what content was appropriate for publication, and what was not.

But the Comics Code Authority was itself a product of larger cultural forces: public anti-comic-book sentiment came to a head in 1954 during the Second Red Scare, and the easiest way to attack comics was to argue that the medium promoted anti-democratic, pro-communist ideologies that corrupted the nation's children. Comics historian David Hajdu notes that, as part of a trade-in program wherein children could surrender their comic books for more wholesome

³⁹² Nietzsche, FW §345, emphasis mine. This aphorism comes in Book V of the work, appended as part of the second edition in 1886.

³⁹³ Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 291-92.

literary entertainment, the chairman of the National Child Welfare Committee of the Auxiliary pasted a letter on the inside front cover of Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* that read:

I thank God that I am an American.
I love my Country. I love my fellow man.
I obey the commandments of God.
I respect authority and the law.
I respect the rights of others.
I read good books that inspire me to be a good citizen, and refrain from reading books devoted to horror, hatred, violence, crime and other evils that destroy the spirit of America. This book is an award given me for living up to the above code.³⁹⁴

At the same time as children's books contained such blatant propaganda, the motto "In God we trust" was being added to the nation's currency and the words "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance (not to mention that a "Pledge of Allegiance" was being mandated in the first place). Small wonder, then, that superhero comics toed the moral line. Even after the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Comics Code Authority, however, superhero narratives still reinforce the democratic social and moral worldview that remains dominant in the United States. Even though the Christian deity is rarely invoked in superhero comics, Superman—the first superhero—still stands for "truth, justice, and the American way."³⁹⁵

But the tendency of superheroes to reinforce the prevailing social and moral order *predates* the establishment of the Comics Code Authority. Even where Siegel and Shuster's original Superman runs afoul of the law, his actions are in keeping with the New Deal ethos of 1930s US-American society (exhibited particularly clearly in an adventure during which Superman demolishes a slum in order to force the government to build safer low-income

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 299-300.

³⁹⁵ Jerry Siegel, quoted in De Haven, *Our Hero*, 172. *Action Comics #800*, an extra-length issue by Joe Kelly et al. celebrating the Man of Steel's 800th adventure, prominently displays this motto in a narrative caption (344, panel 1).

housing; see Chapter One above). From the very beginning, then, the superhero's mission, as comics scholar Peter Coogan puts it, has been "to fight evil and protect the innocent; this fight is universal, prosocial, and selfless. The superhero's mission must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society, and it must not be intended to benefit or further the superhero."³⁹⁶ As we shall come to see in the course of this chapter, this normative, conservative mission of superheroes that denies any crisis of values, let alone the creation of new ones, contrasts sharply with Nietzsche's worldview and his concept of the *Übermensch*.

This chapter will begin with an in-depth examination of the 1986 limited series *Watchmen* written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons. This work is one of the few superhero comics that causes the attentive reader to question the values that support mainstream superhero comics. I cannot definitively state that *Watchmen* is the first superhero comic book to explicitly deal with nihilism and a (fictional) crisis of values, but it is certainly the most famous graphic novel to do so and the one most widely regarded by creators, critics, and scholars as a turning point in the superhero genre. Before *Watchmen*, it was rare (if it happened at all) to see a superhero comic book question whether the existence of superhuman heroes would be a good or a bad thing. *Watchmen*, on the other hand, depicts an alternate reality to our own in which costumed vigilantes (who appeared in imitation of the first superhero comic books) and one truly superhuman being are *not* an unequivocal source of social good. "In effect," writes professor of philosophy and comic book aficionado Iain Thomson, "*Watchmen* makes the case that if our superhero fantasies were realized, our world would be radically altered, and not for the better."³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶ Coogan, "The Hero Defines the Genre," 4. That the superhero's mission must not benefit the superhero is almost redundant, since this idea is entirely in keeping with current social mores that praise "truly" altruistic actions over actions that benefit the doer as well as others.

³⁹⁷ Thomson, "Deconstructing the Hero," 105

Watchmen is at once a “rereading of the history of comic books”³⁹⁸ (in the world of *Watchmen*, superhero comic books enjoyed the support of the government in the 1940s and 1950s, but public disillusionment with the actions of “real-world” superheroes led to the extinction of the genre in favor of pirate stories) and a deconstruction of the superhero. In this story, public faith in superheroes is virtually nonexistent, and superheroes themselves face a moral crisis in which their actions are meaningless at best and, at worst, actively contribute to the erosion of social values.

Jenseits von Gut und Böse (1886) will serve as the locus of this chapter’s examination of Nietzsche’s thoughts on nihilism and the need for new values. Other works will of course be included in this chapter’s constellation of sources, as Nietzsche’s thoughts on nihilism and the revaluation of all values are not confined to any single work. As the analysis moves from the problem of nihilism to Nietzsche’s call for the “revaluation of all values,” our focus will shift from *Watchmen* to other recent superhero comics that, on the surface at least, call the very idea of the superhero into question. The limits of the genre for exploring these issues will be identified, and the chapter closes with a consideration of superhero comics in dialogue with the “Ewige Wiederkunfts-Gedanke,” a thought experiment from Nietzsche’s later works that illustrates the life-affirming attitude of the *Übermensch*.

2. “The Abyss Gazes Also:” The Death of God and the Crisis of Moral Values in Nietzsche’s Works and in *Watchmen*

The super-protagonists of *Watchmen* respond to their world’s value crisis in a variety of interesting ways, and we will begin by examining the character to which Nietzschean themes are explicitly connected within the text: Walter Kovacs, a.k.a. Rorschach. *Watchmen* introduces

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 104.

readers to Rorschach right at the start, and it is immediately clear that he is violent, uncompromising, and perhaps even unhinged. A clean-line rectangular narrative caption, the first words in the first panel of the first issue, inform the reader that what follows will be an excerpt from “Rorschach’s Journal. October 12th, 1985” (see **Fig. 4.01** below). The edges of the narrative boxes that follow, however, are jagged and uneven. Visually, this suggests that these are snippets literally torn from Rorschach’s journal. When coupled with Rorschach’s manner of writing, however, these jagged edges hint at the fragmented nature of Rorschach’s psyche. In the first panel, the clean-line narrative caption is written in all capital letters. Rorschach’s journal, on the other hand, is printed in a rough mixture of capital and lowercase letters. The handwriting is closer to that of a child’s, and as the reader will find out in *Watchmen*’s sixth chapter, childhood trauma continues to shape Rorschach’s character. Furthermore, the syntax of his first sentence is choppy: “Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach.” While this choppiness largely disappears in the subsequent five panels, it resurfaces in later journal entries and is even present in Rorschach’s speech (and in contrast to the speech balloons of other characters, Rorschach’s have ragged edges—Van Ness aptly describes them as “rough and slightly disheveled,” very much in keeping with Rorschach’s outward appearance³⁹⁹).

This combination of graphic and syntactical elements signals to the reader that this character isn’t the sort of superhero we’ve come to expect. This feeling is reinforced, finally, in the content of Rorschach’s message. Typically, superheroes are utterly convinced of the worth and dignity of the non-superpowered humans whom they aid. Rorschach does not feel this way toward the inhabitants of this alternate-reality Manhattan, referring to them as “whores and politicians” whom he will *not* save when the day of reckoning arrives. The novel’s very first

³⁹⁹ Van Ness, *Watchmen as Literature*, 26.

page clearly communicates that this Rorschach fellow is not a typical superhero and that *Watchmen* is not a typical superhero story.



Fig. 4.01 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 9.



Fig. 4.02 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 179.

At the end of *Watchmen*'s fifth chapter, Rorschach is captured and his identity revealed to be the “bum” Walter Kovacs carrying the “THE END IS NIGH” poster on the first page of Chapter I (and *not*, as the page’s setup leads us to expect, the detective who was literally looking down at the street below as Rorschach’s journal narrates the vigilante’s habit of looking down upon the city’s inhabitants—see Fig. 4.01). Chapter VI, in which Rorschach’s origin story is revealed, bears the title “The Abyss Gazes Also,” and as with each of the maxiseries’ twelve

chapters, the quotation from which the title is drawn is placed as an epigraph in the chapter's final panel. The quotation is a translation of aphorism §146 in Nietzsche's work *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*: "Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."⁴⁰⁰ In *Watchmen*, this quotation is obviously the key to Chapter VI's thematic content, and Hans-Joachim Backe's elegant interpretation of this chapter's motto will serve as the springboard into my argument, which traces the significance of this quotation to the overarching nihilistic crisis faced by every one of the other main characters throughout the story.⁴⁰¹

The act of gazing is the central motif of Chapter VI. The artwork constantly draws our attention to which characters are looking at whom and/or what. The first panel of the chapter's first page shows a Rorschach ink blot as presented by prison psychiatrist Malcolm Long to the incarcerated Rorschach. The third panel of the first page establishes that Long and Rorschach are sitting across from one another, and subsequent panels show a series of close-ups. First, the ink blot is shown from Rorschach's perspective, and here we realize that our point of view *is* Rorschach's point of view: we see his hands holding the ink blot and Dr. Long's face beyond Rorschach's/our hands. Then the perspective is reversed, and we see through Dr. Long's eyes as he gazes at Rorschach, who in turn is studying the inkblot. The perspective shifts again, and a

⁴⁰⁰ Thanks to *Watchmen*, this has become one of the most widely recognized Nietzschean aphorisms in the world of superhero comics. The translation Moore uses is not specified, however, and I have yet to encounter this exact phrasing in any translation I have read so far (Moore turns the first sentence into an imperative, whereas Nietzsche's original language urges caution but does not command). The original aphorism reads: "Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein." Nietzsche, *JGB* §146.

⁴⁰¹ The same argument could be made with all twelve chapter epigraphs, as well as the Juvenal quotation that concludes the entire work and from which the title *Watchmen* is drawn ("Quis custodiet ipsos custodes"). The narrative structure of *Watchmen* is so complex that events in each chapter are inextricably interwoven with the events of other chapters, and so while each epigraph bears particular relevance to its specific chapter, each quotation also expounds thematic elements of the entire work. Since Chapter VI's epigraph is drawn from Nietzsche's *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, however, this quotation will be the only one for which I establish relevance to the work as a whole.

disembodied speech balloon asks: “What can you *see*?” What we see is a dog with its skull split open, and we realize that this is what Rorschach sees in the inkblot. Rorschach lies, however, claiming to see only “[a] pretty butterfly.” On the next page, a single large panel takes up roughly half of the page, and the narrative caption presents notes from Dr. Long’s journal for the reader’s inspection: “I just wish he wouldn’t *stare* at me like that.”⁴⁰² The chapter title appears immediately below this panel. We may therefore conclude with Backe that “[d]er Abgrund, der den Blick erwidert, ist in erste Linie Rorschach.”⁴⁰³

Long is not the only character in this chapter who is subjected to Rorschach’s unsettling gaze: through a series of flashbacks, Rorschach/Kovacs gazes intensely at childhood bullies, his abusive mother, and later at the first criminal Rorschach ever executed. What makes the vigilante’s gaze unsettling to the reader is the frequency with which *only* Rorschach/Kovacs’s face is shown. The head-on perspective depicted in panels six and eight of **Fig. 4.02** is repeated roughly two dozen times throughout the chapter.⁴⁰⁴ This puts the reader in the position of whatever character is being looked at by Rorschach/Kovacs, which leads us to the unsettling realization that if the titular abyss is “in erste Linie Rorschach,” then *we* are gazing into the abyss even as that abyss stares back into us. We then recognize that the chapter’s concluding epigraph is a warning *to us*—a warning that comes too late, for by the end of the chapter we have seen the blackness in Rorschach’s soul. We must wonder to what degree we, like Dr. Long, have become infected by Rorschach’s abyssal worldview.

⁴⁰² Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 180.

⁴⁰³ Hans-Joachim Backe, *Under the Hood*, 73. “In erster Linie,” certainly; by the end of the chapter, however, we will recognize that the metaphor of the abyss comes to apply to Dr. Long, as well. Upon *rereading* *Watchmen*—which, according to Thomson, is the only way that *Watchmen* can be read and understood at all—I will argue that the metaphor of the abyss has wider implications for the entire work.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 75. In some, of course, we (the readers) look out from what is clearly Rorschach’s point of view.

The first part of the chapter’s epigraph—on the danger of fighting monsters—is equally important to the chapter’s content. We are left at the end of the chapter with the realization that Rorschach has become a “monster” in the course of his lifelong battle against monsters (i.e. criminals). The incarcerated Rorschach informs the increasingly discomfited Dr. Long that when Kovacs first donned the mask, he was not yet Rorschach. At this stage, Kovacs was just “pretending to be Rorschach.”⁴⁰⁵ “All Kovacs ever was: man in a costume,”⁴⁰⁶ Rorschach coolly informs Dr. Long in his broken syntax. Both of these lines are delivered in panels that show Rorschach from Dr. Long’s perspective: Dr. Long and the reader both are “gazing into the abyss” that is Rorschach, for it is clear that the unmasked man sitting across from Dr. Long is no longer Kovacs pretending to be the masked Rorschach, but rather the unmasked Rorschach adopting the alter ego of Kovacs. “Being Rorschach takes certain kind of insight,”⁴⁰⁷ Rorschach informs Dr. Long as the first of a series of flashbacks begins. The flashback details a specific criminal investigation that Rorschach undertook in 1975. In the course of this investigation, Kovacs came face to face with a “monster” and subsequently became something of a monster, himself.

While Kovacs was no stranger to crimefighting at this point in time, this crime was particularly horrendous. A pages-long series of dialogue-free panels shows Kovacs, in his Rorschach getup, breaking into a suspect’s apartment (see **Fig. 4.03** below). He discovers a scrap of children’s clothing in a furnace, a cutting block with a set of butcher’s implements, and two dogs fighting over a bone. Piecing together what has happened, Kovacs takes the killer’s meat cleaver and approaches the dogs. The coloring of the entire sequence undergoes a

⁴⁰⁵ Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 192, panel 3.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 193, panel 1.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 192, panel 4.

metamorphosis that mirrors Kovacs's transformation into Rorschach. The color palette is initially subdued (on pages 196 and 197), consisting of browns, blues, purples, and very sparing uses of orange and red. The final panel on page 197 marks a change: the color red suffuses this panel, and red-tinted panels dominate the subsequent page in which Kovacs makes the connection between the scarred carving block, the saw and cleaver in his hands, and the kidnapped young girl. Panel four of page 198 shows Kovacs from a perspective through a window, and the coloring is again more muted. Then the perspective switches, and the reader sees a "zoomed in" view of the dogs fighting over a bone. When the view once again shows Kovacs through the window, the entire panel is red. This final realization regarding the young girl's fate is the "insight" into human nature that turns Kovacs into Rorschach. He confronts the dogs, and a final panel shows him raising the meat cleaver above his head, poised to strike. The panel is entirely red and black as though already soaked with the blood of the dogs. As Rorschach resumes his narration of the scene to Dr. Long on page 199, he says: "It was Kovacs who closed his eyes" in the moment before striking the dogs. In the next panel he concludes: "It was Rorschach who opened them again."

The newly reborn Rorschach captures the kidnapper-killer when the latter returns home, wordlessly assaulting him and handcuffing him to a metal pipe. The killer babbles and pleads as Rorschach silently douses the room in kerosene. Only as Rorschach is about to light a match does he finally speak. When he does, his speech balloons are rough and torn around the edges (see **Fig. 4.04** below). This signals to the reader that Kovacs (whose speech balloons, as in **Fig. 4.03**, are smooth) is no longer speaking: Rorschach is. Curiously, the edges of the

murderer's speech balloons are much smoother than Rorschach's. This could simply indicate that Rorschach alters his voice when appearing as Rorschach and not Kovacs, but there is a deeper significance. Rorschach has captured a kidnapper-murderer, a man who is by all accounts a "monster," and yet in the course of battling this monster, Rorschach adopts the monster's methods and so becomes monstrous, himself. Rorschach's methods are extreme, and even his fellow masked vigilantes take issue with his actions. Rorschach, however, dismisses their concerns, either unaware of or indifferent to the fact that he has become a monster in the course of his battle with monsters.



Fig. 4.04 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 203, panels 4-6.

Rorschach dismisses other heroes because they do not share his fundamental insight into the meaninglessness of existence. The Comedian (real name Edward Blake) is the only other "superhero" for whom Rorschach voices any respect in his conversations with Dr. Long. The Comedian was a right-wing vigilante who appeared to enjoy indiscriminately inflicting pain, suffering, and even death on his targets. Rorschach claims that the Comedian is the only "hero" who understood what Rorschach came to understand:



Fig. 4.05 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 193, panel 5.

When Kovacs first met the Comedian, he did not share this view, but he could sense that the Comedian knew something he didn't. After the kidnapping in 1975 and his consequent transformation into Rorschach, however, he came to share the Comedian's bleak worldview (see **Fig. 4.06** below). As the fire consumes the kidnapper-murderer and his apartment, Rorschach tells Dr. Long that he "[l]ooked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not



Fig. 4.06 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 204, panels 1-6.

there.” The kidnapper/murderer is the monster who turned Rorschach into a monster, and the absence of God or any moral design is the abyss into which Rorschach has gazed. Rorschach describes the feeling of meaninglessness that results from this realization with the help of a maritime metaphor: “This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces.” The world—and the human beings who inhabit it—is compared to a seafaring vessel that cannot be steered. In addition to this newfound sensation of meaninglessness, Rorschach appears to also recognize the potential for a new moral design made possible by God’s absence. Having realized that no God determines the moral value of human actions, Kovacs “was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach.” He describes the feeling of the bloodstain on his costume to be “like map of violent new continent,” again using an image of seafaring exploration to portray this newfound moral potential.

Rorschach’s story in Chapter VI presents us with a thoughtful interpretation of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*’s 146th aphorism: “monsters” (“Ungeheuern” in the original German) are people like the kidnapper/murderer who have no moral conscience, and gazing into the “abyss” (“Abgrund”) describes the act of facing the meaninglessness of human existence and the absence of any absolute moral authority. This provides us with a new context for understanding Nietzsche’s original aphorism, which on its own does not specify who or what the “monsters” are, nor what the “abyss” signifies. Furthermore, Rorschach’s comments on God’s absence and the lack of any divine moral guidance resonate strongly with Nietzsche’s works beyond this aphorism from *Jenseits*. When we look at Book III of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, here we find that Nietzsche, too, recognized God’s absence and pondered its ramifications for human morality. When we explore the aphorisms in this section, we find that Rorschach’s language and choice of imagery are strikingly similar to Nietzsche’s.

Rorschach says that he looked, “and God was not there.” In the first aphorism of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*’s third part, Nietzsche expresses this same point much more bluntly:

Nachdem Buddha todt war, zeigte man noch Jahrhunderte lang seinen Schatten in einer Höhle, — einen ungeheuren schauerlichen Schatten. Gott ist todt: aber so wie die Art der Menschen ist, wird es vielleicht noch Jahrtausende lang Höhlen geben, in denen man seinen Schatten zeigt. — Und wir — wir müssen auch noch seinen Schatten besiegen!⁴⁰⁸

Both the death of God and the continued existence of his shadow are metaphorical, of course:⁴⁰⁹

“God” is a human construct, and so was never alive, nor does His “shadow” literally exist, for something that does not exist cannot cast a shadow. God’s “shadow” is Nietzsche’s metaphor for the influence that the erstwhile belief in God continues to exert on our scientific worldview and secular moral values. Of the former, Nietzsche writes in subsequent aphorisms that the view of the cosmos as a living being, or even as a machine, is conditioned by the idea of a creator— even if we do not consciously acknowledge this idea.⁴¹⁰ Our perception of “cause” and “effect” also originates in the religious belief in God as *prima causa*; reality, however, is more complicated, and we can only determine “cause” and “effect” if we arbitrarily isolate two events from the never-ending stream of a constantly changing cosmos.⁴¹¹ Nietzsche argues that we must abandon these ideas if our scientific knowledge is truly to reflect the cosmos as it is, in its full chaos and “godlessness.” Of Western morality, Nietzsche asserts that it is still predicated upon the Christian faith in God and the values espoused by that faith. In light of the “death of God,” we can start to recognize that morality comes not from God, but from “Heerden-

⁴⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *FW* §108.

⁴⁰⁹ As Nietzsche himself makes clear in *FW* §343, the aphorism that opens the fifth book of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, appended in 1886 as part of the second edition: “Das grösste neuere Ereigniss, — dass ‚Gott todt ist‘, dass der Glaube an den christlichen Gott unglauwürdig geworden ist — beginnt bereits seine ersten Schatten über Europa zu werfen.” (Emphasis mine.)

⁴¹⁰ Nietzsche, *FW* §109.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, §112.

Instinkt,”⁴¹² and that health of body and soul are not universally determined from on high, but instead differ according to the individual.⁴¹³

At this point in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche presents the reader with two vivid aphorisms: §124 portrays the *possibilities* for new moral valuation in the wake of God’s death, and §125 depicts the *dangers* that humanity faces in light of this momentous event. We will start with the latter aphorism. Entitled “*Der tolle Mensch*,” aphorism §125 narrates the titular madman’s address to a marketplace crowd (much as the figure of Zarathustra will do in “Zarathustra’s Vorrede”) comprised of people who no longer believe in God, but that have not yet recognized the consequences of God’s “death.” The madman intensifies the proclamation that God is dead when he says to the crowd: “*Wir haben ihn getödtet, – ihr und ich! Wir alle sind seine Mörder!*” That marketplace atheists should be charged with the murder of God is somewhat surprising—we might expect this charge to be leveled at philosophers and natural scientists, and perhaps there are some present among the crowd. Perhaps every modern person who does not believe in the Christian God has, simply by virtue of this unbelief, helped bring about the general realization that faith in the Christian God is untenable. Whatever the case may be, the people in the marketplace have not yet realized what the madman has: namely, that with the erosion of the belief in the Christian God, Western morality has become untethered, and the meaning of human life is thrown into question. The madman expresses this point in a vivid sequence of images:

Aber wie haben wir diess gemacht? Wie vermochten wir das Meer auszutrinken? Wer gab uns den Schwamm, um den ganzen Horizont wegzuwischen? Was thaten wir, als wir diese Erde von ihrer Sonne losketteten? Wohin bewegt sie sich nun? Wohin bewegen wir uns? Fort von allen Sonnen? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? Und rückwärts, seitwärts, vorwärts, nach allen Seiten? Giebt es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie

⁴¹² Ibid., §116.

⁴¹³ Ibid., §120.

durch ein unendliches Nichts? Haucht uns nicht der leere Raum an? Ist es nicht kälter geworden? Kommt nicht immerfort die Nacht und mehr Nacht? Müssen nicht Laternen am Vormittage angezündet werden?⁴¹⁴

The madman's monologue resonates strongly with Rorschach's monologue in *Watchmen* (**Fig. 4.06**). The madman avails himself of images that give a clear impression of disorientation, of the Earth and human endeavor becoming unmoored: the horizon has been wiped away, the Earth has come loose from the sun's gravitational pull, and now it is aimlessly staggering through space, "rückwärts, seitwärts, vorwärts, nach allen Seiten," with no sense of up or down. The image of the Earth wandering through the eternal abyss of space represents the aimlessness of its human inhabitants through an eternal *moral* uncertainty. Having lost its foundational moral anchor—the Christian God—European civilizations come face-to-face with the meaninglessness of existence. In other words, Western humanity is confronted with *nihilism*.

Although the madman's warning is dire, it comes *after* an aphorism bearing the title "*Im Horizont des Unendlichen*," in which Nietzsche uses the image of a ship on a vast ocean to illustrate the potential for moral growth that exists now that "God is dead." This suggests that although we ought to keep the dangers in mind, our primary focus should be on exploring new moral possibilities now that Christian theology has lost its monopoly on moral valuation. Nietzsche uses the image of a seafaring vessel setting sail for undiscovered lands to symbolize this new potential: "[W]ir haben das Land verlassen und sind zu Schiff gegangen!"⁴¹⁵ Our small craft now finds itself on a vast ocean, which on the one hand contains undiscovered treasures but on the other is terrifying in its unendingness. The crew of this ship is overcome with homesickness for the land they left, "als ob dort mehr *Freiheit* gewesen wäre." Existence on the

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., §125.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., §124.

terrifying ocean is freer than existence on land, and the final line of the aphorism implies that returning to the land whence the ship came is impossible, for “es giebt kein ‚Land‘ mehr!” Now that “God is dead,” the traditional foundation of human values is gone. This is terrifying, but also liberating, since we are no longer confined to “God’s” moral edicts. Human potential for moral growth increases, limited only by our own courage and imagination. Rorschach expresses a similar awareness in *Watchmen* (see **Fig. 4.06** above). He uses language that resonates with Nietzsche’s. His images are much grimmer, however: he stands before a “map of violent new continent,” and in his mind the vessel that carries us is “rudderless,” whereas the ship in Nietzsche’s aphorism is under our control and the horizon is not necessarily violent. Rorschach nevertheless realizes that because God is dead (or simply “not there”), he is “free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world.”

Nietzsche argues that humanity must confront the nihilistic crisis of values resulting from the “death of God”—and then *overcome it*. As philosopher and scholar Walter Kaufmann writes: “Nietzsche believed that, to overcome nihilism, we must first of all recognize it.”⁴¹⁶ Nietzsche stresses the importance of nihilism not because he is a nihilist, but rather because the advent of nihilism in the West impresses upon him the importance of overcoming this phenomenon through the establishment of *new* values. The significance of the “*Horizont des Unendlichen*” is that we are free to explore new moral “continents.”⁴¹⁷ It is not at all clear,

⁴¹⁶ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 110.

⁴¹⁷ It is so important to Nietzsche that his readers understand this that he added an aphorism in Book V of the extended second edition of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* that restates the message of §124 even more explicitly. Here, Nietzsche writes that the “death of God” ushers in a new era that “wir Philosophen und ‘freien Geister’” must take advantage of, for “endlich erscheint uns der Horizont wieder frei, gesetzt selbst, dass er nicht hell ist, endlich dürfen unsre Schiffe wieder auslaufen, auf jede Gefahr hin auslaufen, jedes Wagniss des Erkennenden ist wieder erlaubt, das Meer, *unsere* Meer liegt wieder offen da, vielleicht gab es noch niemals ein so offnes Meer’. —” (*FW* §343). Availing himself again of the image of an exploratory sailing vessel, Nietzsche rejoices in the freedom and openness of the moral landscape in the wake of God’s death, even as he acknowledges that the horizon is not entirely bright. In this dangerous new age, Nietzsche asserts that every act of daring on the part of the “Erkennenden” is permitted in humanity’s pursuit of new values.

however, that Rorschach really embraces his newfound freedom. Iain Thomson argues that Rorschach, far from overcoming nihilism, has instead become a nihilist and moral relativist:

Initially, Moore suggests that, given the black-and-white, all-or-nothing mentality of the kind of person who would become a hero (a person who wants to believe in ‘absolute values’ but encounters only ‘darkness and ambiguity’), nihilism is a natural fall-back position. It is as if, rebounding from an inevitable collision with moral ambiguity, such a hero precipitously concludes that, since our values are not absolute, they must be relative—their absolutism having led them falsely to assume these alternatives to be exhaustive.⁴¹⁸

I believe, however, that this assessment more accurately describes the Comedian than Rorschach. The Comedian began operating with official government approval early on in his career, and he quickly proved willing to kill anyone—whistleblowers, political opponents, and, during the Vietnam War, civilians and enemy combatants alike. The Comedian appears to be the personification of everything Nietzsche’s critics fear will come to pass if the credo “Nichts ist wahr, Alles ist erlaubt”⁴¹⁹ were taken seriously (although it is worth noting that Nietzsche does *not* advocate such an attitude).

My interpretation of Rorschach, on the other hand, is much more in line with York University philosophy professor J. Keeping’s take on the character: “Looking at the abyss only causes him to cling more tightly to his conservative values, despite the fact that he no longer has any right to them.”⁴²⁰ Having gazed into the abyss and fought with monsters, Rorschach has in a

⁴¹⁸ Thomson, “Deconstructing the Hero,” 108.

⁴¹⁹ Nietzsche, GM-III §24. In his translation of the same, Kaufmann points out that this “striking slogan is plainly neither Nietzsche’s coinage nor his motto. It is a quotation on which he comments, contrasting it with the unquestioning faith in the truth that characterizes so many so-called free spirits” (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, §24). Nietzsche is using the slogan of the “Assassins,” an Islamic sect encountered by Crusaders, to point out that the “free spirits” of his (Nietzsche’s) day are not *entirely* free to think whatever they please, since they still hold to the idea of “truth.” Even though the slogan is not Nietzsche’s own, as Kaufmann reminds us, it is nevertheless difficult to read this passage as anything but a challenge to freethinkers to really “think freely.” Against such an interpretation, however, is Nietzsche’s repeated insistence throughout his later works that self-overcoming is not a simple matter of “letting oneself go” and indulging one’s every whim.

⁴²⁰ Keeping, “Superheroes and Supermen,” 56. Keeping adds: “Whereas the Comedian remains stuck in the nihilism of the lion, Rorschach reverts from the lion back to the camel. Rorschach does not affirm; he *denies*.” Keeping is

sense been broken by his experience, and the “design” that he scrawls on a “morally blank world” is really just an intensification of his previous moral code. Rorschach doubles down on his brutal treatment of criminals, torturing them for information and murdering the worst of them without the slightest hesitation. He has overcome any moral compunction he may once have had regarding the proper treatment of those he deems “guilty” or “evil,” and in his methods he is arguably as monstrous as the criminals he punishes. His inkblot mask symbolizes his worldview: while the exact configuration of black spots on a white background is constantly changing from panel to panel, no shades of gray are ever present in the black-on-white patterns. Rorschach may posit for himself what counts as “good” and what as “evil,” but thereafter he sees the distinctions he has set as absolute.

Clinging so tightly to an absolute distinction between good and evil is Rorschach’s attempt to *block* the awareness of the abyss from his mind. In Chapter X, Rorschach instructs the second Nite Owl (Dan Dreiberg) on how to successfully live life “on edge:”

referring to Zarathustra’s speech “Von den drei Verwandlungen” (Nietzsche, Z-I) which I examine in depth in Chapter Two. Keeping’s point is not entirely commensurate to the original speech, since Zarathustra portrays each of the three metamorphoses as *necessary* stages in human development: none are inherently bad, since all are necessary. That the camel represents some form of nihilistic denial is not, I think, supported by the text. Quite the opposite: the camel welcomes the heaviest burdens and does not question or deny their worth. That comes later, when the spirit metamorphoses into the lion. Here, the spirit seeks its freedom from the dragon “Du sollst.” Creating new values, however, is not within the lion’s power—“aber Freiheit sich schaffen zu neuem Schaffen—das vermag die Macht des Löwen.” Keeping’s interpretation that both the camel and the lion represent different types of nihilism is intriguing, but again, not entirely borne out by the text—at least, not without substantial evidence and argumentation, which Keeping does not provide. The lion might represent the spirit that recognizes nihilism and is seeking a way out—the spirit at a preparatory stage in the revaluation of all values, which will be discussed later in this chapter. I would argue that the Comedian is *not* this lion: he does not destroy in order to give himself freedom to create, but rather merely to revel in destruction for destruction’s sake.



Fig. 4.07 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 319, panels 5-6.

Rorschach’s words are obviously relevant to his immediate physical situation: climbing down a tall building, he must hang on tightly and not look down. But his words are also an answer to Nite Owl’s worried statement that “humanity is so close to the *edge*.” At this point in the narrative, the United States and the U.S.S.R. stand on the brink of nuclear war: humanity stands on the edge of the abyss of nuclear annihilation, forcing the characters to acknowledge the meaninglessness of an existence that can be obliterated so easily and so completely. Rorschach’s words reveal that he protects himself from “the abyss” in part by “not looking down,” i.e. by not always acknowledging that it is there. Rorschach is hanging on by his fingertips: he has made the moral code he has constructed for himself *absolute*, and only by dogmatically maintaining his absolutism is he able to avoid succumbing to nihilism and despair. Rorschach’s encounter with monsters has deformed him morally, and gazing into the abyss has caused him to adopt an extreme form of his preexisting moral code.

Rorschach is not an exemplary character: he is a *warning*.⁴²¹ In Nietzschean terms, Rorschach does not seek to *overcome* nihilism (the “abyss”) so much as deny it, attempting to

⁴²¹ Apparently, however, many readers see Rorschach’s actions as justified and overlook the significance of the chapter’s epigraph as a warning, coming to view Rorschach as an admirable figure—a *hero*. *Watchmen* writer and

force a world he stubbornly refuses to see in shades of gray to conform to his absolute morality. He claims to be able to give his life meaning, but he also constantly asserts his disdain for the world and the people in it. Keeping goes so far as to suggest that Rorschach's disdain for existence is perhaps "the real reason Rorschach refuses to help Veidt [a former superhero teammate] save the world—because he hates it."⁴²² The very first page of Chapter I (see **Fig. 4.01** above) supports such an interpretation of the character: Rorschach's journal explicitly informs us that he plans to refuse the call to save the corrupted people of the world. "Rorschach does not affirm, he *denies*,"⁴²³ writes Keeping. Rorschach is someone who *hasn't* overcome nihilism and embraced life for what it is. Nietzsche's aphorism in *Jenseits* does not tell us *not* to battle with monsters or gaze into the abyss, but rather to be aware of the dangers of doing so. The crisis of values must be confronted, and Nietzsche is simply calling for constant self-reflection when doing so. Rorschach does not do this. Overcome by the threat of nihilism, he never questions his moral worldview again. He falters at the first step on the road to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.

Rorschach's bleak worldview is contagious, however, and by the end of the chapter, having heard Rorschach's origin story, Dr. Long is overwhelmed by Rorschach's tale of the brutality of human existence. He does not react with righteous fury, as Rorschach does, but rather with despair, as the final page of the chapter makes clear on several levels (see **Fig. 4.08** below). The narrative boxes contain excerpts from Dr. Long's journal, and they detail his struggle to connect with friends (panel one) and with his wife (panel two). As Dr. Long's

co-creator Alan Moore is on the record in favor of reading Rorschach as a cautionary tale: "Even Moore is baffled by the vigilante's popularity among his readers: 'I originally intended Rorschach to be a warning about the possible outcome of vigilante thinking. But an awful lot of comics readers felt his remorseless, frightening, psychotic toughness was his most appealing characteristic—not quite what I was going for'" (Moore, as cited in Van Ness, *Watchmen as Literature*, 120-21).

⁴²² Keeping, "Superheroes and Supermen," 56.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

narration becomes increasingly bleak, the dull reds, oranges, and yellows of the first several panels turn to washed-out shades of purple and blue. Dr. Long's narration finally clarifies "the real horror" that gazing into the abyss of Rorschach's life has revealed to him: that existence "is simply a picture of empty meaningless blackness. [Next panel] We are alone. There is nothing else." As he narrates this, the perspective of the panel "zooms in" on the inkblot in Dr. Long's hands. The once white card is now a faded bluish-purple, and the closeup intensifies until only blackness remains. The final panel of the chapter is a large black square, larger than the preceding seven panels, as the blackness in Dr. Long's mind has spread despite his attempt to contain it. We, like Dr. Long, are left with a panel of *nothing*.

The stark white-on-black lettering of the epigraph panel is the same as in every other chapter, but the preceding panel of solid black is unique to Chapter VI. The eerie white letters seem to float out of the darkness of the previous panel, lending Nietzsche's words a sense of bleak finality that they do not possess in the original work. In *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, aphorism §146 comes in the middle of "Sprüche und Zwischenspiele," the book's fourth part. The aphorisms immediately preceding and following §146 concern the relations between "Mann und Weib," and only with §149 does the focus of the aphorisms switch to considerations of what a given time considers evil or how a hero shapes the world around him—that is, the sort of context in which we might expect to find an aphorism such as §146. In terms of form, "Sprüche und Zwischenspiele" consists entirely of the shortest aphorisms in the entire work, and so readers



Fig. 4.08 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 206.

might find themselves racing through these short, easy-to-read aphorisms as though they were more easily digestible than the pages-long aphorisms of previous sections. Visually, the pages of “Sprüche und Zwischenspiele” are relatively open: much more negative space is visible than in other sections of the work, where entire pages are taken up with the text of a single extended aphorism. The visual effect of reading this assemblage of mixed maxims is that the text here is less—one hesitates to say “oppressive,” but no other word seems to fit—than in other sections of *Jenseits*. Nothing signals to the reader visually that §146 might stand out thematically from the other aphorisms surrounding it, and while of course it may stand out to the attentive reader (as it clearly stood out to Moore), it stands out all the more in *Watchmen*. The words appear to rise out

of the very abyss about which they warn. After reading *Watchmen*, this particular aphorism will *always* stand out when rereading *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. I do not mean to suggest that the aphorism would have been “better” if Nietzsche had written it as white letters floating on a black background appearing after an all-black panel. Rather, I am remarking on Moore and Gibbons’s ability to *visually* reinforce the content of Nietzsche’s aphorism in a manner inaccessible to conventional book publishing.

Having thus gained an awareness of the dangers of the abyss of meaninglessness, readers of *Watchmen* and of Nietzsche must wonder if there is any way out. In seeking an answer to this question, we find that Rorschach and Dr. Long are not the only two characters to face the abyss in *Watchmen*’s world. We will now turn our attention to another such character: Adrian Veidt, a.k.a. “Ozymandias.”

3. *Watchmen*’s Ozymandias and a Moral Perspective “Beyond Good and Evil”

Ozymandias is the crimefighting moniker adopted by Adrian Veidt, the “world’s smartest man,” who ended his career as a masked vigilante in the mid-1970s. He revealed his name and face to the world and launched a merchandising campaign that spawned a business empire. Veidt has invested in all manner of industrial and scientific research, and it is revealed in the final chapters of *Watchmen* that all of his efforts have been directed toward a single goal: averting nuclear confrontation between the United States and the USSR. He has concluded, however, that the only way to accomplish this is to convince the two feuding superpowers that they face a common enemy, and so he manufactures a psychic alien creature and teleports it into the heart of New York City. The resulting psychic explosion kills millions, but world leaders are convinced of an imminent interdimensional threat and all Cold War hostilities cease

immediately. While the details of Veidt/Ozymandias's plan clearly bear no relation to any of Nietzsche's considerations on the *Übermensch*, the character's actions do raise a question that we must also ask of Nietzsche's works: how far is *too far* in our quest to overcome the existential threat of nihilism?

J. Keeping states that Ozymandias, who is arguably the villain of the piece, "places himself 'beyond good and evil'" as he commits "an act of mass murder in order to achieve what he sees as a greater good."⁴²⁴ The provocative formulation "beyond good and evil" (in German: "jenseits von Gut und Böse") comes from Nietzsche's 1886 work of the same name. As is often the case with Nietzsche, the catchiness of the phrasing has led to misunderstandings of the concept. In U.S.-American popular culture, this particular Nietzschean catchphrase has gotten the philosopher and his *Übermensch* in a heap of trouble since before the first superhero comics were published. According to comics scholar Peter Coogan, the science-fiction pulps of the 1920s and 1930s that directly inspired the first superhero comics regularly featured superhuman characters who acted as though their superpowers placed them above the law. As Coogan writes: "The meaning of *superman* in the pulps is clear: a physically and mentally superior individual who acts according to his own will without regard for the legal strictures that represent the morality of a society."⁴²⁵ Coogan adds that such characters as the "Black Master" from the popular *The Shadow* radio show "can be seen as a caricature of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* [sic]. He considers himself to be above the morality of ordinary folk."⁴²⁶ "Beyond good and evil" means, in the context of U.S.-American pulp fiction, that characters who believe themselves to be above the law will opt for "evil" instead of "good." Even Jerry Siegel and Joe

⁴²⁴ Keeping, "Superheroes and Supermen," 58.

⁴²⁵ Coogan, *The Secret Origins of a Genre*, 342.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 341.

Shuster, Superman's co-creators, wrote and illustrated a short story called "The Reign of the Super-Man" in 1932. The titular "Super-Man" was the product of a mad scientist's experiments and used his powers to "manipulate stocks, clean up at racetracks, and generate enough wealth to dominate the planet."⁴²⁷

Siegel and Shuster would later envision a different kind of superman, one who embodied the democratic values of the New Deal era. But superhero comics did not shake the negative implications of "beyond good and evil" for many years. As late as 1954, the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham condemned superhero comics on the basis that the children who read them exhibited behaviors that were "an exact parallel to the blunting of sensibilities in the direction of cruelty that has characterized a whole generation of central European youth fed on the Nietzsche-Nazi myth of the exceptional man who is beyond good and evil."⁴²⁸ The implication was clear: Nietzsche's philosophy was Nazi philosophy, and anyone who thought himself superior to others and consequently "beyond good and evil" would commit evil acts, not good ones. In relation to superhero comics, Wertham's general objection was that superheroes operated outside the law, as vigilantes. The claim that these early heroes operated "beyond good and evil" consequently hinges on the conflation of "good" with "legal" and "evil" with "illegal." It did not matter to Wertham that superheroes operated very much *within* U.S.-American moral standards of "good" and "evil." Even before the Comics Code Authority made sure that superheroes toed the moral line in the decades after Wertham's book and Congressional hearings on the subject, heroes like Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America acted as paragons of U.S.-American

⁴²⁷ Tye, *Superman*, 16.

⁴²⁸ Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 97. See Chapter One, Section 2 for further discussion of Wertham's take on Nietzsche's philosophy.

moral virtue: champions of the oppressed, defenders of the innocent, and protectors of the people, they were clearly the “good guys.”

The accusation of being “beyond good and evil” has shifted to comic-book *supervillains*. Even then, however, being “beyond good and evil” still simply means acting in ways that are considered “evil” according to prevailing U.S.-American social mores. A. G. Holdier, a contemporary comics critic who is hostile to Nietzsche, dismisses Nietzsche’s philosophy as the sort of thing that the supervillain Darkseid would use to justify his “evil” actions.⁴²⁹ Thus, when J. Keeping writes that *Watchmen*’s Ozymandias “places himself ‘beyond good and evil,’” he is arguing in a similar vein. By believing himself to be “beyond good and evil” (although it’s worth noting that this exact phrase never appears in *Watchmen*), Keeping argues that Ozymandias seeks to excuse or justify his “evil” actions. In the rest of this section, then, I will consider Ozymandias’s actions in *Watchmen* and use his deeds to help parse out what Nietzsche’s admonition to think morally “beyond good and evil” actually requires of those who undertake the mission of revaluating all values in the wake of the “death of God.”

Ozymandias is not the typical comic-book villain. He was, and arguably still is, a hero, a one-time member of the super-team that included Rorschach, Nite Owl II, and Silk Spectre II. His superhuman physique and intelligence are not the result of alien physiology or a scientific experiment gone wrong, but rather of decades of disciplined training and, most likely, a lucky throw of the genetic dice. Instead of masking a selfish and resentful end goal, as is the case with Lex Luthor’s deployment of his wealth, Veidt/Ozymandias’s philanthropic and scientific achievements are motivated by a genuine desire to do good and improve the lives of those around him. Even so, his actions (as outlined at the beginning of this section) reveal that there is

⁴²⁹ Holdier, “Where Have All the Supermen Gone?” 5.

no moral line he is not willing to cross in pursuit of the “greater good.” In Chapter XI of *Watchmen*, Ozymandias delivers a monologue explaining his plan to the “heroes” of the piece, Rorschach and Nite Owl II (the chapter ends with a twist, however: unlike most other comic-book supervillains, Ozymandias reveals his plan to the heroes *after* he has carried it out). In the course of this monologue, Ozymandias expresses several variations on the same theme: the nuclear problem requires unorthodox thinking in order to be overcome. At first, Ozymandias’s plan seems so absurd to Nite Owl II that the latter bursts into nervous laughter:



Fig. 4.09 Moore & Gibbons,
Watchmen, 373, panel 5.

Ozymandias insists that the situation required him to step “beyond *conventional solutions*,” and in an earlier panel, he elaborates on his process of stepping “beyond:”



Fig. 4.10 Moore & Gibbons,
Watchmen, 369, panel 2.

In order to take a step toward saving the world, Ozymandias first had to take a step *back*. According to Ozymandias, political leaders of the two competing superpowers were too close to the events of the arms race to be able to see a way out. Ozymandias felt the need to remove himself from the situation in order to grasp it in its entirety. This is not only a figurative move: his plan is formulated, prepared, and executed from his remote Antarctic base, far from the destruction he has wrought upon New York City. In the panel above, one can almost picture that the “vista” stretching wide before Ozymandias includes the whole world, and not just the bleak Antarctic landscape.

At first glance, then, Ozymandias’s logic bears a certain resemblance to Nietzsche’s concept of an individual thinking “beyond good and evil” because his first move—to take a step back and evaluate the problem from a broader perspective—bears a striking similarity to an image deployed by Nietzsche in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* §380. This aphorism occurs near the end of Book V, which was written in 1886 (after the publication of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*) and added to the second edition. In order to assess current European morality in its entirety, Nietzsche writes, one must be as the wanderer who leaves his city in order to accurately ascertain the height of the city’s towers:

Um unsrer europäischen Moralität einmal aus der Ferne ansichtig zu werden, um sie an anderen, früheren oder kommenden, Moralitäten zu messen, dazu muss man es machen, wie es ein Wanderer macht, der wissen will, wie hoch die Thürme einer Stadt sind: dazu *verlässt* er die Stadt. ‚Gedanken über moralische Vorurtheile‘, falls sie nicht Vorurtheile über Vorurtheile sein sollen, setzen eine Stellung *ausserhalb* der Moral voraus, irgend ein Jenseits von Gut und Böse zu dem man steigen, klettern, fliegen muss, — und, im gegebenen Falle, jedenfalls ein Jenseits von *unsrem* Gut und Böse, eine Freiheit von allem ‚Europa‘, letzteres als eine Summe von kommandirenden Werthurtheilen verstanden, welche uns in Fleisch und Blut übergegangen sind.⁴³⁰

⁴³⁰ Nietzsche, FW §380.

Our estimation of the height of a tower is very different when we are standing at its base than when we see it from a great distance. Similarly, the morality that currently prevails in a given society will appear great, final, and absolute when viewed from “inside” the system: it is impossible to view moral edicts dispassionately when we are still under their influence. Any given moral code, however, is nothing more than a collection of prejudices governing behavior. In order that our thinking about morality might be more than “prejudices about prejudices,” we must assume an evaluative position *outside* the boundaries of our current morality: that is, we must not let our thinking be limited by the moral system that we are thinking about. This is a tricky concept, and one that Nietzsche clearly felt required elaboration after his reading audience “misunderstood” *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, published in 1886.⁴³¹ At this point, however, Nietzsche is simply advocating that we reexamine moral edicts without worrying whether the act of doing so makes us “good” or “evil.” This makes sense especially with regard to the Christian moral system, which in Nietzsche’s view condemns even the *thought* of any moral order other than its own: simply wondering whether or not Christian morals are actually the be-all-end-all of moral thinking is, according to Nietzsche’s understanding of Christian doctrine, “sinful,” i.e. “evil.” Thus, Nietzsche qualifies his statement that like-minded readers must ascend, climb, fly to “irgend ein Jenseits von Gut und Böse” by adding that such thinkers must find at least “ein Jenseits von *unsrem* Gut und Böse.” Here, the call to rethink morality “beyond good and evil” is a specific call to think beyond what European Christianity considers “good and evil.”

We come to see that the formula “jenseits von Gut und Böse” has on the one hand a much more specific application than most comics scholars appear to think today. On the other hand, thinking “beyond good and evil” can apply to *any* moral system, and so Nietzsche’s call for

⁴³¹ Nietzsche reflects upon the fiery opposition sparked by his book *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* and the moral philosophy it espouses in GD “Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen” §37.

thinking “beyond good and evil” is simply a call for extra-moral thinking regardless of the society in which his fellow philosophers find themselves. This is not a new position that Nietzsche adopts only in his later works: an unpublished manuscript from 1873 bears the title “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne,” and Nietzsche claims in the introduction to the second edition of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* that he continues to do in 1886 “was ich immer gethan habe, ich alter Immoralist und Vogelsteller – und rede unmoralisch, aussermoralisch, ‘jenseits von Gut und Böse.’”⁴³² Here, Nietzsche explicitly connects “jenseits von Gut und Böse” with “aussermoralisch,” that is, “extra-moral” thinking. He also calls this sort of thinking “unmoralisch,” which Gary Handwerk translates as “immoral,” a meaning that the word clearly conveys (since, in the same sentence, Nietzsche calls himself an “Immoralist”). But Nietzsche’s “immorality” is very specific: he is only “immoral” from the viewpoint of Christian-European morality.

Nietzsche admits that he is “unmoralisch, aussermoralisch,” but it is vitally important to note that he does *not* add “amoralisch” to this list. Nietzsche is decidedly *not* advocating for amorality. He believes that the erection of moral systems is not only necessary for human life to flourish, but a core part of what it means to *be* human at all, as evidenced in the following passage from *Also sprach Zarathustra*:

Wahrlich, die Menschen gaben sich alles ihr Gutes und Böses. Wahrlich, sie nahmen es nicht, sie fanden es nicht, nicht fiel es ihnen als Stimme vom Himmel.

Werthe legte erst der Mensch in die Dinge, sich zu erhalten, — er schuf erst den Dingen Sinn, einen Menschen-Sinn! Darum nennt er sich „Mensch“, das ist: der Schätzende.

Schätzen ist Schaffen: hört es, ihr Schaffenden! Schätzen selber ist aller geschätzten Dinge Schatz und Kleinod.

⁴³² Nietzsche, MA-I “Vorrede” §1.

Durch das Schätzen erst giebt es Werth: und ohne das Schätzen wäre die Nuss des Daseins hohl. Hört es, ihr Schaffenden!⁴³³

Nietzsche's Zarathustra declares that to be human is to create values: moralities are simply codified value-creations. Where Nietzsche differs from religious moralists (Christian or otherwise) is in his insistence, spoken here by Zarathustra, that *no* moral system is "given" to humanity by some deity, and that consequently *no* moral system is absolute. To call oneself an immoralist who thinks extra-morally (but not amorally) is already to refute the claim to absolute value asserted by European-Christian morality. Nietzsche is reminding us that, despite its best efforts to claim the contrary, Christian morality has only ever been *one* type of *manmade* morality. Other moral systems are possible, as the rich history of global humanity proves time and again.

Thus, while Nietzsche condemns the distinctions that Christian doctrine makes between "good" and "evil" in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, he reminds his readers in the same book that thinking beyond the confines of Christian morality does not mean abandoning moral valuations altogether:

Wer an dieser Stelle anfängt, gleich meinen Lesern, nachzudenken, weiter zu denken, der wird schwerlich bald damit zu Ende kommen, — Grund genug für mich, selbst zu Ende zu kommen, vorausgesetzt, dass es längst zur Genüge klar geworden ist, was ich will, was ich gerade mit jener gefährlichen Losung will, welche meinem letzten Buche auf den Leib geschrieben ist: „*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*“... Dies heisst zum Mindesten *nicht* „*Jenseits von Gut und Schlecht*.“ — —⁴³⁴

On a very specific level, the phrase "beyond good and bad" refers to the moral valuations of *Herren-Moral* (see Chapter Two, Sections 3 and 4), and so this passage reinforces Nietzsche's higher estimation of *Herren-Moral* over *Sklassen-Moral*. More broadly, however, this passage

⁴³³ Nietzsche, Z-I „Von tausend und Einem Ziele.“

⁴³⁴ Nietzsche, GM-I §17.

underscores Nietzsche's point that, in Europe, one very specific type of moral valuation (the Christian worldview that distinguishes between a very specific "good" and a very specific "evil") must be overcome, but that the intrinsically human habit of moral valuation must remain. For Nietzsche, the alternative to European-Christian morality as it exists in his time is not *no* morality, but rather—and quite simply—a *different* morality.

We have therefore rejected the claim that "beyond good and evil" is a blanket statement justifying the worst sort of lawlessness and amoral behavior. Instead, the phrase designates a philosophical position that challenges philosophers to think extra-morally, i.e. beyond the confines of a moral system that insists it is the *only* valid system. In a passage from *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Nietzsche describes some of the characteristics of a person who can exist "beyond good and evil:"

[D]er Philosoph wird Etwas von seinem eignen Ideal verrathen, wenn er aufstellt: ,der soll der Grösste sein, der der Einsamste sein kann, der Verborgenste, der Abweichendste, der Mensch jenseits von Gut und Böse, der Herr seiner Tugenden, der Überreiche des Willens; dies eben soll Grösse heissen: ebenso vielfach als ganz, ebenso weit als voll sein können.⁴³⁵

The greatest individuals will be those who are the loneliest, the most concealed, and the most deviant. Given Nietzsche's constant praise of the exceptional individual over the all-too-mediocre "herd," meriting the title "der Abweichendste" (lit. "the most deviant one") is an honorific. This "deviance" in the Nietzschean sense, however, is not undertaken for the gratification of that individual's base desires. A Nietzschean "deviant" is the master of himself and his virtues ("der Herr seiner Tugenden") and possesses an overabundance of will, which commands *itself* first and foremost.

⁴³⁵ Nietzsche, JGB §212.

Despite all of Ozymandias's posturing, however, we must ultimately question whether or not he really operates "beyond good and evil" in the Nietzschean sense of the phrase. We have seen that Ozymandias *claims* to think conceptually "beyond" the confines of what would be morally acceptable to his contemporaries (and to readers of *Watchmen*), and his solution involving a fake psychic alien is certainly unconventional. It is also true that Ozymandias's plan, which involves the deaths of millions, might be permissible according to Nietzsche's repeated assertion that the wellbeing of the "herd" should not be of primary importance to "higher" individuals. As Schacht rightly points out, the fact that "concern for others and their well-being admittedly does not figure directly" in Nietzsche's concept of being "beyond good and evil," may be reason enough for many people to "take this consideration alone to weigh decisively against [...] morality" of this sort.⁴³⁶ Thomson argues that Alan Moore is making precisely this point against the concept of moral thinking "beyond good and evil:" "It is Moore who uses *Watchmen*'s two-man 'superhero' candidates—Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan—to demonstrate the dangers of this Nietzschean ideal."⁴³⁷ This assertion is problematic, on the one hand, because it argues authorial intent: as far as I am aware, Moore never explicitly states that he is deliberately using these (or any other) characters to critique Nietzsche's *Übermensch*-ideal. Furthermore, it is not at all certain that Ozymandias (we will come to Dr. Manhattan in Section 4 below) actually embodies "this Nietzschean ideal," for two main reasons: first, claiming that the "herd's" wellbeing is not of primary importance is very different from suggesting that exceptional types should actively be cruel toward the "herd" (as I have shown in Chapter Two); second, it is not clear that Ozymandias truly thinks and acts "beyond" the "good" and the "evil" of his day.

⁴³⁶ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 474.

⁴³⁷ Thomson, "Deconstructing the Hero," 114.

This second point becomes obvious once we realize, as Keeping points out, that Ozymandias's "actions simply conform to *utilitarianism*, which endorses the principle that 'the end justifies the means.'"⁴³⁸ The number of people who die as a result of Ozymandias's plan to trick the superpowers into cooperation is far less than the number who would die in the event of nuclear war between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Ozymandias's plan is a simple matter of sacrifice "for the greater good," and it clearly illustrates utilitarianism's potential for real-world atrocities done with the best possible intentions.⁴³⁹ Nietzsche, for his part, takes a decisive stance *against* utilitarianism, especially in his late works. An aphorism from "Unsere Tugenden," the seventh part of *Jenseits*, gives a succinct overview of Nietzsche's primary opposition to utilitarianism. He groups utilitarianism with hedonism, pessimism, and "Eudämonismus," arguing that these and other philosophies that measure "den Werth der Dinge" "nach *Lust* und *Leid*" are naiveties: "es giebt höhere Probleme als alle Lust- und Leid- und Mitleid-Probleme; und jede Philosophie, die nur auf diese hinausläuft, ist eine Naivetät."⁴⁴⁰ Nietzsche's opposition to utilitarianism is founded upon his opposition to the type of "Mitleid" that, in his view, is so preoccupied with alleviating suffering that it indulges human beings as they happen to be instead of challenging them to overcome themselves. In this particular aphorism, Nietzsche avails himself of the vocabulary of smithing in order to express his belief that "[i]m Menschen ist *Geschöpf* und *Schöpfer* vereint." "Mitleid" as Nietzsche sees it practiced by the utilitarians, hedonists, and socialists of his day *indulges* those aspects of human beings that must instead be "geformt,

⁴³⁸ Keeping, "Superheroes and Supermen," 58. (Hildebrand & Sandburg make a similar claim in "Who Trusts the Watchmen?" 106.) Keeping further writes: "Nevertheless, I believe that Ozymandias is a close approximation of what Nietzsche meant by the *Übermensch*." I have already begun to argue against such an interpretation and will make the Nietzschean objections to Ozymandias even clearer by the end of this section.

⁴³⁹ It could be argued that Ozymandias deviates from a utilitarian worldview because he takes agency away from the millions who will die as a result of this plan (although, as far as I know, no one considers asking the people on one set of trolley tracks if they would voluntarily die for those on the other).

⁴⁴⁰ Nietzsche, JGB §225.

gebrochen, geschmiedet, gerissen, gebrannt, geglüht, geläutert[.]” Human beings are quanta of raw materials that must be forged into something if they are to amount to anything at all, let alone to greatness. More specifically, that the creature and the creator are *united* “im Menschen” implies that individuals must forge *themselves*, rather than letting themselves be forged by others or attempting only to forge others and not themselves; this is very much in keeping with Nietzsche’s repeated insistence on self-mastery and self-overcoming. When Nietzsche says there are qualities in human beings that “nothwendig *leiden* muss und *leiden soll*,” he is not praising suffering in itself, but rather recognizing that certain parts of a person’s character must “suffer” (i.e. experience “Unlust”) if they are to be mastered and overcome.⁴⁴¹

Utilitarianism, in Nietzsche’s view, is therefore an outgrowth of that *Sklaven-Moral* (see Chapter Two above) that is so desperate for the absence of work and pain that it does not even discipline *itself*. Consequently, we can say of Ozymandias that, from a Nietzschean point of view, he has not begun to think “beyond good and evil” at all; instead, his decision to take preemptive action is very much in line with the utilitarian concern for the happiness and wellbeing of the majority (and Ozymandias does not discount his own happiness in the slightest: he expects to be a leading figure in the new world order). The text of *Watchmen* itself, however, strongly suggests that Ozymandias is in the wrong, difficult though it may be to see any other way out of the global predicament depicted in the graphic novel.⁴⁴² This critique comes in the

⁴⁴¹ Hollingdale writes: “One has misunderstood Nietzsche completely unless one realizes that he visualizes the overcoming of *self* as the most difficult of all tasks, as well as the most important” (*Nietzsche*, 195). It is automatically assumed by many critics of Nietzsche that his pronouncements are to be understood primarily on the political-social level. Although not exclusive to comics scholarship that draws on Nietzsche’s works, this application of Nietzsche’s ideas to broader socio-political concerns occurs frequently within the field.

⁴⁴² It’s worth noting at this point that the situation that Ozymandias faces—the annihilation of the entire world via nuclear war—is not something that Nietzsche could have ever envisioned. While he does claim to foresee wars such as have never been seen on Earth, the idea that any series of wars, let alone a single war between two nations, could annihilate all of humankind precipitates a nihilistic fear to which we will never know Nietzsche’s philosophical response.

form of “excerpts” from a comic-book-within-a-comic-book storyline within *Watchmen*. This diegetic pirate tale follows a character who undertakes a series of progressively more horrific measures to save his hometown from a supernatural pirate attack. In the end, thinking that the threat has arrived, the unnamed character attacks and murders his own wife. Realizing what he has done, he flees the town and finds the pirate ship waiting for him. One of the concluding narrative captions of this comic-within-a-comic reads: “Gradually, I understood what innocent intent had brought me to, and, understanding, waded out beyond my depth.”⁴⁴³ On the page opposite the conclusion to the pirate narrative, in a series of wordless panels, Ozymandias kills his own assistants so that there will be no witnesses to his plan. In this way, the text of *Watchmen* censures Ozymandias’s actions. From a Nietzschean perspective, Ozymandias’s actions repeatedly evince a cruelty toward his fellow human beings that is incommensurate with the ideal of the Übermensch (as in *Der Antichrist* §57; see Chapter Two above). Furthermore, we can see that Ozymandias, like Rorschach and the unnamed protagonist of the pirate comic book, has become a monster in the course of his battle with the monstrous threat of nuclear annihilation.

Ozymandias, too, has gazed into the abyss of meaninglessness, but perhaps without realizing that “the abyss gazes also.” Contrary to Rorschach, however, Ozymandias does not claim that existence is meaningless. Instead, he finds meaning in the idea of human progress:

⁴⁴³ Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 361.

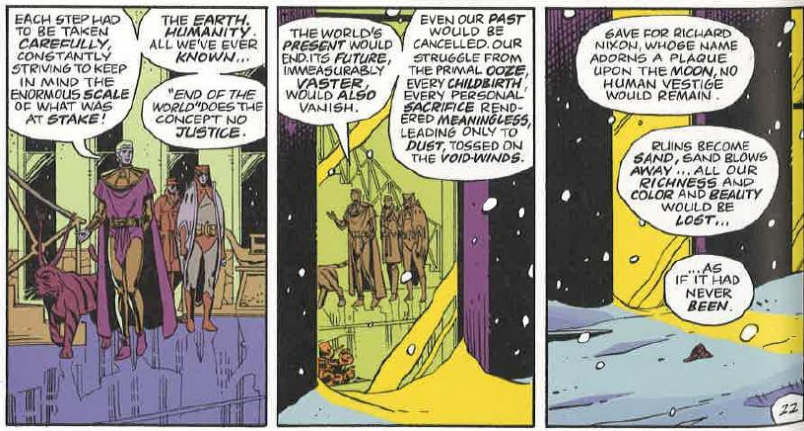


Fig. 4.11 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 370, panels 5-7.

If humanity is annihilated in nuclear conflict, Ozymandias asserts that all of human effort would have been in vain, which implies that, as long as humanity persists *and progresses*, all human effort is worth the trouble. Turning to Nietzsche, we find that his thoughts on this topic are predictably nuanced. While he does not deny the worth of past human achievements, he is not convinced by the idea of human “progress” in the modern optimistic sense:

Die Menschheit stellt *nicht* eine Entwicklung zum Besseren oder Stärkeren oder Höheren dar, in der Weise, wie dies heute geglaubt wird. Der „Fortschritt“ ist bloss eine moderne Idee, das heisst eine falsche Idee. [...] Fortentwicklung ist schlechterdings *nicht* mit irgend welcher Nothwendigkeit Erhöhung, Steigerung, Verstärkung.⁴⁴⁴

As we will see at the end of this chapter, Nietzsche’s valuation of existence rests far more on a joyous affirmation of the moment than on a faith in ceaseless human “progress.” For now, it suffices that we recognize that Ozymandias, like everyone else, requires a moral illusion to give his life meaning. Rorschach has fallen back on an absolutist view of good versus evil, whereas Ozymandias relies on a sense of unending human progress to give meaning to his actions. He even goes so far as to take the burden of “improving” human existence upon himself. When Nite Owl II demands to know just what Ozymandias thinks he’s doing, the latter replies:

⁴⁴⁴ Nietzsche, AC §4.



Fig. 4.12 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 366, panel 2.

Far from being a candidate for the Übermensch, Ozymandias is instead a brilliant depiction of the “‘Verbesserer’ der Menschheit” upon whom Nietzsche heaps such scorn in *Götzendämmerung* (1888). As we saw in Chapter Three, those who take it upon themselves to “improve” humanity have, throughout the ages, always adopted the most brutal and inhuman methods of doing so. Ozymandias would fit seamlessly into their ranks.

One final aspect of Ozymandias’s character remains to be addressed: his left-leaning, egalitarian public platform. Ozymandias publicly proclaims that not only can *anyone* become superhuman, but that *everyone* has the potential to do so. Chapter XI ends with an interview in *Nova Express*, a left-wing magazine in the world of *Watchmen*, that quotes Ozymandias as saying: “Anyone could do as much [as I have]. By applying what you learn and ordering your thoughts in an intelligent manner it is possible to accomplish almost anything. Possible for the ‘ordinary person.’ There’s a notion I’d like to see buried: the ordinary person. Ridiculous. There is no ordinary person.”⁴⁴⁵ This is very much in contrast with Nietzsche’s views on human potential—although it must be said that it is not at all clear that Ozymandias’s public statements

⁴⁴⁵ Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 379.

actually reflect his private beliefs. As we saw in Chapter Two, Nietzsche argues that the Übermensch can appear anywhere, in any nation, among any ethnic group, but he is equally adamant that not everyone has the potential to overcome themselves to such a great extent. This extends beyond the concept of the Übermensch and into the rest of Nietzsche's moral philosophy, as well. He acknowledges in *Jenseits* that the phrase "jenseits von Gut und Böse" is itself a "gefährliche Formel." Adopting an extra-moral position is indeed dangerous, and only the rarest and strongest of individuals can ever attempt to carry out the "Umwerthung aller Werthe" that Nietzsche believes is necessary. It contradicts our U.S.-American democratic sensibility to the extreme, but it must be kept in mind through everything that follows that very few individuals are exceptional enough to handle the responsibility of adopting an extra-moral perspective and creating new values. Ozymandias, despite all of his protestations to the contrary, is *not* one such individual.

4. *Watchmen's* Dr. Manhattan and the Inadequacy of Science to Provide Moral Meaning

In *Watchmen*, the character of Dr. Manhattan represents the failure of a purely empirical worldview to adequately return the abyss's gaze. Dr. Manhattan is the only character in *Watchmen* who is truly superhuman. Other masked vigilantes—Nite Owls I and II, Silk Spectres I and II, the Comedian, Rorschach—are skilled crimefighters, and some—like Nite Owl II—possess advanced equipment and technology, but none possess intellectual and physical abilities that actually surpass human limitations. Even Ozymandias, who demonstrates tremendous intellectual and physical capabilities, is not superhuman in the way that Dr. Manhattan is. The latter was once Dr. Jon Osterman, and he was transformed into Dr. Manhattan in a freak accident at a nuclear research facility. The transformation turned him into a blue-skinned being whose

godlike powers include the ability to teleport himself and others, duplicate himself, grow or shrink in size, and—of greatest importance to the U.S. government—to manipulate reality on the atomic level, meaning he can create or destroy practically anything.

When Dr. Manhattan’s existence is revealed to the world in *Watchmen*’s alternate-reality 1960s, a television reporter—who bears a striking resemblance to Clark Kent—announces that “the superman *exists*, and he’s *American*” (see **Fig. 4.13** below). This statement comes in Chapter IV, which reveals Dr. Manhattan’s origin story through a series of flashbacks. The quote is attributed to Professor Milton Glass, a scientist who used to work with Jon Osterman, and the “back matter” at the end of Chapter IV consists of “excerpts” from Prof. Glass’s monograph on Dr. Manhattan. In it, Prof. Glass claims that the quote was altered: “What I said was ‘*God exists, and he’s American*’.”⁴⁴⁶ Rather than reassuring us that, contrary to Rorschach’s pronouncement in Chapter VI, *God is* in fact present, Prof. Glass writes that if one experiences a “feeling of intense and crushing religious terror at the concept,” then this “indicates only that you are still sane.”⁴⁴⁷ Prof. Glass does not elaborate on this point, but perhaps one part of the “religious terror” expressed by Glass stems from the fact that “God” is made subservient to the



Fig. 4.13 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 123, panels 1-3.

⁴⁴⁶ Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 141.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

United States government. Dr. Manhattan can therefore be read as a literal embodiment of the real-world encroachment of Christian language and beliefs into U.S.-American politics during the Cold War.

Even more distressing than his prompt enlistment in government service is Dr. Manhattan's increasing indifference to human concerns. Since his creation, this "God" has grown ever more alienated from ordinary humanity, a process driven primarily by his purely scientific, super-human worldview. From a Nietzschean standpoint, a similar level of estrangement from the people and moral ideas of one's day is necessary for the development of higher individuals. The figure of Zarathustra, for example, desires alternately solitude and community. But Dr. Manhattan's estrangement is much greater and is shaped by his cosmological perspective. In the grand scheme of an uncaring universe, human life and struggle do not seem to matter:



Fig. 4.14 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 290, panels 6-7.

Dr. Manhattan's question is not rhetorical: he is genuinely asking Laurie Juspecky, a.k.a. Silk Spectre II, why he should care about the trials and tribulations of human beings, which seem insignificant in comparison to the eternal and infinite magnificence of the cosmos. The exchange between the two is intercut with Juspecky's own flashbacks as she attempts to

convince Dr. Manhattan that human life is worth caring about. Manhattan counters her repeated attempts to assert the value of life over non-living matter by saying that her perspective as a living being is too “narrow:”



Fig. 4.15 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 293, panel 7.

From a Nietzschean perspective, we can begin to critique Dr. Manhattan’s worldview here: for “life” to insist on any viewpoint other than its own is nonsensical and spiritually unhealthy. Christianity, of course, is the most prominent example in Nietzsche’s works of life insisting on a worldview that is antithetical to life. But in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Nietzsche also criticizes a purely scientific worldview. In one passage, he specifically targets the contemporary practice of studying history, saying that “sie bejaht so wenig als sie verneint, sie stellt fest, sie ,beschreibt‘ ... Dies Alles ist in einem hohen Grade asketisch; es ist aber zugleich in einem noch höheren Grade *nihilistisch*, darüber täusche man sich nicht!”⁴⁴⁸ Nietzsche never argues that scientific and academic research should not be undertaken, or that they should not strive to be as dispassionate as possible. What he objects to is the notion that we can rely on an “objective’

⁴⁴⁸ Nietzsche, GM-III §26

scientific worldview to give meaning to our subjective existence. This is precisely the problem embodied by the character of Dr. Manhattan.

This idea is present in Nietzsche's works from the very beginning, as he himself points out in "Versuch einer Selbstkritik," the prologue added to the 1886 edition of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. From his first published book onward, he presents a nuanced position on a positivistic, scientific worldview. In §15 of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Nietzsche states that Socrates introduced "eine tiefsinnige *Wahnvorstellung*" into the ancient Greek worldview: namely, the erroneous yet "unerschütterliche Glaube, dass das Denken, an dem Leitfaden der Causalität, bis in die tiefsten Abgründe des Seins reiche, und dass das Denken das Sein nicht nur zu erkennen, sondern sogar zu *corrigiren* im Stande sei." Nietzsche disagrees with this "metaphysische Wahn," asserting that the practitioner of science will constantly encounter "solche Grenzpunkte der Peripherie [der Wissenschaft], wo er in das Unaufhellbare starrt." Nietzsche describes the domain of the natural sciences as a circle: the "edle und begabte Mensch" begins in the center and follows a particular strand of scientific investigation as far as he can. While Nietzsche acknowledges that the "Peripherie des Kreises der Wissenschaft hat unendlich viele Punkte," and that it cannot be determined "wie jemals der Kreis völlig ausgemessen werden könnte," nevertheless he insists that encountering the limits of scientific investigation is "unvermeidlich." At this stage in the advancement of human knowledge ("Erkenntnis"), a "neue Form der Erkenntnis" appears, namely "*die tragische Erkenntnis*" that existence is not fully explicable, let alone correctible. This insight, "um nur ertragen zu werden," requires "als Schutz und Heilmittel die Kunst."⁴⁴⁹ Thus, although Nietzsche fervently supports the scientific endeavor to increase our knowledge of the world we live in, he also argues

⁴⁴⁹ Nietzsche, GT §15.

that creating moral values requires more than simply adopting a purely empirical understanding of the world. Although the natural sciences are vital to this endeavor, they cannot provide new values in and of themselves; not least of all because the more our scientific knowledge increases, the deeper the “Abgründe des Seins” will actually appear as we realize just how much more there is to the world and life than we could ever measure and record. Although Nietzsche will not formulate the situation thusly until fifteen years after the original publication of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, we can recognize in this passage Nietzsche’s first awareness of the abyss that gazes also into us.

We can see that Nietzsche argues from the very beginning that, on its own, scientific inquiry brings one into contact with the abyss. In *Watchmen*, we see that Dr. Manhattan’s increasingly “objective” worldview has brought him to the edge of a very literal abyss:

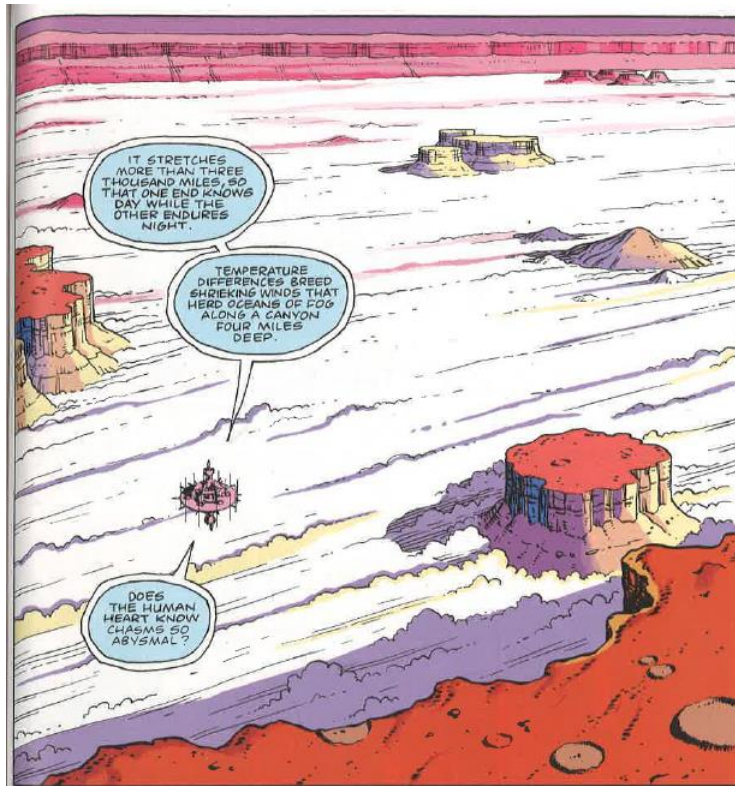


Fig. 4.16 Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 299, panel 1.

At this point in their debate, Manhattan and Juspezyk are on the former's Martian base (created and propelled by Manhattan's superpowers), hovering over the Valles Marineris. Manhattan's question in the bottom left of the panel—"Does the human heart know chasms so abysmal?"—is answered in the affirmative by Juspezyk. We readers, having by this point seen Rorschach's repeated encounters with the abysses of human depravity, can also affirmatively answer Dr. Manhattan's question. While characters like Rorschach and Ozymandias seek to deny the advent of nihilism through their respective beliefs in moral absolutism and human progress, Dr. Manhattan's encounter with literal and figurative abysses has actually caused him to *embrace* the nihilistic worldview. Life does not matter to him, not least of all because he himself occupies a liminal space between the living and the non-living. Iain Thomson suggests that, in the character of Dr. Manhattan, Alan Moore is "suggesting that such a nihilism is the natural complement of a thoroughly scientific worldview."⁴⁵⁰ Again, it's worth pointing out that we ought not immediately assume authorial intent, but the text of *Watchmen* does support the interpretive conclusion that Dr. Manhattan represents "our near-deification of science—and its dangers."⁴⁵¹ Given Dr. Manhattan's nihilistic worldview, Prof. Glass's assertion that Dr. Manhattan is "God" falls closely in line with Nietzsche's assertion, expounded further in Section 5A below, that the Christian "God" actually represents a nihilistic "Wille zum *Nichts*."⁴⁵² The "excerpt" from Prof. Glass's book ends with the ominous statement: "We are all of us living in the shadow of Dr. Manhattan."⁴⁵³ This statement strongly recalls §108 of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. Here, however, the shadow belongs to a being that is both real (in the world of *Watchmen*) and alive. Dr. Manhattan demonstrates the hopelessness of using science to replace God, for this new

⁴⁵⁰ Thomson, "Deconstructing the Hero," 108.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² Nietzsche, GM-III §28.

⁴⁵³ Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 142.

“God” cannot be made to care about human life solely on the basis of objective, empirical argument. As Thomson puts it: “this ‘shadow’ is the dark side of science—the nihilism of a thoroughly objectified and thereby disenchanting world, a world science takes to be intrinsically value-free, and so ultimately meaningless.”⁴⁵⁴

Happily, Laurie Juspezyk is finally able to convince Dr. Manhattan that human life *does* have worth and meaning. She does this, however, not by means of any scientific or empirical data. What convinces Dr. Manhattan is, in a word, love (the two are erstwhile lovers). He does not say as much, but all his talk of the improbability of billions of years of inorganic development and organic reproduction resulting in the “thermodynamic miracle” that is Laurie Juspezyk (and, by extension, all human beings) essentially boils down to the fact that he *does* care, even if he cannot adequately express this care in scientific terms.⁴⁵⁵ Similarly, Nietzsche assigns great—but *not* ultimate—worth to scientific discovery. Again, to Nietzsche’s mind, moral valuation is not an act of *discovery*, but one of *creation* (as in the passage quoted from *Z-I* “Von tausend und Einem Ziele” on page 30 above). Quoting from *Morgenröthe* §453, Richard Schacht neatly and precisely summarizes Nietzsche’s stance on this point:

Nietzsche observes that “to establish anew the laws of life and action” is a task for which “our sciences” do not suffice. While “it is only from them that one can get the foundation stones for new ideals,” he contends, we cannot hope to extract from them “the new ideals themselves.” *These we must construct for ourselves*; and thus we must “do our best” in the absence of any guidelines “to be our own regis, and set up little experimental states. We are experiments: and that is also what we want to be!”⁴⁵⁶

Nietzsche says that the philosophers of the future must be experimenters (“Versucher”—a play on words in the original German that further underscores Nietzsche’s stance as an “immoralist”

⁴⁵⁴ Thomson, “Deconstructing the Hero,” 108.

⁴⁵⁵ Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 306-7. This is perhaps my own personal prejudice, but I find Dr. Manhattan’s sudden conversion unconvincing unless his scientific-sounding “reasons” are taken at more than face value.

⁴⁵⁶ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 473 (emphasis added).

according to Christian moral standards, since “Versucher” could also be “one who tempts,” as “Versuchung” means “temptation”⁴⁵⁷). They must combine the scientist and the artist in order to unify the complementary human endeavors of discovery and creation.

5. Superheroes and Nietzsche’s “Umwerthung aller Werthe”

Nietzsche calls upon philosophers of the future and the *Übermensch* to be scientists and artists, discoverers and creators. As such, they will inevitably have a destabilizing effect on current society. This will primarily take the form of an “Umwerthung aller Werthe.” A limited interpretation of this concept would be to take the prefix “Um-” in “Umwerthung” literally, and assume that Nietzsche is calling for current moral values to be reversed: what was once considered good is now evil, and what was once evil is now good. As I will show, however, the “Umwerthung aller Werthe” does not signify a simple reversal of values. Instead, it calls for a new, non-metaphysical foundation upon which new values are to be erected. In Nietzsche’s estimation, the foundations of modern European secular values are still darkened by the “shadow of God.” A new foundation must be erected that not only eschews the supernatural and metaphysical but that also affirms life as we actually know it to be, its “good” aspects as well as its “evil” ones. In what follows, I will outline the historical context in which Nietzsche places his “Umwerthung,” the specific value system against which his “revaluation” is directed, and finally what Nietzsche’s proposed “Umwerthung” would require of superheroes.

⁴⁵⁷ Cf. Nietzsche, JGB §42: “Eine neue Gattung von Philosophen kommt herauf: ich wage es, sie auf einen nicht ungefährlichen Namen zu taufen. So wie ich sie errathe, so wie sie sich errathen lassen — denn es gehört zu ihrer Art, irgend worin Räthsel bleiben zu *wollen* —, möchten diese Philosophen der Zukunft ein Recht, vielleicht auch ein Unrecht darauf haben, als *Versucher* bezeichnet zu werden. Dieser Name selbst ist zuletzt nur ein Versuch, und, wenn man will, eine Versuchung.”

On the rare occasion that Nietzsche's "Umwertung" is even considered by comics scholars and critics, his ideas are swiftly dismissed. A. G. Holdier, who clearly views Nietzsche as a philosopher of barbarism and brutality, does not explicitly mention the "revaluation of all values" in his essay on superheroes and Nietzsche's philosophy, but he does interpret the Übermensch as "the strongest specimen" of humanity who is "able to bend existence itself to his will" and "create his own rules of mortality and society."⁴⁵⁸ Holdier is scornful of such sovereign individuals because he reduces Nietzsche's philosophy of the will to power to a simpleminded "might makes right" worldview, arguing that Nietzsche proposed that "because we actually exist 'beyond good and evil,' then the only thing that determines what 'should' be done is the strength of strong individuals [...]."⁴⁵⁹ We have seen in Chapter One that Nietzsche's concept of the "Wille zur Macht" deserves much more than such a reductionist interpretation, and in what follows we will see that Nietzsche's "Umwertung aller Werthe" is far from arbitrary and represents anything but a simple regression to barbarous power-grabbing. Indeed, we will see that superheroes embody a preservative—one might almost say conservative—attitude toward prevailing U.S.-American moral values, one that contrasts sharply with the Übermensch's destabilizing effect upon existing moral systems. In the end, we must question whether superheroes, as defenders of the status quo, are actually capable of carrying out Nietzsche's "Umwertung aller Werthe."

A. The "Umwertung aller Werthe" in Context

Although figuratively present in Zarathustra's exhortations to his followers to break old tables of values to make way for new ones, the phrase "Umwertung aller Werthe" first appears

⁴⁵⁸ Holdier, "Where Have All the Supermen Gone?" 6.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

in Nietzsche's post-*Zarathustra* works. Nietzsche asserts, first, that an "Umwerthung aller Werthe" such as he understands it is not a new historical phenomenon. He sees Western history as a series of revaluations, a continual give-and-take between competing value systems in which Christian morality is the most recent victor. Christianity itself, according to Nietzsche in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, "verhiess eine Umwerthung aller antiken Werthe."⁴⁶⁰ Given the larger historical context in which Nietzsche presents Christian values, Nietzsche's "'revaluation' is not a new value-legislation but reverses prevalent valuations that reversed ancient valuations."⁴⁶¹ Nietzsche expands upon this claim in the first essay of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, framing this "Umwerthung aller antiken Werthe" in terms of *Sklaven-Moral* and *Herren-Moral*. Here, he traces Christianity's spiritual roots back to the Hebrews, who could only exact a spiritual revenge on their Babylonian (and later Greek and Roman) captors:

[D]ie Juden, jenes priesterliche Volk, das sich an seinen Feinden und Überwältigern zuletzt nur durch eine radikale Umwerthung von deren Werthen, also durch einen Akt der geistigsten Rache Genugthuung zu schaffen wusste.⁴⁶²

We know from Chapter Two that *Sklaven-Moral* first defines what is "evil"—namely, whatever values it sees as the cause of suffering—and then defines what is "good" as the opposite of that "evil." The revaluation that occurred here was the "*Sklavenaufstand in der Moral*," one that may have begun with a simple inversion of "die aristokratische Werthgleichung (gut = vornehm = mächtig = schön = glücklich = gottgeliebt)," but that extends in spirit far beyond the collapse of the literal aristocracy. Christianity is the "Erbschaft dieser jüdischen Umwerthung," one that, after the Catholic Church rose to power in the fourth century C.E., no longer had to content itself with a merely spiritual revenge against "evil." In Europe, this spirit of "Rache und Umwerthung

⁴⁶⁰ Nietzsche, JGB §46.

⁴⁶¹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 111-12.

⁴⁶² Nietzsche, GM-I §7.

aller Werthe” has triumphed time and again “über alle anderen Ideale, über alle *vornehmeren* Ideale.”⁴⁶³

There have been attempts at other “Umwerthungen” since then—Nietzsche cites the Renaissance as the one that came closest to revaluing Christian values⁴⁶⁴—but none has been enduringly successful. Even non-Christian metaphysical and secular philosophies continue to languish under the shadow of the dead God; consequently, the natural sciences do not yet represent an “Umwerthung” of all Christian “Werthe.” Nietzsche also sees contemporary political movements not as “revaluations” of the Christian world order, but as offshoots even more sickly than the cancerous original (see Chapter Two above for more on Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity in such secular guises as democratism, socialism, and anarchism). In Nietzsche’s view, Christianity poses a twofold danger: first, the impossibility of continued belief in the Christian God has precipitated the nihilistic crisis now facing Europe; second, even if the Christian God had not lost all legitimacy, Nietzsche argues that Christianity *itself* is a nihilistic religion. I have expounded the first point in Section 2 above; it remains now to expand upon the second. As we shall see, Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity as a nihilistic religion hostile to *real* life is central to the life-affirming impetus at the heart of his “Umwerthung aller Werthe.”

Christian doctrine, according to Nietzsche, displaces the worth of human life from the real world to a metaphysical “beyond,” an ideal world, an afterlife. Nietzsche asserts that pagan beliefs espoused a life-affirming worldview (i.e. the idea that life is worth living even if it is a tragedy). The Christian worldview, then, represents an “Umwerthung aller Werthe *ins Lebensfeindliche*.”⁴⁶⁵ In Nietzsche’s self-reflective (and at times self-aggrandizing) work *Ecce*

⁴⁶³ Ibid., §8.

⁴⁶⁴ Cf. Nietzsche, AC §61.

⁴⁶⁵ Nietzsche, EH “Schicksal” §7 (emphasis added).

Homo (1888-89), he states that what distresses him about “die christliche Moral” is not that it represents “der Irrthum als Irrthum,” but rather “der Mangel an Natur, es ist der vollkommen schauerliche Thatbestand, dass die *Widernatur* selbst als Moral die höchsten Ehren empfieng und als Gesetz, als kategorischer Imperativ, über der Menschheit hängen blieb!...”⁴⁶⁶ Christianity is “anti-nature” not because it demands that we discipline our “natural urges”—as we have consistently seen, self-discipline and the sublimation of the passions into creative drives is a central tenet of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*—but because its doctrines encourage the individual to label their natural urges “evil” or “sinful” and to repress them in favor of “alle jene Aspirationen zum Jenseitigen, Sinnenwidrigen, Instinktwidrigen, Naturwidrigen, Thierwidrigen, kurz die bisherigen Ideale, die allesammt lebensfeindliche Ideale, Weltverleumder-Ideale [...]”⁴⁶⁷ Our natural instincts are not “evil” in and of themselves: they may cause great “evil” when they are indulged rather than sublimated, but this does not mean that they should be *extirpated*. As Schacht so neatly puts it:

His estimation of them [the natural affects], however, is not unqualifiedly positive; and he would by no means have the “liberation of life” of which he speaks to be understood merely in the sense of a regressive unleashing of these drives. Thus he is very nearly as disdainful and disapproving of any such ‘letting go’ as he is of the crude and harmful strategy of repression directed against them. [...] *Control* of them [the affects] is taken by Nietzsche to be crucial to their evaluation, and matters in his way of thinking no less than does their strengthening.⁴⁶⁸

In Nietzsche’s view, the Christian God himself represents Nothing(ness): “In Gott ist das Nichts vergöttlicht, der Wille zum Nichts heilig gesprochen!”⁴⁶⁹ On the one hand, the collapse of faith in the Christian God shatters the foundations of Western morality and confronts us with

⁴⁶⁶ Nietzsche, EH “Schicksal” §7.

⁴⁶⁷ Nietzsche, GM-II §24.

⁴⁶⁸ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 369.

⁴⁶⁹ Nietzsche, AC §18.

the problem of nihilism. On the other, it reveals that nihilism has always been an integral part of the Christian faith. By calling the “real” world “evil” and positing an imagined afterlife as the “true” and “good” world, Christianity denies the idea that our this-worldly existence has any value in and of itself, claiming instead that its only value lies in preparing us for the “real” afterlife. If this life is “sinful” to the Christian (or “suffering” to the Buddhist; Nietzsche also accuses Buddhism of being a nihilistic religion), then it makes sense to yearn for a “good” afterlife. Since no such afterlife actually exists, however, what Christians (and Buddhists) are actually yearning for is the *cessation of this life* and all its woes. In other words, they are longing for nothingness—for, as Nietzsche asserts at the close of the third and final essay in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, “lieber will noch der Mensch *das Nichts* wollen, als *nicht* wollen...”⁴⁷⁰

Christianity is not the *only* nihilistic religion that Nietzsche criticizes, but it is the one of greatest relevance to European moral values. Nietzsche devotes *Der Antichrist* (1888), one of his last authorized manuscripts, entirely to his critique (he even says “Fluch”) of Christianity. The Christian priest and theologian’s desire for power is “*der nihilistische Wille zur Macht*,” because Christian doctrine devalues this life and locates all value in an imaginary “Jenseits.” “Die christliche Kirche liess Nichts mit ihrer Verderbniss unberührt, sie hat aus jedem Werth einen Unwerth, aus jeder Wahrheit eine Lüge, aus jeder Rechtschaffenheit eine Seelen-Niedertracht gemacht,”⁴⁷¹ writes Nietzsche in the final aphorism of *Der Antichrist*. Every value that derives from life (which, according to Nietzsche, is the only sort of value that we can draw) was inverted and made into “einen Unwerth,” every truth of human existence twisted into a lie. The invention of the afterlife is condemned as an impoverishment of human life, since the afterlife is posited as “*das Jenseits als Wille zur Verneinung jeder Realität*” and positions this

⁴⁷⁰ Nietzsche, GM-III §28.

⁴⁷¹ Nietzsche, AC §62

afterlife “*gegen das Leben selbst...*”⁴⁷² By promising an afterlife of ease and reward to the lower castes of ancient Roman society, along with an afterlife of punishment for those who engage in “sinful” this-worldly behavior, Nietzsche argues that St. Paul (whom he credits as the true founder of Christianity and not Christ) discovered the weapon that would bring the ancient world to its knees before the Christian Church. Paul’s great insight was, “*dass man mit dem ‚Jenseits‘ das Leben tödtet...* Nihilist und Christ: das reimt sich, das reimt sich nicht bloss...”⁴⁷³

Consequently, Nietzsche’s call for the “Umwerthung aller Werthe” is first and foremost a call to reassess the worth of “*die von den Christen und andren Nihilisten abgelehnten Seiten des Daseins[.]*”⁴⁷⁴ The revaluation Nietzsche envisions is not a simple reversal of existing moral and legal edicts: what was once wrong is not *ipso facto* what is now right, and vice versa. Instead, those “aspects of existence” that have been maligned, repressed, and denied under Christian moral hegemony must now be revisited and their value reestablished. This time, however, value will not be established relative to some imagined world order ruled by a non-existent deity, but rather relative to humanity’s enhancement and flourishing in *this* life. Nietzsche believes that, when this new mode of valuation is carried out, we will discover that the “abgelehnten Seiten des Daseins” are “*sogar von unendlich höherer Ordnung in der Rangordnung der Werthe als das, was der Décadence-Instinkt gutheissen, gut heissen durfte.*”⁴⁷⁵ Nietzsche is not yet at the point of dictating new moral values; rather, he is establishing the need for a *new evaluative foundation*.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., §58.

⁴⁷⁴ Nietzsche, EH-GT §2.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Schacht argues something similar, writing that Nietzsche’s “Umwerthung aller Werthe” is proposed “with a view not only to the criticism and overcoming of all ‘merely moral’ modes of thought and evaluation, but moreover to a subsequent reorientation and new grounding of normative thinking” (*Nietzsche*, 422).

B. Nietzsche's "Rangordnung der Werthe" versus the Democratic Ethos of Superhero Comics

There is one important point where Nietzsche's philosophy is irreconcilable with the democratic, egalitarian ethos present in superhero comics. Nietzsche writes that one of the fundamental truths of human existence is the *inequality* of human individuals. He opposes the doctrine of the "Gleichheit Aller vor Gott," calling it "die Lieblings-Rache der Geistig-Beschränkten an Denen, die es weniger sind[.]"⁴⁷⁷ He argues instead that a spiritual hierarchy exists, with those who are less spiritually limited on one end and those who are more so on the other. In another aphorism in *Jenseits*, he states that "was dem Einen billig ist, durchaus noch nicht dem Andern billig sein kann, dass die Forderung Einer Moral für Alle die Beeinträchtigung gerade der höheren Menschen ist, kurz, dass es eine *Rangordnung* zwischen Mensch und Mensch, folglich auch zwischen Moral und Moral giebt."⁴⁷⁸ Nietzsche takes stock of humanity and finds that the vast majority are mediocre, with only a few exceptions representing a higher—it is important that Nietzsche never uses the word "better"—type of human being. It should be clear by now, however, that this means only that higher individuals are not to be held to the "Heerdenmensch's" moral standard, not that they are free of *all* moral restrictions.

Consequently, as he writes in *Zur Genealogie*, it falls to philosophers to establish a new hierarchy of moral values on the basis of scientific knowledge of the world:

"Alle Wissenschaften haben nunmehr der Zukunfts-Aufgabe des Philosophen vorzuarbeiten: diese Aufgabe dahin verstanden, dass der Philosoph das *Problem vom Werthe* zu lösen hat, dass er die *Rangordnung der Werthe* zu bestimmen hat. —"⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁷ Nietzsche, JGB §219.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., §228.

⁴⁷⁹ Nietzsche, GM-I §17.

Nietzsche's "Rangordnung der Werthe" is inarguably relative, but it is not arbitrary. He claims to base this "Rangordnung" not on the whims of any given individual, but rather on demonstrable differences in spiritual (intellectual, psychological) aptitude between individuals. Robert Guay, professor of philosophy at Binghamton University, sums up Nietzsche's position thusly: "Nietzsche is not claiming, against universal morality, that there is no suitably impersonal view of things; he is claiming that in the suitably impersonal view of things there is, against universal morality, an order of rank between persons."⁴⁸⁰ Nietzsche views the egalitarian social and political tendencies of his day as *erasing* the important spiritual differences between persons in an attempt to enforce conformity to a mediocre standard, and against this he posits "a wide range of elites: higher persons, geniuses, nobles, free spirits, attempters, legislators, the profound, the healthy, the manifold, the great, the strong, the virtuous, and so on." Consequently, "[o]rder of rank is part of Nietzsche's attempt to better understand, not to deny, the diversity of human possibility."⁴⁸¹ Nietzsche is quite prepared to grant that the herd morality he spends so much time criticizing should continue to keep the mediocre masses in check, since these people do not (according to Nietzsche) possess the necessary discipline to sublimate their more selfish desires and passions in the service of self-mastery and enhancement through creative pursuits.

Nietzsche takes aim first at herd morality's insistence that *everyone* conform to its edicts, and second at the modern opinion that herd morality is the morality of *highest possible value*. As Schacht points out, this does not mean "that no value whatever (or a purely negative value) attaches to everything hitherto accorded the status of a high or intrinsic value. On the contrary, he [Nietzsche] is quite prepared to discover that at least some such things do properly deserve to

⁴⁸⁰ Guay, "Order of Rank," 498.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 500.

be accorded some measure of value – even though it may turn out to be much more modest or quite different from that generally attributed to them.”⁴⁸² I even think it likely that Nietzsche’s works suggest that the foundations of herd morality are *also* worth reevaluating. Given his intense devotion to the idea that Christianity is a nihilistic, spiritually ill religion, combined with his scorn for Christianity’s tendency to insist that its worldview alone is permissible, it stands to reason that some future “Umwerthung aller Werthe” would include the transplantation of herd morality from its current metaphysical ground to more secular soil.

Nietzsche knew that the notion that different moralities apply to different people was deeply antithetical to the egalitarian ideologies of his day, whether democratic, socialist, or anarchist. This egalitarian “herd” ethos, however, has become so deeply ingrained in U.S.-American superhero comics that to remove it would render the genre unrecognizable. As we saw in Chapter One, Superman has, from the beginning, dedicated himself “to assisting the helpless and oppressed.”⁴⁸³ The problem with this, in Nietzschean terms, is not that Superman works for the “greater good,” but that Superman comics never seriously challenge the idea that this is the only permissible use of his talents. In Wolfman and Castellini’s *Man and Superman*, a flashback sequence in the third chapter depicts a scene in which a young Clark Kent debates with his adoptive father Jonathan the degree to which he (Clark) must sacrifice his personal happiness for the greater good. Martha Kent argues that Clark “needs a *life*, too” (see **Fig. 4.17** below). The argument here is whether Clark can justify spending any time as “Clark Kent” when every second *not* spent as “Superman” will be time spent *not* saving the world. Everyone—the characters in the story, as well as writer Wolfman and artist Castellini—takes it as a given that the best use of Clark’s powers is in pursuit of the “common good.” Again, from a Nietzschean

⁴⁸² Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 348.

⁴⁸³ Siegel and Shuster, *The Superman Chronicles: Volume One*, 70.

perspective, there’s nothing inherently wrong with such a mission—but to take this mission as a given is reflective of an egalitarian moral prejudice. If Superman were to reflect on his life and powers and conclude independently that serving the public good is the best course of action, that would be one thing. But in *Man and Superman*, as in the other comics detailing Superman’s origin story, it’s a question of *how* Superman can best go about this mission, and not whether or not he should undertake it in the first place.



Fig. 4.17 Wolfman & Castellini, *Man and Superman*, n.p., panels 1-2.

C. The Superhero as Moral Conservative versus the Destabilizing Nature of Nietzsche’s Übermensch

Ultimately, the typical superhero narrative constantly reassures us that our modern, U.S.-American way of life is the “right” way to live, whereas Nietzsche’s works cause us to question the moral values we take for granted. The superhero’s job is the *preservation* of the status quo, and the generic outline for a superhero narrative runs roughly as follows: a character disrupts the “normal” functioning of society; the superhero steps in to defeat this supervillain’s “evil” machinations; and by the end of the issue (or multi-issue narrative arc), society returns to its “normal” state. Consequently, film scholar Frank Verano argues that, “[b]y their very nature,

superheroes are reactive. They preserve the status quo and rid the system of radical supercriminal elements.”⁴⁸⁴ A comic-book character who disrupts the normal functioning of society, even if they do so with the best intentions, will inevitably be identified as the narrative’s villain: “Without the supervillain, the superhero morphs into a cause of social disruption that, taken to its natural progression, leads to the superhero becoming a supervillain.”⁴⁸⁵ Thus, even a superhero with a progressive social agenda could only go so far before his or her actions become problematic: “The proactive, progressive superhero is inevitably a problematic figure; good intentions aside, when a powerful figure forces societal change without the right to do so, he or she has entered supervillain territory.”⁴⁸⁶ This is precisely what happens to Ozymandias in *Watchmen*. The same thing is true of *The Uncanny X-Men*’s Magneto, who, as we saw in Chapter Three, wants to forcibly change the way humans and mutants interact, and who is opposed by Professor Xavier, the epitome of the “good” mutant who teaches his students to uphold the “ordinary” humans’ way of life at all costs.⁴⁸⁷ It is telling that superheroes generally adopt a *conservative* role in comic book narratives, while the supervillains are the ones who fight for some sort of change (although their methods are questionable at best).

Of course, the change that a supervillain fights for is usually a purely selfish one: any valid social criticisms revealed in the course of a supervillain’s master plan are always exploited for purely selfish personal gain: Magneto wants to rule the world, and Ozymandias seeks a similar role for himself at the end of *Watchmen*. “The values of the supervillain,” in the words of

⁴⁸⁴ Verano, “Superheroes Need Supervillains,” 85.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ Martin Lund makes an interesting point when he mentions that Magneto and Professor X are often interpreted as having been “modeled on” Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., respectively. As Lund notes, if this is true (and it is not certain that Lee and/or Kirby had the two Civil Rights leaders explicitly in mind), then the series is reflective of the attitude according to which “King is often sanitized as an inoffensive (to whites’ sensibilities) accommodationist while Malcolm X is perennially viewed as only and always an angry separatist” (“Beware the Fanatic!” 143).

political scientist Chris Deis, “are villainous in that they are antisocial and stand outside the norms of ‘normal’ society. Supervillains are also egomaniacal and selfish—personal enrichment, personal power, and control over others are their *raison d’être*.”⁴⁸⁸ It should be clear by now that the latter half of this statement obviously disqualifies supervillains as candidates for Nietzsche’s Übermensch. Being “antisocial” in the sense that one stands “outside the norms of ‘normal’ society,” however, is in fact a *prerequisite* for the higher type of individual who is capable of carrying out the “Umwerthung aller Werthe.” Nietzsche writes in *Jenseits* that the philosopher, generally speaking, must be the enemy of today’s ideals: “Es will mir immer mehr so scheinen, dass der Philosoph als ein nothwendiger Mensch des Morgens und Übermorgens sich jederzeit mit seinem Heute in Widerspruch befunden hat und befinden musste: sein Feind war jedes Mal das Ideal von Heute.”⁴⁸⁹ And in the second essay of *Zur Genealogie*, Nietzsche describes a “Mensch der Zukunft,” which I take to mean the Übermensch, as one who “uns ebenso vom bisherigen Ideal erlösen wird, als von dem, was aus ihm wachsen musste, vom grossen Ekel, vom Willen zum Nichts, vom Nihilismus [...]”⁴⁹⁰ The Übermensch will liberate us from the life-negating yearning for salvation in the afterlife (which is really the yearning for the cessation of existence). Since Christianity and nihilism are the dominant ideals of the modern Western world (in Nietzsche’s view), such a future liberator will by definition be an “Antichrist und Antinihilist,” the “Beseiger Gottes und des Nichts.” Both terms represent the Übermensch’s *opposition* to the prevailing moralities of the modern era.

It is also the task of the philosopher to lay the groundwork for the Übermensch, and so philosophers must also be radically anti-establishment (although Nietzsche is equally adamant

⁴⁸⁸ Deis, “The Subjective Politics of the Supervillain,” 96.

⁴⁸⁹ Nietzsche, JGB §212.

⁴⁹⁰ Nietzsche, GM-II §24.

that this does not mean one should be an anarchist). This philosophical orientation can help us open our eyes to present-day moral issues. The superhero genre as a whole, even those narratives that have arisen after *Watchmen*, rarely present characters or narratives that truly challenge our current sense of right and wrong, “good” and “evil.” This tendency predates the strictures of the Comics Code Authority (and persists even after the Code became defunct in 2011). As Verano observes, “[s]upervillains that represent broad, base evils are a standard conceit of the superhero genre; when a figure that represents absolute evil is defeated, the absolute good of the superhero is glorified and his or her role in society is justified.”⁴⁹¹

Psychology professors David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister go so far as to call superhero comics “moral pornography.” Superhero comics, according to Pizarro and Baumeister, “depict an exaggerated morality that has been stripped of its real-world subtlety.” We enjoy them, she argues, precisely because of this exaggerated morality: “moral good and moral bad are always the actions of easily identifiable moral agents with unambiguous intentions and actions.”⁴⁹² Superhero comics offer us an escape from the messy quotidian realities of our moral lives.

Even the “edgy” superhero comics of recent decades present readers, when all is said and done, with a moral philosophy that is easily identifiable and that does not challenge our preconceived notions of what is “good” and “evil.” One example is the standalone superhero narrative *Kingdom Come*, written by Mark Waid and drawn by Alex Ross, which originally appeared in four installments ten years after the first issues of *Watchmen* hit the stands. At first glance, this miniseries appears to present a morally ambiguous world, one in which the progeny of Golden Age superheroes, having no more supervillains left to fight, have taken to battling each other out of sheer boredom. Collateral damage among the non-superpowered population is

⁴⁹¹ Verano, “Superheroes Need Supervillains,” 83.

⁴⁹² Pizarro and Baumeister, “Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography,” 20.

consequently at an all-time high. It becomes clear early on, however, that these new superbeings—called “metahumans” rather than “superhumans”—are reprehensible. Their actions are purely self-indulgent and undisciplined, and they fight with no higher goal in mind. An aging (though no less powerful) Superman, alongside a seemingly ageless Wonder Woman and a mechanically reinforced Batman (looking much the worse for wear), is called out of retirement to resume his “pro-social mission,” which he accomplishes by beating a sense of responsibility into the new generation of metahumans.

In the end, there is no moral ambiguity, just the question of whether or not the metahuman war will grow so out of control that the rest of humanity is wiped out in the final battle. This of course does not happen; instead, the U.S. government launches a nuclear attack that kills most of the metahuman combatants. Those who survive (including the trio of Golden Age heroes mentioned above) decide that the best thing they can do is quietly fade into the background and let ordinary humanity get on with the perfectly fine job they were doing before the metahumans came along. A five-panel page near the end of the miniseries’ fourth issue neatly summarizes the narrative’s moral message. In this sequence, an ordinary human character (from whose perspective the entire story is told, by the way) addresses an enraged and grieving Superman:



Fig. 4.18 Waid & Ross, *Kingdom Come*, 185.

Here, the “super” is clearly viewed as *inferior* to the “man.” The speaker—a minister named Norman McCay—asserts that Superman’s “*knowledge*” of “*right... and wrong*” is not “*instinctive*” to him as a Kryptonian, but rather an instinct that comes from Superman’s “*own humanity*.” Moral knowledge is viewed as instinctive to the *human* race, ingrained into the very essence of our being. The fact that Superman is actually an alien, yet still possesses his “*own*

humanity,” in effect implies that “humanity” is somehow *universal*, and that its instinctive knowledge of right and wrong is likewise universally valid. Far from giving readers any challenging moral questions or presenting them with an awareness of “Moral als *Problem*,” as Nietzsche’s works do, the narrative ends on a note of moral self-congratulation.

Almost all superhero comics that I have read similarly fail to challenge prevailing social notions of “right and wrong.” Even in cases where the superhero *does* adopt an anti-establishment role, the narrative is twisted so that the establishment being fought is clearly recognizable as “wrong.” *Superman: Red Son* is a good example of this. This narrative (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Two, Section 6 above) clearly illustrates the danger inherent in the superhero’s conservative mission: Superman believes that his moral and ideological values offer humanity the best possible existence, and so he forces compliance where it is not freely given. Of course, the twist here is that in this Elseworlds miniseries, Superman lands in Soviet Russia instead of rural Kansas and becomes a Communist leader. Consequently, the narrative’s critique of Superman’s abuse of power does not extend to U.S.-American democratic institutions and value systems. Instead, it reinforces the pro-U.S.-American sentiment that has reigned in superhero comics since a star-spangled Captain America punched Hitler in the face on the cover of *Captain America #1* (cover date March 1941).

This is not to say that every U.S.-American superhero comic book need necessarily challenge our moral prejudices. But it is worth noting that most superhero comic-book narratives reinforce the moral framework of the U.S.-American society in which they are produced and published. And in fact, such “morally pornographic” superhero tales are preferable to the spate of recent “edgy” superhero comics that co-opt the nihilistic undertones of *Watchmen* without any of the moral sophistication. Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo’s

standalone *Joker* (2008, 2013) is an instructive example of the contemporary nihilistic superhero comic book. The artwork is deliberately off-putting, and the narrative follows the titular “Clown Prince of Crime” on a drug- and sex-fueled rampage across Gotham City. In the final confrontation with Batman, the story’s narrator—one of Joker’s thugs—is grievously wounded by the Joker, and as he crawls away, his narration asserts that there is “no cure” for the Joker:



Fig. 4.19 Azzarello & Bermejo, *Joker*, n.p.

The comic book’s final splash page shows the thug leaping from the bridge to his death, the last image in an unrelentingly bleak narrative. Unlike *Watchmen*, which gives us several philosophically interesting characters whose responses to a crisis of meaning cause us to reflect on our own moral values, *Joker* seemingly recognizes the advent of nihilism but, instead of

striving to overcome it, simply wallows in it. And this is also true of several other comics I have read that are, if not strictly part of the superhero genre, then at least superhero-adjacent. *God Is Dead* (Hickman et al., 2014), for example, caught my eye because its title is derived from Nietzsche's famous pronouncement. After reading the first six issues, however, it became evident that the Nietzsche connection was left entirely unstated and thus could be entirely coincidental. The narrative focuses on a group of human resistance fighters seeking to retake their world after the gods of every ancient pantheon have set about murdering or enslaving humanity. Sadly, character development and plot motivation take a backseat to shock value, and rather than referring to any of the moral consequences of Nietzsche's original statement, the title seems only to refer to the mounting pile of supernatural corpses as the gods eventually turn on one another.

D. Difficulties in Deconstruction: Metanarrative Limits of the Superhero Genre

As we have so far seen, Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen* stands apart from the rest of superhero comics as a narrative that treats "die Moral als Problem." Iain Thomson goes a step further and suggests that *Watchmen* presents a most unexpected "Umwerthung aller Werthe:" it challenges the millennia-old Western preconception that heroes are necessary (as saviors, as inspiration, as pathfinders). Thomson argues that "[b]y presenting nihilism as the simple, unvarnished truth about life in a godless universe, Moore seeks to deconstruct the would-be hero's ultimate motivation, namely, to provide a secular salvation and so attain a mortal immortality."⁴⁹³ Thomson claims that although all of the heroes in *Watchmen* "are heroes precisely in so far as they embrace this nihilism and nevertheless seek a path leading beyond it,"

⁴⁹³ Thomson, "Deconstructing the Hero," 108.

the text of *Watchmen* suggests “that all such paths may be either hopeless or horrific” and consequently “develops its heroes precisely in order to ask us if we would not in fact be better off without heroes.”⁴⁹⁴ Thomson also argues that even Nietzsche did not abandon the concept of the hero. It is true that Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*-concept explicitly contains the notion that exceptional individuals—whom we might call “heroes”—are vital to the project of human enhancement, but Thomson goes one step further and refers to Zarathustra’s speech “Von den Erhabenen” in Part II of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in which Zarathustra mentions a “super-hero” (an “Über-Held” in the original German). According to Thomson, the “great heroes of the past” serve as inspiration to “individuals who would participate in the creation of a more meaningful future.” Said creative individuals would seek to “overcome these heroes and thereby become ‘overheroes’—or ‘superheroes’—that is, even greater heroes for the future.”⁴⁹⁵ Thomson argues that in *Watchmen*, unlike in Nietzsche’s works, an objection is being made to the hero *as such*, “Über-Held” or otherwise.

Upon closer examination, however, I believe that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is calling for the conventional hero to be overcome in the form of the “Über-Held,” much as he calls for the transcendence of contemporary humanity in the figure of the *Übermensch*. In “Von den Erhabenen,” Zarathustra sees “[e]inen Erhabenen,” a “sublime one,” emerge from the woods, adorned with horrible trophies and dressed in torn and tattered hunter’s attire. Of this heroic figure Zarathustra says: “Vom Kampfe kehrte er heim mit wilden Thieren: aber aus seinem Ernste blickt auch noch ein wildes Thier — ein unüberwundenes!”⁴⁹⁶ This figure has fought with wild animals and yet he has not overcome the wild animal within himself: this figure

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁹⁶ Nietzsche, Z-II “Von den Erhabenen.”

embodies the more general statement in *Jenseits* concerning the danger of becoming a monster in the course of one's battle with monsters (and in this case, the "wild animal" is the abyss that gazes back). This sublime figure must, according to Zarathustra, discard "[a]uch seinen Helden-Willen:" he must transform the beasts ("Unthiere") within himself into "himmlischen Kindern." The current heroic type is powerful but violent, as much a beast as he is a human being; Zarathustra states that he must overcome this beastliness and transform into "heavenly children"—it is difficult to interpret this image as a violent person obsessed with power. The term "Über-Held" functions as a place holder for a new type of human being that cannot be adequately described using existing vocabulary.

Zarathustra further elaborates that the current heroic type becomes beautiful when "die Macht gnädig wird und herabkommt in's Sichtbare: Schönheit heisse ich solches Herabkommen."⁴⁹⁷ Such criticism can be aptly applied to the heroic figures in *Watchmen*: Ozymandias, for example, operates in the shadows (so does Rorschach, albeit in a more direct manner and on a much smaller scale). Bringing his power "in's Sichtbare" could be as simple as acting transparently and taking public responsibility for his actions. This would represent a shift for both *Watchmen's* superheroes and conventional mainstream heroes more generally, all of whom operate under secret identities even if they do not share Ozymandias's Machiavellian aspirations. Power becoming "gracious" would also be a departure from the norm: superhero narratives, as we have consistently seen, do rely on action and violence to resolve most of the challenges they face. And perhaps this is what *Watchmen* is suggesting: that an individual who actively *tries* to be a (super)hero, in the sense of a man of violence and action, is no longer morally permissible in today's world. It is possible, as Thomson argues, that *Watchmen* presents

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

a case for the abolition of the “hero” altogether. It is also possible that, contrary to Thomson’s assertions, Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* makes a similar case for a new type of hero: one who overcomes the violent tendencies of the “wildes Thier” and becomes something else entirely.

Unfortunately, *Watchmen* does not give us a clear indication of what the alternative to superheroes could be, and Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* is equally vague when it comes to concretizing the “Über-Held.” And perhaps this is the point of both texts: to pose the question and make us aware of the problem, rather than to provide a single definitive answer. But *Watchmen* is not the only superhero comic book to suggest a “deconstruction” of the hero and an “Umwerthung” of all heroic values, and perhaps two others can help us get a better sense of what comes *after* the superhero. First, we will look at the first issue of *Storm Watch* (1996) written by Warren Ellis, in which Ellis explicitly refers to Nietzsche in his problematization of the superhero. Then we will turn briefly to *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Miller, Varley, and Jansen.

After an introductory splash page, *StormWatch* #37 opens with a scene of carnage in the German countryside. An entity only shown in silhouette uses a corpse as a grotesque puppet and ventriloquizes a conversation between itself and the corpse (see **Fig. 4.20** below). The unseen character—whom readers deduce to be the superbeing that has killed these people—appears to be quoting haphazardly from *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The envy of the resentful toward the exceptional individual is an idea we are familiar with from Nietzsche’s works, even if “Father’s” line about despising “the man who can fly” is not drawn from Nietzsche verbatim. As in Roy Thomas’s *Invaders* (see Chapter Two, Section 2), Nietzschean language is used by a supervillain to justify his actions. Unlike in the first issue of Roy Thomas’s *Invaders*, however, the characters within the world of *StormWatch* are aware that “Father” is quoting Nietzsche—and



Fig. 4.20 Ellis et al., *StormWatch* #37, n.p.

that he is quoting him badly (see Fig. 4.21 below). The Kenyan superhuman “Swift” says she read Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* in her teens, and launches into a brief lecture concerning the National Socialist appropriation of Nietzsche during the reign of the Third Reich—and is abruptly cut off as the team engages “Father.” This brief utterance signals to readers (and perhaps to critics) that Ellis is aware of Nietzsche’s fraught reception history, including the philosopher’s reception history in superhero comics. The fact that “Swift” is interrupted mid-

lecture signals that no one is taking this too seriously—it’s still a superhero comic, and action is still the order of the day.

“Father’s” lines on this page (Fig. 4.21) are indeed a grotesque representation of the scene from “Zarathustra’s Vorrede” in which Zarathustra carries and buries the corpse of the street performer who fell from his tightrope. However, the Übermensch is *not* the cause of the



Fig. 4.21 Ellis et al., *StormWatch* #37, n.p.

performer's fall. Instead, "ein bunter Gesell,"⁴⁹⁸ later also called a "Possenreiter,"⁴⁹⁹ walks out behind the tightrope walker and, growing impatient with the latter's slow pace, jumps over him and causes him to fall. Zarathustra comforts the dying tightrope walker, and after the latter has passed away, Zarathustra bitterly remarks: "Keinen Menschen fieng er, wohl aber einen Leichnam."⁵⁰⁰ This line is echoed in *StormWatch #37* by "Father," who continues to quote the next two lines of "Zarathustra's Vorrede," although he revealingly omits the second half of the first sentence:

Unheimlich ist das menschliche Dasein und immer noch ohne Sinn: ein Possenreisser kann ihm zum Verhängniss werden.
Ich will die Menschen den Sinn ihres Seins lehren: welcher ist der Übermensch, der Blitz aus der dunklen Wolke Mensch.⁵⁰¹

That "Father" does not account for the "Possenreiter" who caused the tightrope walker to fall means that he misses the point entirely. Zarathustra drives this point home in a speech from Part III, saying: "Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden muss. [¶] Es giebt vielerlei Weg und Weise der Überwindung: da siehe *du* zu! Aber nur ein Possenreisser denkt: ,der Mensch kann auch *übersprungen* werden."⁵⁰² Humanity as it currently exists must be overcome, but we must work *through* ourselves rather than trying to skip ahead to the end like the "Possenreiter" does. The character "Father" thinks that he is the Übermensch, when really he is the cruel and uncaring "Possenreiter" who tries to avoid the hard work of self-overcoming. The "Possenreiter" thinks he can take the easy way to some final or ultimate state of human existence, but the Übermensch represents the ideal of constant, never-ending becoming and self-overcoming. Far

⁴⁹⁸ Nietzsche, Z-I "Zarathustra's Vorrede" §6.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., §8.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., §7. Zarathustra is wryly referring to himself in the third person here.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Nietzsche, Z-III "Von alten und neuen Tafeln" §4.

from being an example of the *Übermensch*, “Father” clearly demonstrates the dangers of the self-satisfied individual who thinks he is the end product of human development.

“Father” continues to mangle Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* as the battle progresses: he conflates “ordinary men” with “despisers of the body;” he tells a member of the super-team to “take your poison back,” for they “are not rich enough to give it to me;” and he asserts that “man is a painful *embarrassment*, more of an *ape* than any ape.” He is defeated in the end, but the tone of the final page is unexpectedly subdued (see **Fig. 4.22** below). As the super-team stands around the defeated “Father,” they receive a transmission from their home base. These words are contained within two stylized speech balloons in the upper left-hand corner of the panel. The balloons are colored orange, with white centers. In the bottom left-hand corner of the panel (as well as in the subsequent panel), there is a similarly colored rectangle. The text of this box, however, is distinguished as narrative text (rather than spoken text) via the comic book convention of enclosing narrative text in rectangular boxes and spoken text in elliptical “balloons.” We are therefore given to understand that this text is not said by StormWatch command, even though they are the same color. However, the coloration and stylization of these final narrative boxes do not match those of the narrative boxes in the rest of the issue. As we saw in **Fig. 4.20** above, narrative captions in this issue begin with a large red letter, and the text is placed within a white box surrounded by a yellow border. Any additional narrative captions in the same panel are colored in a fade from yellow to white. This is true of all other narrative captions throughout the issue—until readers arrive at the final page. Here, the fade is similar, but the color is wrong, suggesting that these words are somehow different from other narrative text in this issue.



Fig. 4.22 Ellis et al., *StormWatch* #37, n.p.

Indeed, this text is not narration, but rather a translated quotation from Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*: “Seht, ich lehre euch den Übermenschen: der ist dieser Blitz, der ist dieser Wahnsinn! —”⁵⁰³ This quotation is most obviously linked to “Father:” not only does the character utter these words in the issue’s opening panels, but the perspective of the panels on the final pages focuses in on “Father’s” corpse before fading to black. The superhuman “Father” is “lightning” insofar as he is powerful and dangerous; he is “madness” because he is obviously a

⁵⁰³ Nietzsche, Z-I “Vorrede” §3.

homicidal maniac. But this quotation has a second, and more shocking, referent: the members of StormWatch, especially their leader Henry Bendix. Right before he dies, “Father” says: “All I wanted to do was change the world.” Many pages earlier, Bendix, on one of several missions he undertakes to recruit new members to StormWatch, asks potential recruit Jenny Sparks: “Didn’t you ever want to change the world?” (See **Fig. 4.23** and **4.24** below.) Bendix’s appearance is downright sinister: he is cloaked in shadow, and his technologically advanced headgear gives him a menacing, machine-like appearance. Bendix also demands absolute obedience to his orders, and it is clear that, under his leadership, StormWatch’s relationship to “ordinary” authorities is tenuous at best. Some of his new recruits are even more frightening than he is: he finds a superhuman named “Rose” in a cavern literally dripping with human corpses, and it is not clear whether she was eliminating some sort of demonic cult or sacrificing them herself. It is therefore uncertain that StormWatch will be a force for good: in fact, the similarity between



Fig. 4.23 (left) Ellis et al., *StormWatch* #37, n.p., panel 5.

Fig. 4.24 (right) Ellis et al., *StormWatch* #37, n.p., panel 6.



“Father’s” final words and Bendix’s recruitment message strongly indicates the opposite. (It’s worth noting that these words do *not* come from Nietzsche; rather, they are more in keeping with the eleventh of Marx’s famous theses “Concerning Feuerbach.”⁵⁰⁴ Nietzsche’s philosophy is concerned primarily, if not entirely, with the individual self: one must want to change oneself, not necessarily the world. Any attempt in superhero comics to apply Nietzsche’s philosophy primarily in an outward-directed manner is, as we have repeatedly seen, ultimately misguided.) *StormWatch* #37 highlights the fact that superheroes and supervillains share a prefix. Superhumans of all moral persuasions are powerful and dangerous (“lightning” and “madness”), and this first issue urges us to consider whether the benefits of powerful, violent superbeings outweigh the costs.

Unfortunately, the rest of the series never quite lives up to the promise of #37. Ellis’s tenure on *StormWatch* ended with a crossover event wherein the super-team is nearly wiped out by the xenomorphs from the *Alien* film franchise. The surviving members were subsequently given their own comic-book line, *The Authority*, also written by Ennis. I have not tracked down any issues of *The Authority*, but if *StormWatch* is any indication, the attempt to problematize the superhero is inimical to the nature of the superhero genre itself. Superhero comics rely heavily on serialization: only a standalone title like *Watchmen* could really “do away” with the concept of the superhero by story’s end. For the genre to continue, any problematization of the superhero must eventually be resolved or ignored so that superhero comics can continue to be published and sold. And even some standalone titles can fall victim to this fate, as was eventually the case with our next example: *The Dark Knight Returns*.

⁵⁰⁴ Marx, “Concerning Feuerbach,” 421-23.

As we saw in Chapter One, Section 6, this four-part miniseries (published just before *Watchmen*: cover dates for *DKR* are February-June 1986; for *Watchmen*, September 1986-October 1987) depicts an aging Bruce Wayne battling his inner demons in addition to enemies new and old. These battles culminate when, in the fourth part of *DKR*, Batman and Superman clash over their opposing opinions on the proper role of the superhuman in normal human society. Superman believes that superhumans can only operate with the permission of the US government, while Batman insists that a lack of official oversight is essential if the superhero is to successfully carry out his mission. Batman uses advanced technology to level the playing field and almost defeats Superman—but his heart gives out at the last second. In the end, it is revealed that Batman faked his death by ingesting a chemical that suppressed his vital signs (somehow). Symbolically, Batman has died, but Bruce Wayne lives on and has apparently overcome his demonic inner urge toward unbridled violence. The final page of the miniseries shows the white-haired Bruce Wayne, dressed in fatigues instead of his usual Batman getup, leading the miniseries' new Robin and a group of former gang members turned vigilantes who call themselves the "Sons of Batman" (see **Fig. 4.25** below). Bruce Wayne begins the story as a lone-wolf vigilante, reluctant even to accept the aid of Carrie Kelley (who becomes Robin); by the end he has enlisted an entire team of vigilantes-in-training and become the "Boss." He kneels on the ground, giving orders and gesturing toward blueprints for what is presumably a new headquarters. The gray narrative captions are Bruce Wayne's inner monologue, and from this we learn that he now exists "far past the burnt remains of a *crimefighter* whose time has passed..." He now seeks to build "an *army*—to bring *sense* to a world plagued by *worse than thieves and murderers*..." As Batman, he was still motivated by uncontrollable surges of anger and vengeance sparked by the mugging-turned-murder of his parents. Now, the series suggests

that Bruce Wayne is motivated by a grander vision of a less corrupt society. He sees beyond the bat, which symbolized this bestial rage within himself. This transformation is represented visually by the fact that he now appears without the Batman costume: *Bruce Wayne* is in charge, not the Bat.



Fig. 4.25 Miller, Janson, Varley, *The Dark Knight Returns*, n.p.

The ending does not give us any substantial insight into the actual details of Wayne’s new approach to superheroism beyond the suggestion that it will transcend mere crimefighting and become something more, but it is clear that Wayne/“Boss” ushers in a new age of

superheroes at the end of *DKR*. Unfortunately, this transformation is undone by the two sequels, both also written by Frank Miller. In *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2001-02), Bruce Wayne is back in the Bat-suit a mere three years after the events of *DKR*. The “Sons of Batman” play a relatively minor role: the action is driven primarily by individual superheroes (Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman) and one main supervillain (a brutish reinvention of Lex Luthor). Wayne’s return to form as Batman undermines the original miniseries’ ending and highlights a major limitation of the superhero genre: serialization. Serialization demands that superheroes persist in a recognizable form. Consequently, any given superhero narrative can only *hint* at the transcendence (i.e. the “self-overcoming”) of the superhero. This is perhaps not surprising when we consider that even an event as seemingly world-shattering as the “Death of Superman” (in *The Death of Superman*, December 1992 to October 1993) was not, indeed *could not* be permanent. The same is true of Batman’s death in Miller’s second sequel, *The Dark Knight: Master Race* (2015-2017, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, Section 1 above). Batman is resurrected and restored to a younger version of himself in the course of this *DKR* “threequel.” The “Sons of Batman” play an even more diminished role in this crossover miniseries, and by the end, the born-again Bruce Wayne re-embarks on his crimefighting crusade. We are left to wonder whether anything has really changed. Frank Miller’s Batman is not exempt from the superhero’s fate as dictated by the demands of the comic-book industry. For as long as the industry relies on never-ending serialization to support itself, all superheroes are destined to return over and over again. One might even say: to recur eternally...

6. “Die ewige Wiederkunft:” Nietzsche’s Answer to Nihilism and the Fate of the Superhero

Nietzsche’s primary philosophical goal was to recognize and critique nihilistic value systems; as such, he spends relatively less time suggesting possible means of overcoming this nihilistic crisis. His works do suggest that an affirmative, “Dionysian” worldview is both desirable and possible in the face of nihilism (although his suggestions on this front are hardly systematic or programmatic—they are “für Alle und Keinen”⁵⁰⁵). Inextricably bound up with this worldview is Nietzsche’s “doctrine” of the “ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen,” translated into English as either “the eternal recurrence” or “the eternal return of the same.” This is one of Nietzsche’s slipperiest ideas, and recent scholarship is still divided on what, exactly, Nietzsche meant by it. Like all of the Nietzschean concepts that I have investigated in the course of this dissertation, the “ewige Wiederkunft” is a catchy phrase that has found its way into several comics studies essays. In what follows, I will chart a course through the relevant essays, asking of each whether it helps us better understand Nietzsche’s still-contentious “doctrine” of “eternal recurrence.”

We begin with Suzie Gibson’s popular philosophy essay “Batman Is Superman,” in which Gibson argues that “eternal recurrence” means the repetition of life events, sometimes through memory, which in turn is central to the character of Batman. “The ordeal of training which enables a psychological awakening involves experiencing Nietzschean eternal recurrence, where traumatic memories of being attacked by bats, and worse still the murder of his parents, are relived,” she writes. From here, she draws two conclusions pertaining to the “eternal recurrence.” First, she claims that “Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence is about the

⁵⁰⁵ The subtitle for *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

repetitive nature of our existence.” This is ostensibly stated with reference to the nature of Batman’s training, which entails doing similar activities over and over again to improve performance. Her second point is somewhat more muddled, suggesting that Batman “relives” moments from his past not only in his memory, but somehow literally: “Time is not a linear entity but a circular phenomenon that allows us to revisit over and over again events in our lives. Memory is crucial to this process.”⁵⁰⁶ Although Nietzsche scholar Paul S. Loeb’s recent essay “Eternal Recurrence” (2017) is largely in agreement with Gibson’s two-part interpretation, we find when we turn to Nietzsche’s works that neither point is actually supported by anything Nietzsche wrote. The first idea, that the “eternal recurrence” refers to the repetitive nature of our lives, is entirely at odds with the way Nietzsche presents the idea in his published works. The second idea, that time itself recurs and that we literally relive past events, derives from the assumption that Nietzsche believed the “eternal recurrence” to be literally true. Nietzsche, however, only considered the literal scientific validity of this concept in notes that he never prepared for publication during his lifetime. Even these notes, however, do not entertain the notion that time itself repeats.

The concept of the “ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen” first appears in the penultimate aphorism of the fourth part of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. This aphorism is worth quoting in its entirety:

Das grösste Schwergewicht. — Wie, wenn dir eines Tages oder Nachts, ein Dämon in deine einsamste Einsamkeit nachschliche und dir sagte: „Dieses Leben, wie du es jetzt lebst und gelebt hast, wirst du noch einmal und noch unzählige Male leben müssen; und es wird nichts Neues daran sein, sondern jeder Schmerz und jede Lust und jeder Gedanke und Seufzer und alles unsäglich Kleine und Grosse deines Lebens muss dir wiederkommen, und Alles in der selben Reihe und Folge — und ebenso diese Spinne und dieses Mondlicht zwischen den Bäumen, und ebenso dieser Augenblick und ich selber.

⁵⁰⁶ Gibson, “Batman Is Superman,” 240.

Die ewige Sanduhr des Daseins wird immer wieder umgedreht — und du mit ihr, Stäubchen vom Staube!“ — Würdest du dich nicht niederwerfen und mit den Zähnen knirschen und den Dämon verfluchen, der so redete? Oder hast du einmal einen ungeheuren Augenblick erlebt, wo du ihm antworten würdest: „du bist ein Gott und nie hörte ich Göttlicheres!“ Wenn jener Gedanke über dich Gewalt bekäme, er würde dich, wie du bist, verwandeln und vielleicht zermalmen; die Frage bei Allem und Jedem „willst du diess noch einmal und noch unzählige Male?“ würde als das grösste Schwergewicht auf deinem Handeln liegen! Oder wie müsstest du dir selber und dem Leben gut werden, um nach Nichts *mehr zu verlangen*, als nach dieser letzten ewigen Bestätigung und Besiegelung?—⁵⁰⁷

Although the words “ewige Wiederkunft” or “ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen” are not used in this aphorism, Nietzsche himself unequivocally states in his self-reflective manuscript *Ecce Homo* (1888) that this passage expresses the idea of “eternal recurrence.” *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche writes, “gibt im vorletzten Stück des vierten Buchs den Grundgedanken des Zarathustra.”⁵⁰⁸ Earlier in this same passage, Nietzsche had already identified the “*Ewige Wiederkunfts-Gedanke*” as the “Grundconception” of *Also sprach Zarathustra*. This may come as a surprise to comic-book audiences who are much more used to hearing terms like “Übermensch” and “der Wille zur Macht” in connection with Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. In its first published appearance, then, the “ewige Wiederkunft” is presented in hypothetical terms—but it is *not* to be misconstrued as a *scientific* hypothesis. What if a demon were to come to us in our most lonesome hour and suggest that we would live this life innumerable times over, with all its joys and pleasures but also all its sorrows and sufferings? The question is posed directly to the reader, whom Nietzsche addresses here using the informal “Du.” The aphorism presents two possible responses: either “Du” would curse a demon who spoke thusly, for no prospect could be more undesirable; or “Du” would praise the demon as a

⁵⁰⁷ Nietzsche, FW §341.

⁵⁰⁸ Nietzsche, EH-Z §1.

god for speaking something so divine. Either way, Nietzsche argues that an individual's response reveals something profound about that person.

According to Kaufmann, the idea that the question, "willst du diess noch einmal und noch unzählige Male?" should lie upon our actions as "das grösste Schwergewicht" suggests at first glance that Nietzsche "wanted us to ask before every action: 'Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?'" Kaufmann argues, however, that this is not the case. Instead, the individual is "to ask himself whether his present state of being is such that he would have to answer the demon with impotent anger and gnashing of teeth," or whether he would instead *welcome* such a state of affairs. Individuals who experience the former "would be crushed by this terrifying doctrine," but stronger individuals "would find in it the last incentive to achieve perfection." A strong individual would thus find that the "Ewige Wiederkunfts-Gedanke" expresses his (or her) "yearning for that joyous affirmation of himself and life which would enable him 'to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation.'"⁵⁰⁹ I take both Kaufmann and Nietzsche to mean that the concept of the "ewige Wiederkunft" functions as a litmus test by means of which individuals may determine whether or not they possess the life-affirming attitude that, in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, will be described as one prerequisite of the Übermensch. Hardship and suffering cannot be avoided, and they certainly do not need to be enjoyed: but if we know how to transform hardship and suffering into new opportunities for growth (as we saw in Chapter One), then the thought of living our lives over and over again, hardships and all, does not crush us. Asking ourselves if we want to relive a given action over and over again would be similarly revealing: if this notion leads us to choose only those actions that lead *away from* hardship, challenges, and "unpleasant" things in general, this reveals that we

⁵⁰⁹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 325.

value the absence of displeasure more than the possibility of self-overcoming. Rather than functioning as a sort of categorical imperative, the idea of the “ewige Wiederkunft” is meant to spontaneously reveal one’s attitude toward life and overcoming. As Schacht writes: “The thought of the eternal recurrence of all events without addition, subtraction or alteration would, on his [Nietzsche’s] view, present an even more formidable challenge and test of one’s ‘strength’ and ability to affirm life as it exists.”⁵¹⁰

We can therefore reject Gibson’s first point and conclude that the “ewige Wiederkunft” does not have anything to do with the “repetitious nature of existence,” let alone with reliving memories of past trauma. Nevertheless, Paul Loeb, in his 2017 essay “Eternal Recurrence” in the *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, argues that Zarathustra’s experience in the speech “Vom Gesicht und Rätsel” (in the third part of *Zarathustra*) presents “mnemonic evidence” that human beings both relive their pasts and experience “prospective memory” of their former-future lives.⁵¹¹ Loeb argues that, in *Zarathustra*, the eternal recurrence is literally true and that time is circular, not linear; Zarathustra can therefore “remember” things from past relivings of his life that have not yet happened to him this time around. Loeb’s “evidence” for this is the fact that, after Zarathustra’s conversation with a dwarf at the gateway of the “Augenblick” (with an infinite road stretching out in both directions, representing infinite past and infinite future), Zarathustra hears the mournful wail of a dog and asks “Hörte ich jemals einen Hund so heulen? Mein Gedanke lief zurück. Ja! Als ich Kind war, in fernster Kindheit: [¶] —da hörte ich einen Hund so heulen.” Somehow, Loeb takes this to mean that Zarathustra heard *this same exact dog* howl when he was a child, and not that Zarathustra heard a dog howl *in a similar manner*. Loeb argues that Zarathustra as a child “remembered” hearing this dog howl as an adult (i.e. in the

⁵¹⁰ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 258.

⁵¹¹ Loeb, “Eternal Recurrence,” 655.

“future”) because Zarathustra as an adult has already heard the dog howl an infinite number of times in the past (Loeb 652-55).⁵¹² Loeb’s interpretation ignores the language Nietzsche employs here, which clearly indicates that Zarathustra remembers hearing a dog howl *like that* (“da hörte ich einen Hund *so* heulen”) and not that he now remembers having remembered having heard “the very same howling dog.”⁵¹³

Gibson’s second point, that the “eternal recurrence” is based on the idea that “time is not a linear entity but a circular phenomenon that allows us to revisit over and over again events in our lives,” is easily refuted by fragments from Nietzsche’s notebooks that were published in *Der Wille zur Macht*. In one of the relatively few unpublished notes contemplating the possible real-world validity of the “ewige Wiederkunft,” Nietzsche presupposes that “die Welt” must be thought of “als bestimmte Größe von Kraft und als bestimmte Zahl von Kraftcentren[.]” Given “einer *unendlichen* Zeit würde jede mögliche Combination [der Materie] irgendwann einmal

⁵¹² Ibid., 652-55.

⁵¹³ Ibid., 651. One is reminded of the hilarious treatise on the grammar of time travel in Douglas Adams’ *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (101-3), except that Loeb appears to take his absurdities absolutely seriously. Furthermore, Loeb actually writes: “If I were asked why I believe that I am now reliving a life that I have already lived, the most natural reply would seem to be that I remember having lived this life before” (652). Not only would such a “memory” not prove anything to anyone but a psychic, Loeb also has to deliberately misinterpret Nietzsche’s original text in order to assert that Zarathustra “remembers” his past life, instead of simply remembering having heard a dog howl in anguish more than once over the course of his life. Loeb remarks that “it is remarkable that contemporary scholars do not debate the obvious idea, and Nietzsche’s own suggestion, that his doctrine is supportable by direct mnemonic evidence” (652-53). On the contrary: it is not at all remarkable that contemporary scholars do not debate an idea that Nietzsche does not present (and it is also concerning that Loeb takes the *fictional* character of Zarathustra as “proof” of anything *real*).

And this is not even the only invention that Loeb makes in his interpretation of “Vom Gesicht und Rätsel.” After hearing the dog howl, Zarathustra looks around and realizes that the gate and the dwarf have disappeared, and he wonders: “Träumte ich denn?” Loeb takes an incredible leap at this point and states:

Nietzsche’s implication is that Zarathustra has just crossed the gateway of death and in an *Augenblick* returned into his qualitatively identical life so as to awaken into the first awareness of his early childhood. Since this is a prevision of his midnight-tolling moment of death at the end of the published book, Nietzsche leads us to infer that his dying protagonist experiences a revelation of his eternally recurring life and that his final song of joy and affirmation is a response to just this revelation (651-52).

There are internal inconsistencies in Loeb’s argument here (how can Zarathustra be living the same life if in one he dies crossing the gate and in another he continues living after doing so?), but more important is the fact that *Zarathustra does not die*, neither here nor at the end of Part III (which is what Loeb means by “the end of the published book;” Part IV barely figures into Loeb’s interpretation of *Zarathustra*). Nor does Zarathustra cross the gateway at any point before, during, or after his conversation with the dwarf. It would appear that, in his eagerness to find fault with previous Nietzsche scholarship, Loeb has had to invent an entirely new *Zarathustra*.

erreicht sein; mehr noch, sie würde unendliche Male erreicht sein.”⁵¹⁴ Thus, in the model of existence that must be true *if* the “ewige Wiederkehr” is to be true, time must be *infinite*. It is quite another thing to say that time is finite but recurs in infinite cycles. This of course does not stop Loeb from arguing that Nietzsche saw time itself as circular, but like his argument about “mnemonic evidence” this, too, requires him to reinvent the text of *Zarathustra*. Loeb himself admits that the assumption that “time is relational” (i.e. that the doctrine of eternal recurrence “entails the recurrence of time itself”) is an “*implicit* assumption” that he, Loeb, believes Nietzsche to be making on the basis of Zarathustra’s speech “Vom Gesicht und Rätsel.”⁵¹⁵ In my estimation, this section once again does not “prove” anything of the sort. Zarathustra describes the path as bifurcated by the gate at which he stands: “Diese lange Gasse zurück: die währt eine Ewigkeit. Und jene lange Gasse hinaus – das ist eine andre Ewigkeit.” Nothing here suggests that the two paths curve around and meet somewhere out of sight; in fact, the path forward (i.e. the future) is explicitly called “eine *andre* Ewigkeit.” Loeb, for some reason, decides that this actually means that the two paths are part of the *same* eternity, and thus assumes (perhaps because the Earth is round) that the two paths curve together: “Thus, although the limited perspective of the present moment shows past and the future as distinct, linear, and infinitely extended; [*sic*] the longer and superior perspective invoked in this [Loeb’s] proof shows past and future as eventually curving together into a single circular course that is finite but unbounded.”⁵¹⁶ Loeb attempts to cement his argument by dismissing Zarathustra’s

⁵¹⁴ Nietzsche, WM §1065, or eKGWB/NF-1888,14[188]; emphasis added.

⁵¹⁵ Loeb, “Eternal Recurrence,” 659-60; emphasis added.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 660. Truly, the mind boggles reading this: an *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtung* on Loeb would practically write itself. Loeb also cites FW §109 as “proof” of his stance on recurring time, but even here, Nietzsche writes that “das ganze Spielwerk wiederholt ewig seine Weise, die nie eine Melodie heissen darf,” which still does not prove that *time* recurs, only that the specific constellations of matter in the universe (including human beings) are finite, and so recurrent. And although Loeb also refers readers to *Ecce Homo*, “Die Geburt der Tragödie,” §3, he conveniently overlooks the fact that Nietzsche here calls “Die Lehre von der ,ewigen Wiederkunft” the doctrine “vom

understanding of his own situation, calling it “limited,” whereas Loeb’s “superior perspective” allows him to twist the text to fit his Procrustean bed.

Loeb’s specious interpretation having been rejected, the further fact remains that Nietzsche never treats the “ewige Wiederkunft” as a literal truth in his published works. Such real-world hypothesizing occurs only in the fragments from his notebooks posthumously arranged by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and Heinrich Köselitz in *Der Wille zur Macht*. Nietzsche writes in one such fragment that “[d]er Satz vom Bestehen der Energie fordert die ewige Wiederkehr.”⁵¹⁷ In another, he states that the cosmos does not possess “die Wunder-Fähigkeit zur unendlichen Neugestaltung ihrer Formen und Lagen”⁵¹⁸ as was once thought, from which he concludes in yet another fragment that the “ewige Wiederkunft” is “die wissenschaftlichste aller möglichen Hypothesen.”⁵¹⁹ As Schacht notes, however, “[t]hese points do not suffice to establish the soundness of the latter doctrine; and nothing Nietzsche says in this passage [WM §1062] implies that he means them to or thinks they do.”⁵²⁰ And while Nietzsche writes in another note that he *wishes* that the eternal recurrence were literally true (“Mir scheint umgekehrt Alles viel zu viel werth zu sein, als daß es so flüchtig sein dürfte: ich suche nach einer Ewigkeit für Jegliches [...]”⁵²¹), he knows “that his desire that this should be so obviously does not lend any weight to the hypothesis.”⁵²²

unbedingten und unendlich wiederholten Kreislauf aller Dinge.” The “Kreislauf aller *Dinge*,” not the “Kreislauf aller *Zeit*.”

⁵¹⁷ Nietzsche, WM §55, or eKGWB/NF-1886,5[71] §6.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., §1062, or eKGWB/NF-1885,36[15].

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., §1063, or eKGWB/NF-1886,5[54].

⁵²⁰ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 262.

⁵²¹ Nietzsche, WM §1065, or eKGWB/NF-1887,11[94].

⁵²² Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 263.

It is telling that none of these musings on the potential scientific validity of the “ewige Wiederkunft” ever made it into Nietzsche’s published works.⁵²³ We can never know for certain whether or not Nietzsche ever intended to publish a more scientific approach to the question of the eternal recurrence; as we have seen, however, the published works present the concept as a test of character, a function that it can carry out regardless of whether or not Nietzsche believed it was literally true.⁵²⁴ “What matters here is not the *truth* of the idea,” writes Schacht; “rather, the emergence of human beings capable not only of enduring it (were it to be true), but moreover of embracing it without qualm, and indeed of ‘craving nothing more fervently.’”⁵²⁵ Then there is Loeb, who insists that the thought experiment carries no weight if Nietzsche did not believe it to be literally true: “Although scholars argue that this thought experiment should leave us crushed, elevated, or transformed, isn’t simple indifference the more appropriate response?”⁵²⁶ It is true that Nietzsche omits “indifference” as a potential response to the “ewige Wiederkunft,” but perhaps that is because he simply assumes that his readers possess an imagination. Nietzsche is challenging us to *imagine* that it is true and assess how we would react *if* it were true. Not everyone enjoys such hypotheticals, certainly, but to dismiss a thought experiment out of hand because it isn’t *actually* true is to miss the point.

For those of us who enjoy using our imagination, Nietzsche’s “ewige Wiederkunft” will elicit a strong reaction in one direction or another. I find a clear and humorous example of a

⁵²³ Cf. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 327: “In his books, of course, Nietzsche never offered any proof of his doctrine; it is only in his notes that we encounter these attempts; and his reasons for not publishing a proof presumably included his own sense that his efforts were inadequate. But while the references to this doctrine in his writings stress the experience of believing it, it is important to note that Nietzsche thought that the eternal recurrence might be implied by modern science[.]”

⁵²⁴ And there have been any number of successful attempts to disprove the scientific validity of this hypothesis: cf. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 327 and Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 263-64.

⁵²⁵ Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 259.

⁵²⁶ Loeb, “Eternal Recurrence,” 663.

negative response in the following daily strip from Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts* (published in newspapers on March 5, 1960):



Fig. 4.26 Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts*, 184.

Charlie Brown does not go quite as far as the ascetic priest in Nietzsche's *Genealogie*, who negates this life in favor of an idealized afterlife (whether the Christian Heaven or the Buddhist Nirvana). On the one hand, Charlie Brown's actions throughout 50 years of comic strips indicate a certain resilience in the face of defeat: he always gets on that pitcher's mound again, he always tries to kick the football one more time. And he certainly experiences moments of joy, even if they do seem to be outnumbered by the experiences that elicit an exclamatory "Good grief!" On the other hand, there is a certain resignation in the character that does not embody Nietzsche's life-affirming formula "amor fati," which he connects to the "ewige Wiederkunft" in *Ecce Homo*: "Meine Formel für die Grösse am Menschen ist amor fati: dass man Nichts anders haben will, vorwärts nicht, rückwärts nicht, in alle Ewigkeit nicht."⁵²⁷ The above comic strip clearly illustrates that Charlie Brown does *not* want to have everything all over again exactly as it is, forwards and backwards, for all eternity. However deeply he has endeared himself to us since his debut on October 2, 1950, Charlie Brown is not Übermensch-material.

⁵²⁷ Nietzsche, EH "Warum ich so klug bin" §10.

But what of the superhero? Sarah K. Donovan and Nicholas P. Richardson, in their pop philosophy essay “Under the Mask: How Any Person Can Become Batman,” agree with Gibson that Batman exemplifies the affirming attitude of Nietzsche’s Übermensch. Donovan and Richardson, however, quote at length from “Vom Gesicht und Rätsel” and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the “ewige Wiederkunft” than Gibson. In the second part of this speech, after Zarathustra argues with the dwarf at a gateway along the eternal paths of past and future, Zarathustra follows the cries of a howling dog and discovers a shepherd into whose mouth a snake has crawled while he was sleeping. Zarathustra tells the young man to bite down, which the shepherd does, spitting out the head and laughing, having undergone a metamorphosis into something “[n]icht mehr Hirt, nicht mehr Mensch, — ein Verwandelter [...]”⁵²⁸ Donovan and Richardson present the following interpretation: “Nietzsche believes that life is full of real suffering (as represented by the snake in the riddle) and joy (as represented by the triumphant bite of the shepherd and his subsequent laughter).” They conclude that this parable means that “an individual who lives according to Nietzsche’s philosophy of the eternal recurrence can embrace both suffering and joy. This person loves life so much that he or she does not regret or wish away even the most painful moments”⁵²⁹ This interpretation is largely in keeping with the argument I have developed above. Curiously, however, Donovan and Richardson only focus on the first part of their interpretation (on the meaning of the snake and the shepherd’s bite) when their attention turns to Batman. “Much like the snake in the vision, in the world of Batman the bat is a symbol for everything frightening, tragic, and ruthless in life. Only Batman is able to confront the bat, embracing it and overcoming the despair that it symbolizes.”⁵³⁰ They argue that

⁵²⁸ Nietzsche, Z-III “Vom Gesicht und Rätsel,” §2.

⁵²⁹ Donovan & Richardson, “Under the Mask,” 137-38.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 138.

in *The Dark Knight Returns*, “we see Bruce Wayne finally come to terms with the bat.” And as we saw in Chapter One, and in **Fig. 4.25** above, Bruce Wayne does eventually “come to terms with the bat” by overcoming the idea of the “Batman” altogether. The miniseries’ title takes on a changed meaning: in the first issue, the Dark Knight returns; in the final issue, the Dark Knight is transcended. We can extend Donovan and Richardson’s comparison and find in this revitalized Bruce Wayne an example of someone who “does not regret or wish away even the most painful moments.” Although he is changed by the end, the fact that Bruce Wayne continues his crimefighting endeavor indicates that he affirms his crimefighting lifestyle. Instead of being broken by the challenges he faces in the course of the novel, he uses them as an opportunity for growth. He *chooses* to continue living as he does: the traumas that threatened to overcome him (symbolized by the bat crashing through the windows of Wayne manor; see **Fig. 1.28**) have instead been overcome, and the final page of *DKR* gives no indication that this new Bruce Wayne would wish away any of the events that have helped him become who he is.

So it is that Bruce Wayne’s *attitude* toward his life is more important than the mere fact that, as A. G. Holdier glibly puts it, “The Dark Knight (Eternally) Returns” in issue after issue.⁵³¹ Religion and Literature professor A. David Lewis writes: “Superheroes have this idea of sequence built into their narrative DNA, as it were. [...] The last page is never the *last* page, because another installment is soon to come in superheroes’ never-ending quest for justice. [...] We expect superheroes to always continue.”⁵³² This is a rather mundane interpretation of

⁵³¹ This is the title of a subsection in Holdier’s essay “Where Have All the Supermen Gone?” and clearly plays on the title of Miller et al.’s 1986 miniseries *The Dark Knight Returns* and on Nietzsche’s doctrine of what Holdier here refers to as the “eternal return.” This section of Holdier’s essay, however, makes no reference to Nietzsche’s concept of the “ewige Wiederkunft:” if Holdier’s readers are not familiar with Nietzsche’s philosophy, the title’s play on words will be missed. Holdier does not even explain what is ostensibly meant by this title (its oblique reference to Nietzsche’s “ewige Wiederkehr” presumably refers to the repetitive nature of the Batman-Superman conflict that has been rehashed in numerous canonical and noncanonical encounters).

⁵³² Lewis, “Save the Day,” 33.

Nietzsche's "ewige Wiederkehr" that misses the life-affirming principle embedded within it. The Übermensch is one who has gained the "fürchtbarste Einsicht in die Realität" and has not been crushed by it and instead has found therein "einen Grund noch hinzu, das ewige Ja zu allen Dingen *selbst zu sein*." The Übermensch is his own reason for becoming (not just for being) and affirms life even after having considered the "abgründlichsten Gedanken" of the "ewigen Wiederkunft." In his later works, Nietzsche calls this affirmative worldview "*der Begriff des Dionysos selbst*."⁵³³ Instead of referring to the mere fact that Batman (or whichever other superhero) returns in each successive issue, we can read Batman's constant recurrence as a continuous affirmation of the superhero lifestyle. His repeated returns represent a constant choice: the superhero *chooses* day after day to be a superhero. (The same holds for Superman, Wonder Woman, and every other superhero). According to this understanding of Batman, the two sequels to Miller et al.'s *DKR* are redeemed. Bruce Wayne's return to his Batman identity

⁵³³ Nietzsche, EH-Z §6. This connection of the "ewige Wiederkunft" to the concept of the "Dionysian" is likely what led comics scholar Geoff Klock, in his 2002 work *How to Read Comics and Why*, to conflate the "eternal recurrence" with the "Apollinian" and "Dionysian" drives of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Writes Klock: "Like Friedrich Nietzsche's paradigm of Apollo and Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the revisionary superhero narrative is about the conflict between Batman and Joker, about the dialectic between the arbitrary imposition of order—the arbitrary answer to the question of the 'multiple choice'—and the eternal recurrence of the chaotic, elemental, fictional repressed" (62-63). First and foremost, Nietzsche changes what he designates as "Dionysian" between his early and late works. As R. J. Hollingdale writes in *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy*, "[t]he name *Dionysus* now stands for the life-affirmation of the man who is 'strong enough for freedom', who can allow himself every liberty because he has his passions under control, who is master of his life and not its victim and who, because joy consists in the exercise of one's will to power, enjoys life and consequently affirms it: 'Dionysus' is now the Dionysus of *The Birth of Tragedy* plus the Apollo of *The Birth of Tragedy*—the effect of strong passion, strong will to power, controlled by itself, i.e. *sublimated*" (241). See also Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 329 and Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 397. The concepts of the "Dionysian" and of the "ewigen Wiederkunft" are intertwined, but because of the subtle shift of meaning in the term "Dionysian," the relationship between the two is not quite the relationship that Geoff Klock implies. Furthermore, in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, the Apollinian is not quite the draconian enforcer of order Klock takes Batman to be, nor does the Joker's nihilistic, chaos-for-the-sake-of-chaos worldview accurately capture the Dionysian artistic tendency that Nietzsche describes here. Although the Dionysian "drive" ("Trieb") in *Geburt der Tragödie* does contain an awareness of the eternal flow of existence that is indifferent to the trials and tribulations of human beings (see GT §1-3), this is distinct from the concept of the "ewige Wiederkehr," an idea from Nietzsche's later works that Klock invokes here in connection with the Apollinian and Dionysian of Nietzsche's early work. Finally, it is important to note that even in *Geburt der Tragödie*, Nietzsche is not advocating for the repression of the Dionysian by the Apollinian (as Klock suggests by equating the former with the Joker and the latter with Batman), but rather the sublimation of *both* drives into a higher artistic form (that of Attic tragedy). This is in keeping with Nietzsche's later use of the term "Dionysian" which, as Hollingdale tells us, conveys the idea of *both* drives *sublimated*, not repressed, in the service of the individual's self-creation.

does still undermine the maturation that Bruce Wayne undergoes in the first novel, but it could also indicate Wayne's conscious decision to affirm the way he lives his life.

Even death cannot keep the superhero from his or her mission, as seen in *Dark Knight: Master Race* and, nearly three decades prior, the "Death of Superman" event that caused a sensation in the early 1990s. Begun in December 1992 and brought to a close in October 1993, the "Death of Superman" chronicles Superman's death (at the hands of a mindless monster called "Doomsday," who also perishes in the fight) and eventual resurrection. Lewis writes that "[t]he Death of Superman' was never about his being or remaining dead; it was about how he would return. [...] It isn't saying *in what manner* he would return but instead *in what form* he would return, *who he would be* upon his return. [...] The trick here is that he changed without aging, progressed without degrading."⁵³⁴ In other words: "Nur wer sich wandelt, bleibt mit mir verwandt."⁵³⁵ Superman is granted the opportunity of a clean slate, a fresh start: and yet he immediately dons the mantle of superhero once again. He has been changed by his experience, yet all the same he chooses to live his life as he has always lived it, knowing full well that there is every chance that his resurrection was a one-time event (even though we readers may suspect otherwise). I would be hard pressed to find a more dramatic and uplifting representation of the Übermensch's life-affirming desire, "das ewige Ja zu allen Dingen *selbst zu sein*," than *The Return of Superman's* closing images of Superman's triumphant return from the dead.

⁵³⁴ Lewis, "Save the Day," 35.

⁵³⁵ Nietzsche, JGB "Aus hohen Bergen. Nachgesang."

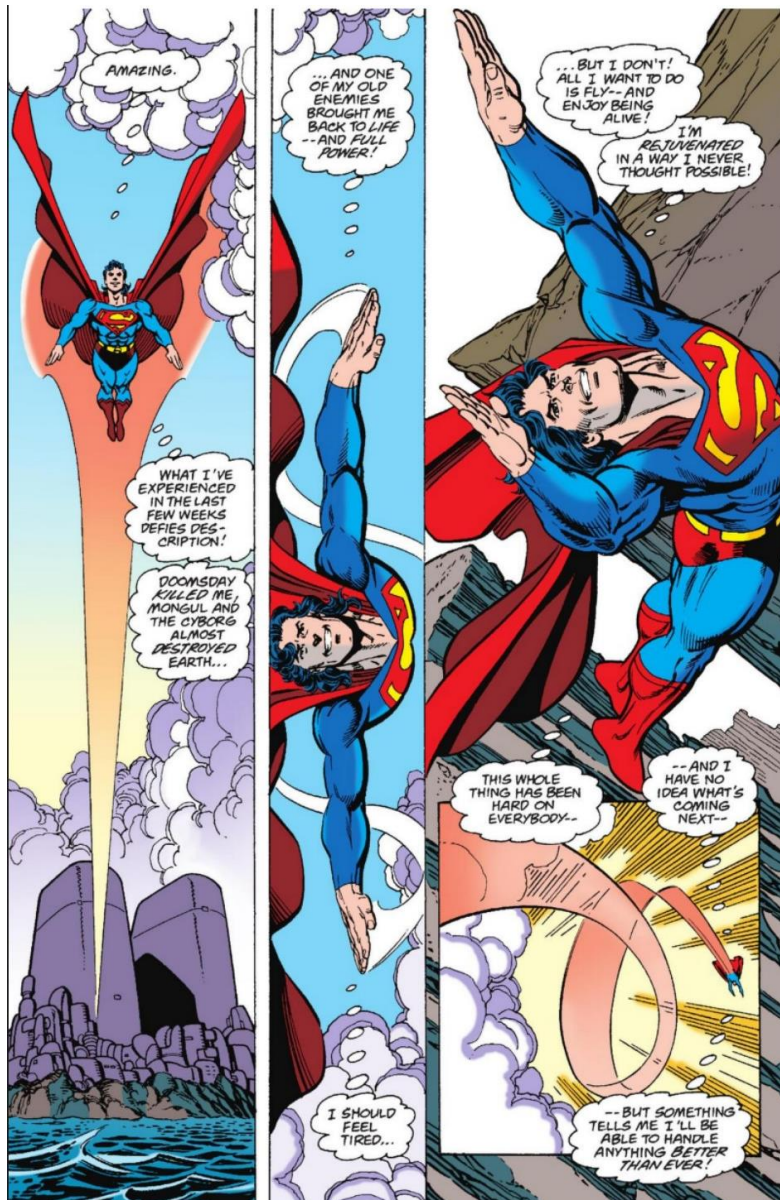


Fig. 4.27 Jurgens et al., *The Return of Superman*, 394.

Chapter Five

Of Super-Men and Wonder Women: The Role of Gender in Superhero Comics and Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Übermensch

1. Introduction

Nietzsche's philosophical pronouncements regarding women (and the relationship between women and men) appear infrequently in superhero comics and the accompanying criticism and scholarship. This is due, perhaps, to the fact that, while Nietzsche's Übermensch and the "Wille zur Macht" were rehabilitated after the Second World War, his views on women are still regarded today as either irrelevant or deeply damaging to his overall philosophy. Reclamation efforts have been made on this topic, as we will see in the course of this chapter, though such efforts come with significant caveats. The issue of the representation of women, and of gender more broadly, in superhero comics is similarly controversial. Female superheroes occur less frequently than male superheroes, and the word "superhero" is, as Goodrum, Prescott, and Smith point out, inherently masculinized: we must refer specifically to "female superheroes" or "superheroines" if we are to discuss the very real differences between superheroes who are women and superheroes who are men.⁵³⁶ Carolyn Cocca, writing two years prior to Goodrum et al., also acknowledges this linguistic shortcoming, but argues instead that "just as 'stewardess' became 'flight attendant' and 'policeman' became 'police officer,' there's no reason that the word 'superhero' couldn't suffice for all of these characters" regardless of gender.⁵³⁷

Nevertheless, beginning with William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter's Wonder Woman in

⁵³⁶ Goodrum, Prescott, and Smith, "Introduction," 3-4. At the time of their writing (2018), the authors state that the spellcheck function of MS Word only recently began recognizing the word "superheroine" as "a real word" (3). When Carolyn Cocca published her monograph *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* in 2016, she states that the spellcheck functions of MS Word and her iPhone still underlined the word "superheroine" in red.

⁵³⁷ Cocca, *Superwomen*, 7. The comparison isn't entirely perfect, since different terms are used in the examples cited by Cocca, rather than the adoption of a previously gendered term to refer to people of all genders to whom the descriptor applies.

1941 and continuing through the present day, there are marked differences in the depictions of female and male superheroes that merit sustained scholarly attention.

In this chapter, I will begin by examining those few instances wherein Nietzsche's philosophical treatment of sex and gender are directly referenced by comics creators and critics. Though few in number, *all* of these references pull from a single passage in the first part of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883). Consequently, I will examine this passage in its original context and expand upon the interpretation being made in superhero comics. From there, I will pose and address the following question: Can the term "Übermensch" be understood as gender-neutral—neutral at least concerning the heterosexual binary of "men" and "women," if not all genders and sexual orientations recognized today? For the sake of clarity, I will follow Frances Opper's lead and use the term "sex-gender" when referring to Nietzsche's writings from now on, as his works do not distinguish between biological sex and gender presentation. Over the course of this examination, we will come to see that although Nietzsche is bitingly critical of "das Weib," his works also present the idea that both men *and* women have vital roles to play in the coming of the Übermensch. How U.S.-American superhero comics represent issues of sex and gender will help us determine the limitations of Nietzsche's philosophy of sex-gender, as well as its potential, in the end, for conceptualizing human advancement beyond the rigid binary of "man" versus "woman."

2. "Zarathustra's Peitsche" in Comics and in Context

Of everything that Nietzsche wrote on the subject of "woman" (and he wrote a great deal on this topic), perhaps the most infamous pronouncement occurs at the very end of Zarathustra's speech "Vom alten und jungen Weiblein" in the first part of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883).

This speech is unusual because it is not a direct address, as are most of Zarathustra's speeches; instead, he relates to someone (ostensibly one of his companions; he addresses the person as "mein Bruder") a conversation he previously had with "ein altes Weiblein," who approached him "zur Stunde, wo die Sonne sinkt." This "altes Weiblein" allegedly requested that Zarathustra speak to her "vom Weibe," and Zarathustra tells his "Bruder" that he obliged. Zarathustra recites a litany of opinions on women that begins with: "Alles am Weibe ist ein Räthsel, und Alles am Weibe hat eine Lösung: sie heisst Schwangerschaft," and what follows is not any less clichéd. By the end, the old woman states that, although Zarathustra "kennt wenig die Weiber," nevertheless "hat er über sie Recht!" She then offers Zarathustra "eine kleine Wahrheit" as thanks for his speech. She encourages him to fetter this truth and prevent it from making itself known before she finally says it aloud: "Du gehst zu Frauen? Vergiss die Peitsche nicht!"⁵³⁸

Within the world of superhero comics, I have found this pronouncement to be the *sole* point of reference made between superheroes and Nietzsche's philosophical consideration of "das Weib." Just as the connection between Siegel and Shuster's Superman and Nietzsche's Übermensch was first made by the critics of comic books, so too was a critic the first to cite the "Peitsche"-line in connection with superheroes. In his 1954 polemic *Seduction of the Innocent*, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham refers to the "whip" in order to demonstrate the violence and sadism that he alleges is at the heart of both superhero comics and Nietzsche's works:

As our work went on we established the basic ingredients of the most numerous and widely read comic books: violence; sadism and cruelty; the superman philosophy, an offshoot of Nietzsche's superman who said, 'When you go to women, don't forget the whip.' We also found that what seemed at first a problem in child psychology had much wider implications. Why does our civilization give to the child not its best but its worst, in paper, in language, in art, in ideas? What is the social meaning of these supermen,

⁵³⁸ Nietzsche, Z-I "Vom alten und jungen Weiblein."

superwomen, super-lovers, superboys, supergirls, super-ducks, super-mice, super-magicians, super-safecrackers? How did Nietzsche get into the nursery?⁵³⁹

Wertham ascribes the whip-comment directly to “Nietzsche’s superman,” as though the Übermensch were a character with a speaking role in Nietzsche’s works (perhaps Wertham confuses the Übermensch with Zarathustra). Wertham expands upon what he finds so objectionable about “superwomen” and “super-girls” in a subsequent chapter, but he does not make the connection to Nietzsche any clearer. Wertham asserts that the “[s]uperwoman (Wonder Woman) is always a horror type. She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, is the cruel, ‘phallic’ woman. While she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be.”⁵⁴⁰ Wertham’s phrasing is revealing: he asserts that girls are “*supposed to want to be*” a certain way. His ideal nature of the “girl” exists, therefore, at a *double remove* from what “girls” actually *are*. Wertham, quick to point out the allegedly damaging effects of comic books upon the psyches of young children, does not even consider that the intense societal pressure on female children to conform to rigid conventions of “girlhood” is also psychologically damaging. This is not entirely surprising: throughout the entire book, Wertham is concerned with shoring up contemporary social ideals concerning “good” behavior in children. A “phallic woman” like Wonder Woman can only confuse children, who in Wertham’s psychological opinion are healthy only when they are cisgender heterosexuals.⁵⁴¹ Exactly what makes Wonder Woman phallic,

⁵³⁹ Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 15.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁴¹ Wertham spends a good deal of time detailing the alleged homosexual undertones in superhero comics. At about the midpoint in *Seduction*, Wertham spends two pages chronicling the ways in which male patients in his care would “fixate homoerotic tendencies” on the relationship between Batman and his young ward/sidekick Robin (190). He does not argue that Batman and Robin *are* gay, merely that they can be read as gay. Even knowing what we know now of Wertham’s creativity when “citing” interviews he held with patients (see Chapter One, Section 2 above), we have little reason to doubt this particular claim (cf. Brooker, 103-10). His language and argument are much less nuanced regarding Wonder Woman, however: he argues outright that she is “the Lesbian counterpart of Batman” and that her stories contain a “homosexual connotation” that is “psychologically unmistakable.” Unlike with

Wertham does not say: ostensibly, however, the physical strength that Wonder Woman exhibits is a “masculine” trait that, because it is exemplified by a woman, creates some sort of gender confusion in impressionable young readers.

It is unclear exactly how Nietzsche fits into this picture, much less how the “whip” figures into Wertham’s calculations. At first, Wertham appears to interpret “Nietzsche’s superman” as someone who abuses women simply for the sake of abusing them, and to interpret superheroes as doing the same. But then his attention turns to Wonder Woman and the purported threat of a “phallic woman,” rather than to the supposed threat of violence *against* women by male superheroes. Wielding her lasso, Wonder Woman would appear to be the one bringing the whip—perhaps Wertham is suggesting that male and female superheroes *both* deal violently with members of the opposite sex. But this doesn’t make much sense, either, for both male and female superheroes battle male and female supervillains. Perhaps there is *no* connection between Wertham’s use of the “whip”-quotation and his subsequent vilification of Wonder Woman as a sexually confusing “phallic woman.” In the final analysis, I think this last possibility is the most likely. Much of Wertham’s book consists of wild attempts to associate comics with every philosophical, political, social, and psycho-sexual movement or phenomenon that mainstream U.S. culture deemed unsavory at the time. His scattershot approach is characteristic of early

Batman, Wertham does not cite any young children who interpret the character in this way; instead, he quotes from an unspecified issue of *Psychiatric Quarterly* that deplored the *Wonder Woman* series as a title that “portrays extremely sadistic hatred of all males in a framework which is plainly Lesbian” (192-93). The only evidence that Wertham cites to support these claims is among the most specious in the entire work: “Wonder Woman has her own female following [in the comics]. [...] Her followers are the ‘Holliday girls,’ i.e. the holiday girls, the gay party girls, the gay girls” (193). Because she is a “Lesbian,” Wonder Woman is “a frightening image” for boys and a “morbid ideal” for girls, undermining the conventional ideal of what “girls” are “supposed to want to be.” The character is taken by Wertham to represent something unnatural (i.e. homosexuality) that poses a danger both to the psyches of young children and to the overall functioning of society.

comics criticism in general, which used Nietzsche, among others, in the attempt to discredit comic books by association.⁵⁴²

I have not found any other mid-century comic-book critics who specifically reference the “whip” passage when critiquing the portrayal of women in comics, nor have I found any further reference to this passage in either contemporary scholarship or popular criticism of comics. Finally, despite the various uses and abuses of Nietzsche’s words and ideas in superhero comics themselves, I have found only one series that directly references the “whip” in connection with Nietzsche. The series in question is Roy Thomas’s *Invaders!* (1975), and we saw in Chapter Two just how much fun Roy Thomas had putting Nietzsche’s words into the mouths of his villains. In this case, the only character in the series to actually say the quotation aloud is Colonel Eisen in *Invaders! #13* (February 1977). When confronting the eponymous heroes in the Warsaw Ghetto, Eisen faces off directly against Spitfire, notably the only woman on the team. When she refuses to be cowed by his blustering, Eisen exclaims in frustration: “Nietzsche was *correct!* ‘When you go to *women*, take along a *whip!*’” (see **Fig. 5.01** below). Eisen fights with a whip (he himself has no superpowers), but ends up using it against Captain America, not Spitfire, when the former comes to the latter’s aid. Eisen’s line is a one-off reference to Nietzsche, and Captain America sums up the good guys’ attitude toward this undeniably anti-woman utterance: “Why, you *dirty - -!*”⁵⁴³ The whip, which is not explicitly present in the

⁵⁴² Walter Ong, for example, claimed in 1945 that the “streamlined American Amazon gives evidence of the cult [of youth], for instance, in a morbid retrogressive fancy, reminiscent again of proto-Nazi melody out of Nietzsche or Stefan George” (“The Comics and the Super State,” 38). Ong cites only one example of this alleged “apotheosis of youth” in Wonder Woman comics: apparently, the titular Amazon, in some unspecified issue, faces a judge who is an infant. Wertham calls Wonder Woman a “phallic woman;” Ong calls her a “morbid retrogressive fantasy” similar to those allegedly found in Nietzsche’s works. The only thing these early critics could agree on was that they didn’t like her, nor did they care much for Nietzsche.

⁵⁴³ Thomas draws from this particular well once more, in *The Young All-Stars #3* (August 1987). Once again, a Nazi supervillain takes offense at a woman superhero—in this instance, one named “Firebrand” who can, appropriately, streak across the sky aflame and cast fireballs—who dares to challenge him. Sea Wolf calls her “insolent” and

passage from *Zarathustra* quoted above, is presented here quite literally, and although Eisen ends up using it indiscriminately against all of his opponents, he addresses its use specifically to the only female superhero present.

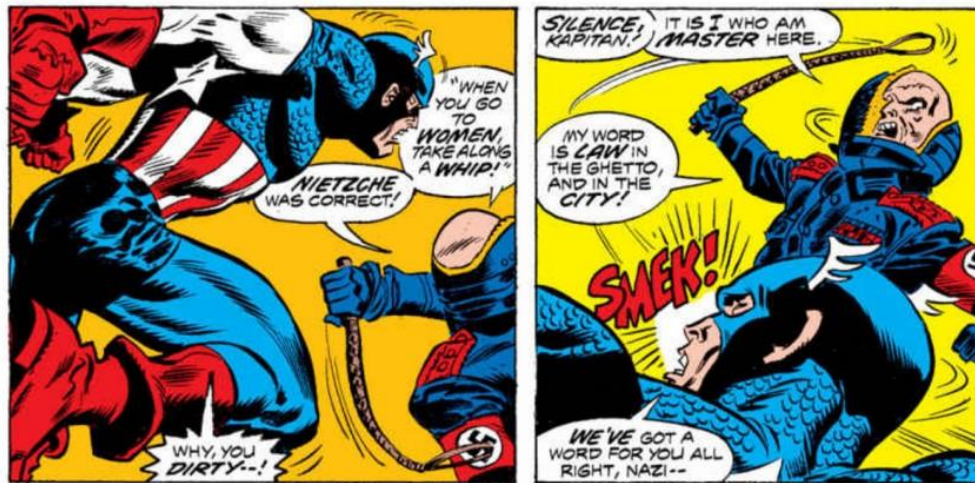


Fig. 5.01 Thomas et al., *The Invaders* #13, 263, panels 5-6.

The idea of the whip in connection with “woman” returns in a big way in the seventeenth issue of Thomas’s *Invaders!* (June 1977). A Nazi interrogator code-named “Madame Räthsel” (the in-issue translation of which is “Madame Mystery”⁵⁴⁴) wields a whip—which, surprisingly, she uses at first only to hypnotize her American prisoner of war, striking him instead with a rolled-up comic book found in his possession.⁵⁴⁵ Once she has what she wants from her prisoner—the missing piece of the American super-soldier formula that created Captain America—she intends to use it on herself. She is hindered by the hapless Hauptmann Schneider,

suggests that he “shall have to whip that *out* of you!” (page 6, panels 2-3). Although the reference is not made by the supervillain character named “Übermensch,” the allusion is clear once we have read Thomas’s *Invaders!*

⁵⁴⁴ Thomas, *Invaders* #17, 338.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 339.

as her intention is “*contrary to der Führer’s wishes...*”⁵⁴⁶ Using her whip against her Nazi comrade, she flings him across the room (an indication of already superhuman strength, perhaps)—but misjudges the distance, and he crashes into her machine. Out of the ensuing explosion emerges a superpowered Madame Räthsel, now known as Warrior Woman.

She makes quite an entrance when she first engages the Allied superhero team (see **Fig. 5.02** below). Having used a fire hose to extinguish the Human Torch and Toro, she easily defeats them in physical combat before sending Captain America plummeting from a cliff. It is

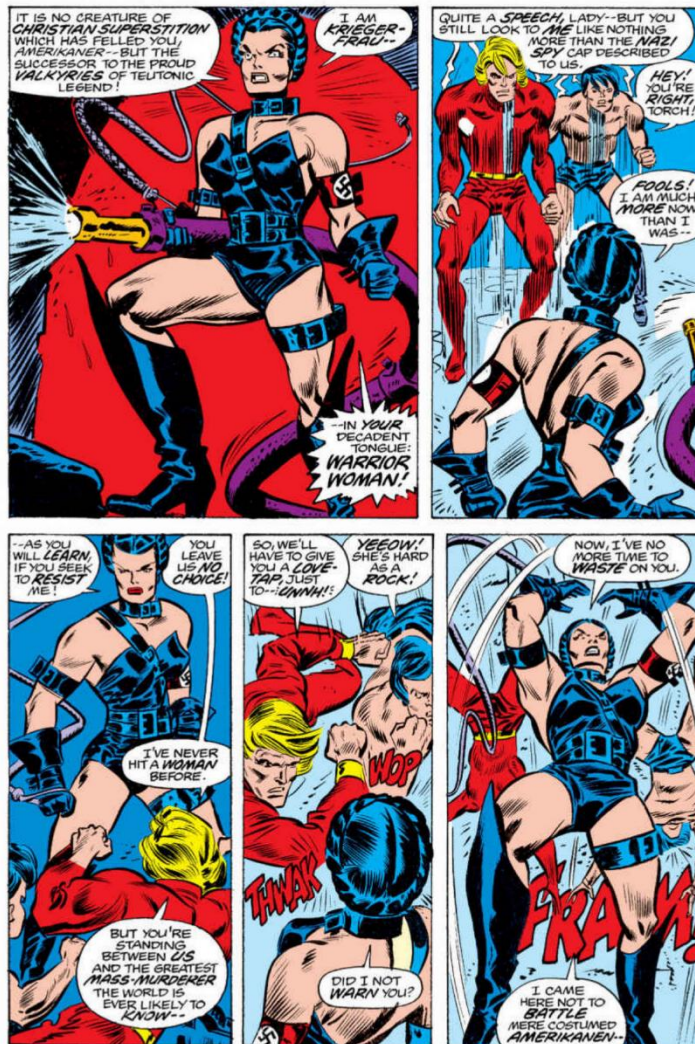


Fig. 5.02 Thomas et al., *The Invaders* #117, 345, full page.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 340.

immediately apparent that Warrior Woman is an unusual female character: in the way she fights and the “poses” she strikes while doing so, she more closely resembles male characters than her female counterparts. This is in keeping with conventions of gender representation in superhero comics. As formulated by Carolyn Cocca in her 2016 monograph *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, “[m]ost mainstream superhero comics began to display very particular and very binary representations of gender: hypermuscular men and hypersexualized women.”⁵⁴⁷

Although both male and female superhuman characters are shown performing amazing feats of strength, Cocca notes that male superheroes are depicted with a focus on musculature, while female superheroes are drawn with an emphasis on their “womanly” curves. Often, women are drawn in anatomically impossible positions wherein they are “twisted and arched to display all of their curves in front and back simultaneously. One’s back would have to be broken to contort in such a way, which is why it would come to be labeled the ‘broke back’ pose.”⁵⁴⁸ Male superheroes, on the other hand, are “generally drawn facing front with a focus on their musculature,” and this is clearly the case with Warrior Woman in **Fig. 5.02**. Although she is still more scantily clad than male superhumans (whether good, bad, or ugly), the visual emphasis falls on Warrior Woman’s musculature rather than her secondary sexual characteristics: her shoulders are broad and powerful, her legs are overdefined, and her costume does little to emphasize her breasts. Compare these images of Warrior Woman to the various “fighting” poses that Spitfire strikes in *Invaders #12* (January 1977). The latter fights in a way that always displays her “womanly” figure: she is shown frequently from a side profile with an emphasis on her breasts, buttocks, and almost cherubically smiling face (see **Fig. 5.03** below). Warrior

⁵⁴⁷ Cocca, *Superwomen*, 11.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 12. Cf. *ibid.*, 15, 23, 39-40, 138, 203, and 221 for further examples and discussion of the “‘broke back’ pose” in superhero comics.

Woman is her opposite on every score—and let us not overlook the very first panel in which Warrior Woman appears. Readers need not be Freudian psychoanalysts to notice where the fire hose (still spraying!) is positioned relative to the rest of Warrior Woman’s body.



Fig. 5.03 Thomas et al., *The Invaders* #12, 250, panels 1-4.

In fact, the 1977 Warrior Woman matches Wertham’s 1954 description of the “phallic woman” *almost exactly*, and it is difficult to imagine that Thomas did not do this on purpose (the name “Warrior Woman,” although it could simply be an alliterative complement to “Master Man,” bears an obvious similarity to “Wonder Woman”). Warrior Woman is a masculinely coded female character, and she even exhibits some of the “man-hating” of which Wertham accuses Wonder Woman. She heaps scorn upon every male character in the series, Allied and Axis alike, with the sole exception of Adolf Hitler. When Hitler orders Warrior Woman to marry Master Man, the former Madame Räthsel is anything but pleased with this pairing (see

Fig. 5.04 below). This could be attributed to the incompatibility in intellect between the two Nazi Übermenschen: although she can throw a punch with the best of them, Warrior Woman possesses an above-average intelligence (hence her former role as an interrogator), whereas Master Man is nothing more than an “oaf.” Given her general contempt for men and her exaggeratedly “masculine” poses in Fig. 5.04, however, it is possible to read a hidden meaning into her rejection of heterosexual marriage: perhaps Warrior Woman, unlike Wonder Woman, really is supposed to be the “Lesbian” character that Wertham describes. If so, then female homosexuality is being ascribed to a character who is not only one of the “bad guys,” but who is also “wrong” in a visual sense (i.e. she displays conventionally masculine characteristics). Visually, then, she is “Other” and decidedly *not* a representation of virtuous femininity. That role is filled by Spitfire, whose physical strength does not correlate to a “masculine” appearance or to “man-hating.” Although Warrior Woman’s sexual orientation may be ambiguous, it is clear

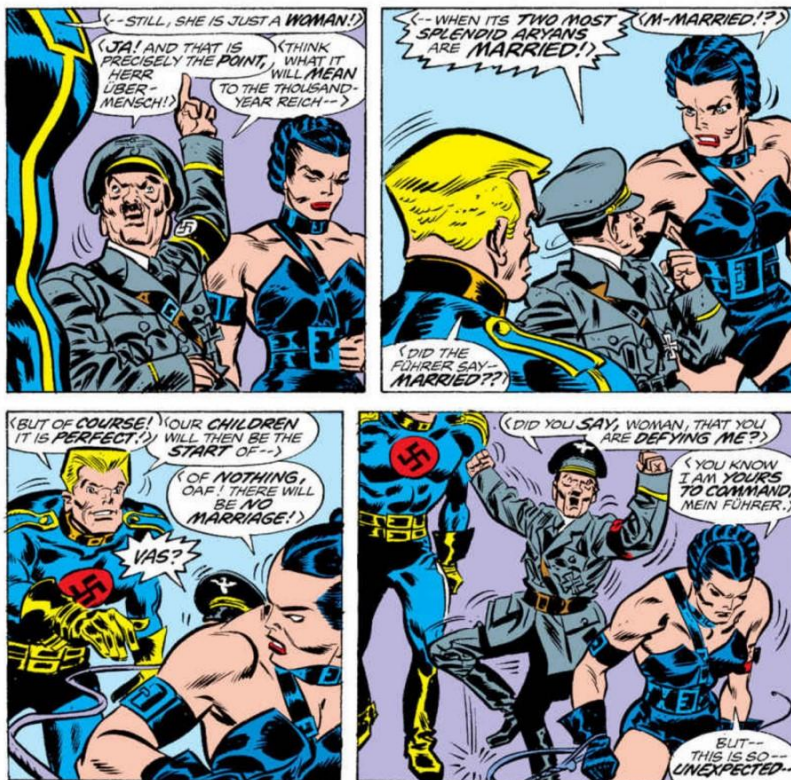


Fig. 5.04 Thomas et al., *The Invaders* #18, 353, panels 1-4.

that Thomas interprets the “whip” negatively: it is utilized only by villains, one a man and the other an “abnormal” woman.

Wertham attributes the “whip” comment directly to Nietzsche, and so does Thomas’s character Colonel Eisen. The matter is not so simple, however: the “kleine Wahrheit” of bringing the “Peitsche” is something an old woman told Zarathustra, not something that Zarathustra says. Even in the text of *Zarathustra*, it is a quotation, for Zarathustra is relating this tale to a third party after the fact. And as German Studies scholar Peter Burgard points out, “it is even further removed [from Nietzsche] by virtue of being, first, a statement not in a straightforward philosophical discourse but in a fictionalized philosophy, and, second, uttered by a woman.”⁵⁴⁹ The “Peitsche” quotation exists at a triple remove from Nietzsche. Although the philosopher is, of course, the progenitor of every word spoken by every character in *Zarathustra*, to assume that he tacitly endorses the old woman and her “kleine Wahrheit” would be an unjustified interpretive leap. Fictional characters do not necessarily express the views of their author.

Nevertheless, “Zarathustra’s Peitsche,” as it is sometimes known,⁵⁵⁰ became a thorn in Nietzsche’s side almost immediately after *Zarathustra* was published. Frances Oppel relates a story told “by one Sebastian Hausmann” who, upon meeting Nietzsche in Sils-Maria, recounted some of the difficulties he had with the philosopher’s work, chief among them the “whip”

⁵⁴⁹ Burgard, “Figures of Excess,” 4.

⁵⁵⁰ I have encountered this formulation in German-language as well as English-language scholarship, either in the body of the essay/monograph or in the title (an example of the latter would be Schmidt, “Du gehst zu Frauen? Zarathustras Peitsche – ein Schlüssel zu Nietzsche oder einhundert Jahre lang Lärm um nichts?” in the inaugural volume of *Nietzscheforschung* (1994). Zarathustra does take possession of a whip, it seems—we will see this later on in the analysis of Z-III, “Das andere Tanzlied”—so it is not entirely wrong to call it “his” whip. We must be careful, however, that in employing this shorthand we do not forget who gave him the whip and encouraged him to use it.

comment. According to Hausmann, Nietzsche replied: “I mean, it is clear and understandable that this is only a joke, an exaggerated, symbolic mode of expression.”⁵⁵¹ Joke or not, Oppel asserts, it appears that “[n]othing Nietzsche can say will get him out of the mess the whip continues to get him into with readers.” This hasn’t stopped some apologists from trying, however, beginning with Nietzsche’s own sister, who claimed after her brother’s mental collapse and later death that the “whip” comment came from her. In her 1900 essay “Friedrich Nietzsche über Weib, Leibe und Ehe,” Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche relates a story in which she was reading a novella by Turgenev to her ailing brother when the latter “äußerte sich missbilligend” regarding the behavior of a male character who was beating his young lover with a riding crop. “Da konnte ich aber nicht umhin,” she continues, “ihm an einigen und bekannten Beispielen zu zeigen, daß es eben Frauennaturen giebt, die nur durch die brutale Behandlung des Mannes im Zaume gehalten werden und die, sobald sie nicht die Peitsche (natürlich nur als Symbol betrachtet) über sich fühlen, frech und unverschämt werden [...]” Of course, she also claims to have said that such drastic—yet somehow merely symbolic—measures are not necessary for *her* and all other “vernünftigen, tugendhaften Frauen.” She claims the two of them had a good laugh at this, and when, one year later, she read the first part of *Zarathustra*, she claims to have said: “O Fritz [...] das alte Weibchen bin ich!” whereupon her brother allegedly chuckled and promised not to tell a soul.⁵⁵²

There is no reason to believe this to be true, however: for one thing, Förster-Nietzsche *forges* a letter from her brother in the same essay! She is also known to have invented other stories regarding the origins of some of her brother’s most famous catchphrases (as in the case of “der Wille zur Macht” as discussed in Chapter One above). Nevertheless, the idea that this

⁵⁵¹ As quoted in Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender*, 118.

⁵⁵² Förster-Nietzsche, “Friedrich Nietzsche über Weib, Liebe und Ehe,” 1063.

passage—and other such apparently hostile pronouncements on “das Weib”—can be explained, or even excused, by events in Nietzsche’s biography persists to this day. Entire scholarly monographs are devoted to detailing Nietzsche’s closest relationships with women, whether positive or negative, in the attempt to either condemn Nietzsche for misogyny, or to exonerate him from these charges. From his sister’s 1935 book *Friedrich Nietzsche und die Frauen seiner Zeit* (1935) to present-day studies such as Mario Leis’s *Frauen um Nietzsche* (2000), biographical events are frequently cited to reject as to support the claim that Nietzsche was a “Frauenfeind.” Even more recently, Julian Young asserts in 2013 that the “cause of his ‘turn’ against women lies in his biography, not his philosophy.”⁵⁵³ The biographical event responsible for this “turn,” in Young’s view, is the spectacularly acrimonious falling-out between Lou Salomé and Paul Rée on the one side and Nietzsche on the other. Young asserts—more or less correctly, I believe—that “[t]here is no trace of misogyny in [Nietzsche’s] works of the 1870s.”⁵⁵⁴ After the 1882 breakup of the philosophical/romantic triad, *Zarathustra* emerges with its “Peitsche”-passage, and Nietzsche’s subsequent works contain pronouncements that are more directly hostile toward “das Weib” and “die Frauen.”

The trouble with the biographical approach, however, is that it tends to devolve into an attempt to retrospectively psychoanalyze Nietzsche. Frances Opper, citing two more recent attempts to explain Nietzsche’s philosophy by attempting to determine his individual pathology, writes that this approach “comes dangerously close to psychobiography,” although she admits that she does “see the value of such scholarship.” Ultimately, I agree with Opper that the question of whether and to what degree Nietzsche’s relationships with the women in his life

⁵⁵³ Young, “Nietzsche and Women,” 56.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

“influenced Nietzsche’s philosophy” is “very difficult to prove,”⁵⁵⁵ and it is not my focus in this chapter to do so. We need not look beyond the text of *Zarathustra* itself to find evidence that the old woman’s “kleine Wahrheit” is not meant to be heeded, and that Zarathustra’s uncharacteristic regurgitation of sex-gender stereotypes in “Vom alten und jungen Weiblein” is not to be taken at face value.

Peter Burgard writes that the exclamation mark that ends the sentence, “Vergiss die Peitsche nicht!” both “lends the remark its admonitory quality” while also “at least potentially” serving as “a mark of irony.”⁵⁵⁶ The potential for irony is not absolute, however: as Burgard points out, the old woman’s statement is prefaced by the phrase: “Und also sprach das alte Weiblein.” This lends the old woman’s “kleine Wahrheit” a declarative importance similar to Zarathustra’s own pronouncements, which are always accompanied by the phrase “Also sprach Zarathustra.”⁵⁵⁷ Even if the old woman’s statement cannot be taken as pure irony, I believe there is further evidence in this section that encourages us to take what is said by both characters on the subject of “das Weib” with a grain of salt. To begin with, the old woman comes to Zarathustra “zu der Stunde, wo die Sonne sinkt,” and their conversation takes place during this twilight hour. The position of the sun at various times of day plays an important role in *Zarathustra*. Part I begins with Zarathustra addressing the rising sun at dawn, and at this time of day Zarathustra has, for ten years, absorbed the sun’s “Überfluss”⁵⁵⁸ until he himself is overflowing and ready to descend the mountain and rejoin human society. Midday is the high

⁵⁵⁵ Oppel, *Resentment and the Feminine*, 11. It’s worth noting, however, that Oppel’s monograph is not entirely free of attempts to psychoanalyze Nietzsche. On the third page of her book, she writes in response to another scholar who diagnoses Nietzsche with castration envy: “In my view, Nietzsche suffers less from castration envy than from womb envy.” To be fair, this is not psychobiography so much as it is “psychophilosophy,” to coin a term: Oppel’s conclusion is based only on what Nietzsche writes in his philosophical works rather than on the events his life.

⁵⁵⁶ Burgard, “Figures of Excess,” 4-5.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁵⁸ Nietzsche, Z-I, “Zarathustra’s Vorrede,” §1.

point of the day for Zarathustra, “da der Mensch auf der Mitte seiner Bahn steht zwischen Thier und Übermensch und seinen Weg zum Abende als seine höchste Hoffnung feiert: denn es ist der Weg zu einem neuen Morgen.”⁵⁵⁹ Midday leads to evening, evening to a new morning. The fact that the sun is literally setting on the events of “Vom alten und jungen Weiblein” signifies that the sun is figuratively setting on the conventional description of “das Weib” that Zarathustra, normally the destroyer of traditional values, is reproducing rather than critiquing. After the sun sets on these out-of-date ideas, the new dawn will bring with it a new perspective on “das Weib.” That the woman speaking with Zarathustra is old could also signify the age of her “kleine Wahrheit” and its consequent unsuitability to the coming new era. Although it is still strange that Zarathustra does nothing at this point to explicitly demolish current preconceptions of “das Weib,” he does at least keep the old woman’s “kleine Wahrheit” under wraps, telling his male listeners that this little truth is “ungebärdig wie ein junges Kind.” The fact that this little truth is compared to an unruly young child complicates the issue, but it does not refute the idea that the old woman’s “truth” is not to be taken seriously. Rather than old-fashioned and out of date, this “truth” could instead be immature, too young to be released into the world in its current state. Either way, Zarathustra is clearly not ready to fully incorporate the old woman’s “kleine Wahrheit” into his teachings.

Furthermore, the “Peitsche” actually reappears in Part III, a fact often overlooked when interpreting this problematic symbol. “Das andere Tanzlied” begins with Zarathustra speaking to Life itself. At first, Zarathustra is angry at Life: he feels Life has led him astray on thorny paths, and he even goes so far as to call Life “diese verfluchte flinke gelenke Schlange und Schlupf-Hexe!” He would like Life better if it did not give him such trouble: “Gerne möchte ich mit dir –

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., “Von der schenkenden Tugend,” §3.

lieblichere Pfade gehen!” But he is tired, at his wits’ end, and can think of no other way to bring Life under his control than to use his whip: “Nach dem Takt meiner Peitsche sollst du mir tanzen und schrein! Ich vergass doch die Peitsche nicht? – Nein!”⁵⁶⁰ This callback to the “Peitsche” from Part I suggests on the one hand that “das Leben” is a woman—but it also suggests that “das Weib” in Part I is actually Life. To briefly consider this second idea: many of Zarathustra’s pronouncements on “das Weib” take on an entirely new significance if we substitute “Leben” for “Weib.” For example, Zarathustra’s statement that the “Lösung” to the “Räthsel” of woman is “Schwangerschaft” would mean that the meaning of life is to procreate, but also to *create* (moralities, societies, art, knowledge, etc.). This episode in Part III further suggests that, when Life proves difficult, we, like Zarathustra, might be tempted to “bring the whip.” We are tempted to force Life to conform to our ideas of what it should be—by, for example, inventing gods and interpreting all of existence according to some “divine” scheme. This is the old way of doing things, represented by the “altes Weiblein” that hands Zarathustra the whip.

But the old ways are to be overcome, and that is precisely what happens here, for in the next part of “Das andere Tanzlied,” Life responds to Zarathustra’s accusations and encourages him to cast aside the whip. “Oh Zarathustra!” Life cries out; “Klatsche doch nicht so fürchterlich mit deiner Peitsche! Du weisst es ja: Lärm mordet Gedanken, – und eben kommen mir so zärtliche Gedanken.” Zarathustra is apparently cracking the whip in an attempt to frighten Life into submission by making a loud noise, rather than by physically striking Life/“das Weib” with the whip. This noise, however, kills contemplation, meaning that Zarathustra cannot see Life for what it is, but only for what he’s trying to force it to be. Life, however, reminds Zarathustra that the two of them together can find “unser Eiland und unsre grüne Wiese,” and that this new land

⁵⁶⁰ Nietzsche, Z-III “Das andere Tanzlied” §1.

exists “jenseits von Gut und Böse.” As we saw in Chapter Four, Section 3, the phrase “jenseits von Gut und Böse” indicates an extra-moral intellectual position from which one can examine existing moral structures (which in the Western world specifically would mean Christian moral doctrines of “good” and “evil), assess their worth, and begin the process of creating new values. Zarathustra and Life find common ground (the image is literal—Life speaks of an island and a green pasture) once they move beyond conventional notions of good and evil. Rather than curse Life, like Christian morality does, Zarathustra comes to Life, and Life comes to Zarathustra. Having been reminded of this, Zarathustra declares: “Damals aber war mir das Leben lieber, als je alle meine Weisheit.”⁵⁶¹ Thereupon, Zarathustra abandons his whip, making no more reference to it in the rest of Part III and all of Part IV. Zarathustra overcomes his need for the whip when he “goes to” Life, which would mean that he also overcomes his need for the whip when he “goes to” women.⁵⁶² Wertham’s interpretation of the “whip” passage as encouraging violence is disproven, and we can clearly see that Thomas’s villains Colonel Eisen and Warrior Woman have fallen short of Nietzsche’s Übermensch-ideal by failing to overcome their outdated sex-gender-based antipathies.

3. The Question of Sex-Gender in Nietzsche’s Works and *Wonder Woman* Comics

Comics scholar Carolynocca argues that the word “superhero” has become (or is at least in the process of becoming) a gender-neutral term.⁵⁶³ Nevertheless, the fact remains that

⁵⁶¹ Nietzsche, Z-III “Das andere Tanzlied” §2. All previous quotations in this paragraph come from the same.

⁵⁶² Opiel makes a similar point, but in a more convoluted manner. Reading “Vom alten und jungen Weiblein” and “Das andere Tanzlied” with “[c]onventions of allegory and dream symbolism” in mind, Opiel interprets the old woman “as part of Zarathustra, as one of his ‘devils,’ perhaps the key devil, the serpent,” which means that, when giving him the gift of the whip, she is giving him “the gift of herself as serpent” (ostensibly because a whip resembles a serpent in terms of shape, length, and general ability to form coils). “In the coils of the whip, she symbolizes resentment of women, something that Zarathustra must overcome, because resentment of women equals resentment of life, and of himself” (*Nietzsche on Gender*, 150).

⁵⁶³ Cocca, *Superwomen*, 6-7.

there are fewer superheroes who happen to be women than superheroes who happen to be men. Explanations for this gender bias in superhero comics abound, ranging from the demographic makeup of comic-book artists (majority white, majority male) to the *perceived* demographics of comic-book readers (men are still perceived as the majority of readers, even though male readers have only ever enjoyed a slight majority) to cultural expectations that showcase men as human beings of action and women as human beings of romance and everyday drama.⁵⁶⁴ The answer to the question: “Can a superhero be a woman?” is an obvious “Yes,” but it comes with some heavy caveats. Superheroes can be women—but they are rarer than superheroes who are men. Superheroes can be women—but they are often sexualized in a way their male counterparts are not. The answer to the question: “Can the Nietzschean Übermensch be a woman?” is even more complicated. In this section, I will begin by analyzing the origins of Wonder Woman, the most famous and longest-running female superhero. We will find that her creator intended for her to exceed and even transcend the archetypal male superhero. I will then turn to Nietzsche’s philosophical estimation of “das Weib” in his middle and late works. Although Nietzsche is often unfairly critical of “woman,” I will show that his works do not preclude the possibility of “woman’s” self-overcoming and potential Übermensch-status.

Wonder Woman was created by William Moulton Marston, a psychologist who believed that women were psychologically superior to men. According to an interview in the *Washington Post* in 1937, four years before Wonder Woman debuted in *All-Star Comics #8* (December 1941), Marston believed that women would inevitably rule the country one day because they “have twice the emotional development, the ability for love, than man has.” Their capacity for socioeconomic and political success was similarly doubled in Marston’s mind: “[A]s they

⁵⁶⁴ Cf. Cocca, *Superwomen*, 13-16.

develop as much ability for worldly success as they already have ability for love, they will clearly come to rule business and the Nation and the world.” This revolution would come soon, and Marston was its prophet: “The next 100 years will see the beginning of an American matriarchy—a nation of amazons in the psychological rather than the physical sense. [...] In 500 years, there will be a serious sex battle. And in 1,000 years women will definitely rule this country.”⁵⁶⁵

Marston wanted to spread this gospel and change the world, but it took him some time to find the ideal medium for his message. According to historian Jill Lepore, who details Marston’s personal life and professional accomplishments in her superb monograph *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (2014), Marston had attempted to use adult fiction as a vehicle for his pro-matriarchy views, writing an erotic historical novel entitled *Venus with Us* in 1932.⁵⁶⁶ After this book failed to sway anyone to his side, Marston “came to believe that there is no better form of psychological propaganda than a comic book.”⁵⁶⁷ Where most critics of comic books saw a danger to literacy, Marston saw an opportunity to transmit his message of female superiority to children even before they had learned to read. Wonder Woman comics were consequently written (by Marston) and drawn (by Harry G. Peter) in such a way that they would communicate Marston’s decidedly idiosyncratic psychological theories of human nature and society to children of all ages, resulting in a generation primed to accept the establishment of a benign matriarchy in the place of a violent patriarchy. Such was Marston’s intention, at any rate: his “whole strip is aimed at drawing the distinction in the minds of children and adults between love bonds and male bonds of cruelty and destruction [...]”⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁵ As quoted in Lepore, *Secret History*, 170.

⁵⁶⁶ Lepore, *Secret History*, 148-49. Cf. Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound*, 62-68.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁶⁸ As quoted in *ibid.*, 243.

Marston believed that women had a gender-specific advantage over men. In “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” Marston writes that the “male hero, at best, lacks the qualities of maternal love and tenderness which are as essential to a normal child as the breath of life.” In comics featuring male heroes like Superman and Batman, according to Marston, “the most important ingredient in the human happiness recipe is still missing—*love*.” The problem is that traditionally “masculine” qualities are praised by society, whereas traditionally “feminine” qualities are despised: “It’s smart to be strong. It’s big to be generous. But it’s sissified, according to exclusively masculine rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring.” The “obvious remedy,” Marston concluded, “is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman.” Said allure consists, so he claims, in woman’s innate desire “to be tender, submissive, peaceloving.”⁵⁶⁹ Marston did not set out to make a female superhero who was merely the female equivalent of Superman. According to Marston’s conception of the sexes, a male superhero, no matter how well-intentioned, would never actually be able to solve the world’s problems because strength and action without “maternal love” would never fix the underlying causes of conflict. Wonder Woman had to be *more* than just as strong and just as generous as Superman: the “Woman” in her name had to be even more important than the “Wonder.”

In Wonder Woman’s adventures, Marston depicted “love bonds” and “male bonds of cruelty and destruction” literally. Comics scholar Tim Hanley crunches the numbers for us: Wonder Woman is tied up, on average, “11 percent of the time” in *each* of the first ten issues of her solo series *Wonder Woman* (after her debut in *All-Star Comics*, Wonder Woman starred in *Sensation Comics* for less than a year before getting her own series; thereafter, she starred

⁵⁶⁹ As quoted in *ibid.*, 187.

concurrently in both for many years). When the bondage of all other characters in the series is included in this calculation, an average of “27 percent” of *each* of the first ten issues of *Wonder Woman* depicts at least one bound character.⁵⁷⁰ Furthermore, Marston was an equal-opportunity binder: in his comics, men bind women, women bind men, women bind women, and men bind men. This bondage was not mere titillation, although that did play a role: “To Marston, there was a definite erotic component to submitting to women,” Hanley writes. But this erotic component was “a bait and switch, playing on male desires with the bondage to bring them in and then hitting them with his metaphors and messages about female superiority.”⁵⁷¹ Lured in by the erotically exciting images of bondage, young male readers would come to see that bondage in the world of *Wonder Woman* “was actually an elaborate series of metaphors about submission.”⁵⁷² Marston believed that men would willingly submit to the authority of women if they (men) were conditioned from boyhood to view the act of submitting to women as pleasurable. “The only hope for peace,” he wrote in a letter to *Wonder Woman* publisher Max Gaines, “is to teach people who are full of pep and unbound force to enjoy being bound.”⁵⁷³ It turns out that Wertham’s perception of eroticism in *Wonder Woman* comics wasn’t entirely wrong, but salaciousness was not Marston’s ultimate goal—officially, at any rate.

Although all the bondage in Marston’s *Wonder Woman* comics was designed to play on “male desires,” by reading these comics attentively, we can share Hanley’s realization that

⁵⁷⁰ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound*, 44-47. The percentages are calculated as the number of panels in each issue in which a character is bound against the total number of panels in each issue.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 55-56. Both Hanley and Lepore explore how Marston’s own sexual preferences were inextricably linked to his psychological theories concerning bondage. Marston lived in a polyamorous relationship with his wife Elizabeth Holloway Marston and his lover Olive Byrne. The two women continued to live together and raise their children following Marston’s death. Marston was known to have enjoyed bondage—what he apparently referred to as “captivation”—in his personal sex life (Lepore, *Secret History*, 119-20).

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁷³ As quoted in *ibid.*

“different forms of bondage had different meanings.”⁵⁷⁴ *Sensation Comics #6* (June 1942) neatly showcases how the context in which bondage occurs determines whether it is positive or negative according to Marston’s psychological scheme of submission and dominance. In the Amazonian homeland, women bind other women with benevolent intent. On Paradise Island, the ancestral home of the Amazons (according to Marston’s mythology), the “intent of bondage was never to hurt, ridicule, or shame someone, and there were rules of safety and care.”⁵⁷⁵ In the free-for-all lasso competitions in Paradise Island’s grand arena, all of the “girls *Wonder Woman* has defeated carry her enthusiastically to the judge’s stand” (see **Fig. 5.05** below). There were no hard feelings because these bondage games were “an expression of trust to emphasize that their utopia was based on kinship with a hierarchy of submission.”⁵⁷⁶ This was submission to a



Fig. 5.05 Marston and Peter, *Sensation Comics #6*, 88, panels 3-7.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

loving authority because, according to Marston, women were twice as capable of love as men. The opposite of this benign binding was to be found in the “world of men”—that is, the rest of the globe beyond Paradise Island. In the world of men, even the love of women can be corrupted, as evidenced by the character of “Baroness Paula, Gestapo agent and murderess.”⁵⁷⁷ The Baroness has chained a female prisoner—whom she alarmingly calls her “slave”—and forces her to participate in an experiment against her will. The victim is clearly in distress, for in the war-torn world of men, bondage is used—even by women—to humiliate and subjugate rather than to build trust and loving submission. When Wonder Woman enters the scene and binds the evil Baroness and U-Boot commander against their will, her purpose is not to subjugate, but to rehabilitate (see **Fig. 5.06** below). “With this great gift I can change human character!” she says in the issue’s final panel. “I can make bad men good and weak women strong!” This issue

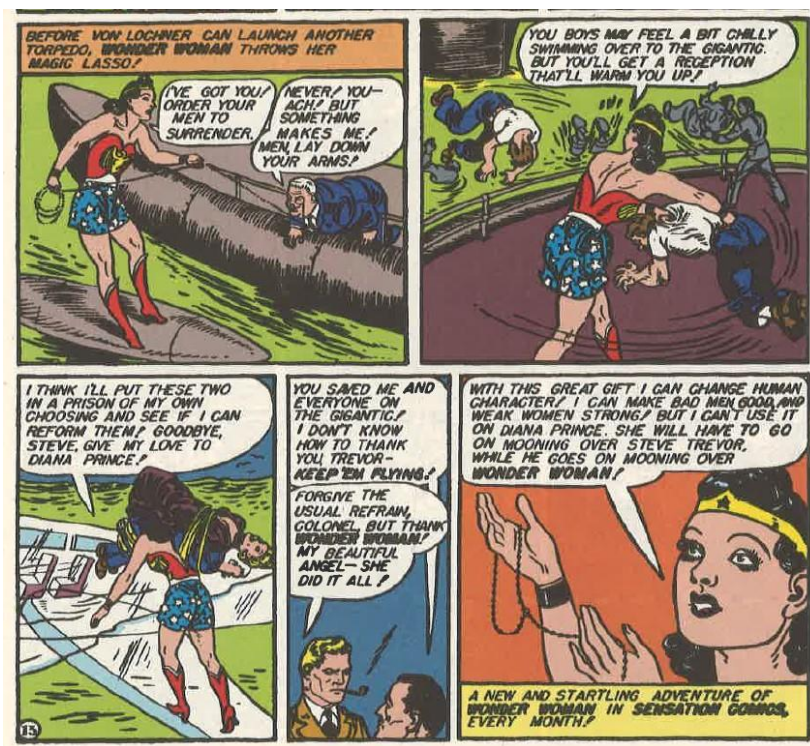


Fig. 5.06 Marston and Peter, *Sensation Comics* #6, 96, panels 4-8.

⁵⁷⁷ Marston & Peter, *Sensation Comics* #6, 91.

clearly illustrates Marston's use of bondage imagery in accordance with his stated goal of luring young male readers to his comics by appealing to their sexual appetites, only to then show that submitting to love leads to triumph over evil and the reformation of even the worst villains.

The entire premise of Wonder Woman's character is based on Marston's conviction that women were superior to men because they are essentially different from men: they are more loving, and therefore more fit to positions of leadership and reform.⁵⁷⁸ Given Nietzsche's reputation as a "Frauenfeind," it may come as a surprise to find a passage in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I* in which Nietzsche, too, cautiously offers the idea that the female sex-gender is the superior of the two (this alone does not exonerate Nietzsche from charges of misogyny, of course): "Das vollkommene Weib ist ein höherer Typus des Menschen, als der vollkommene Mann: auch etwas viel Selteneres."⁵⁷⁹ Here, we have the word "Menschen" used to describe human beings of both sex-genders, with the "ideal" woman ranking *higher* than the "ideal" man. This would seem to support Frances Oppel's argument that, although the word "Übermensch" is gendered in the original German (Nietzsche always speaks of "der Übermensch"), we need not limit our understanding of "Übermensch" to "superman:"

Neither Walter Kaufmann nor R. J. Hollingdale, his two most widely read English translators, render *Mensch* as 'human being,' save on rare occasions; both use the generic 'man,' and this usage alone gives the texts a more sexist bias than they otherwise need to have. The now-familiar word Übermensch has been popularly translated either as 'superman' (with connotations of a male superhero wearing underpants on the outside and a red cape) or as 'overman' (with little meaning other than an implied masculinity).⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁸ According to Lepore, this conviction of superiority based on difference put Marston at odds with the "twentieth-century feminists [who] had tended to turn away from arguments for rights that rested on ideas about difference, rather than on ideas about equality" (*Secret History*, 171).

⁵⁷⁹ Nietzsche, MA-I §377.

⁵⁸⁰ Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender*, 14.

We should remember, however, that *MA-I* predates *Zarathustra*, the first work in which Nietzsche uses the word “Übermensch” to signify his concept of ideal humanity, by five years, and that the way in which Nietzsche uses the word “Mensch” may have changed over time (as happened with the term “Dionysian” from *Die Geburt der Tragödie* to *Ecce Homo*).

Nevertheless, this is a promising first step toward a gender-inclusive interpretation of the Übermensch, and the rest of *MA-I*'s “Siebentes Hauptstück: Weib und Kind” supports the idea that women, by possessing qualities and tendencies different from those of men, are at least equal, if not superior, to men. He even reverses conventional views on men and women at one point, asserting that “die Weiber haben den Verstand, die Männer das Gemüth und die Leidenschaft.”⁵⁸¹ In another aphorism, Nietzsche also reverses conventional power relationships between men and women, claiming that “die Frauen haben es verstanden, sich durch Unterordnung doch den Überwiegenden Vortheil, ja die Herrschaft zu sichern.”⁵⁸² There is some similarity between this statement and Marston's belief that submission actually leads to dominion, but Wonder Woman's actions are obviously much more direct than the alleged behavior of women in Nietzsche's works.

This statement on the higher nature of the “ideal woman,” coupled with a few cautious reversals of patriarchal power structures, is intriguing; unfortunately, neither in this work nor in his subsequent works does he describe “das vollkommene Weib” in unambiguously concrete terms. Examples of real-life women whom Nietzsche describes positively in his works are few and far between, and so it is difficult to extrapolate the positive qualities of “das vollkommene Weib” from Nietzsche's descriptions of real women. In fact, the only woman about whom he writes unambiguously positively is Cosima Wagner, wife of Richard Wagner. Long after his

⁵⁸¹ Nietzsche, *MA-I* §411.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, §412.

“break” with Wagner, Nietzsche mentions her twice in his last finished manuscript, *Ecce Homo* (1888). The first reference comes in the section of the book titled “Warum ich so weise bin,” and here Nietzsche simply says:

Es giebt einen einzigen Fall, wo ich meines Gleichen anerkenne — ich bekenne es mit tiefer Dankbarkeit. Frau Cosima Wagner ist bei Weitem die vornehmste Natur; und, damit ich kein Wort zu wenig sage, sage ich, dass Richard Wagner der mir bei Weitem verwandteste Mann war... Der Rest ist Schweigen...⁵⁸³

It isn't entirely clear just what qualities Cosima Wagner possesses that cause Nietzsche to name her his one and only equal. When he mentions Frau Wagner again in the section “Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe,” he says only that she is an example of “hoher Bildung” and demonstrates good taste: “Die wenigen Fälle hoher Bildung, die ich in Deutschland vorfand, waren alle französischer Herkunft, vor Allem Frau Cosima Wagner, bei weitem die erste Stimme in Fragen des Geschmacks, die ich gehört habe...”⁵⁸⁴ Even if Cosima Wager is not *the* ideal woman, this description of her positive qualities is meager: she possesses good taste, her manners are highly refined, and she is “of the most noble nature.”

While praise of women like Cosima Wagner is rare in Nietzsche's works, passages criticizing women he esteems poorly are relatively more frequent. §233 of *Jenseits* expresses Nietzsche's distaste for Marie-Jeanne 'Manon' Roland de la Platière (known simply as Madame Roland), Anne Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein, and Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin de Francueil (better known as George Sand), saying that men consider these three writers to be “die drei komischen Weiber an sich — nichts mehr! — und gerade die besten unfreiwilligen *Gegen-Argumente* gegen Emancipation und weibliche Selbstherrlichkeit.”⁵⁸⁵ This aphorism is in

⁵⁸³ Nietzsche, EH “Warum ich so weise bin,” §3.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., “Bücher” §3.

⁵⁸⁵ In fact, Nietzsche so dislikes George Sand that he disparages the writer twice more in GD “Streifzüge” §1 and §6.

keeping with Nietzsche's general opposition to "Frauenemanzipation," a position expressed explicitly in Nietzsche's later works and present even in his earlier works. Even this anti-emanipatory stance is not straightforwardly misogynistic, however. True enough, Nietzsche calls the contemporary "Emancipation des Weibes" "eine Dummheit,"⁵⁸⁶ but he immediately qualifies this statement by calling it "eine beinahe maskulinische Dummheit." Nietzsche means that if women were to become "emancipated" and possess equal rights in modern society, they would face exactly the same degenerating effects of "Decadenz" that currently plague modern European men: "Man will sie überhaupt noch mehr ‚cultiviren‘ und, wie man sagt, das ‚schwache Geschlecht‘ durch Cultur stark machen: als ob nicht die Geschichte so eindringlich wie möglich lehrte, dass ‚Cultivirung‘ des Menschen und Schwächung — nämlich Schwächung, Zersplitterung, Ankränkelung der *Willenskraft*, immer mit einander Schritt gegangen sind[.]"

We recall from previous chapters that Nietzsche's objection to "cultivation" or "civilization" is inextricably tied to his critique of Christianity and other metaphysical systems that seek to force *everyone*, including Nietzschean "higher types," to conform to the morality of the "Heerdenmensch." To subject women to the same degenerative process as men would be entirely pointless, and would in fact encourage women, "sich dergestalt zu entweiblichen und alle die Dummheiten nachzumachen, an denen der ‚Mann‘ in Europa, die europäische ‚Mannhaftigkeit‘ krankt," the end result of which will be "eine Anbröckelung der weiblichen Instinkte[.]"⁵⁸⁷. Nietzsche objects to "Frauenemanzipation" because he views it as the erasure of "female instincts," that is, as the attempt to deny the natural differences between men and women and expose both sex-genders to the same stultifying effects of herd morality.

⁵⁸⁶ Nietzsche, JGB §239.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

While this does not necessarily indicate that women are incapable of self-development in Nietzsche's eyes, it is suggestive that every example Nietzsche gives in his later works of historical "höhere Menschen" who have approached the ideal of the "Übermensch" is male: Julius Ceasar, Napoleon, Goethe, etc. Every "höhere Mensch" that Zarathustra encounters in Part IV is also a man; aside from the "altes Weiblein" in Part I, the only women present in *Zarathustra* are metaphorical women like Life, Wisdom, and Truth. Zarathustra even goes so far as to say that women are not capable of the type of friendship necessary for the creation of higher types and eventual Übermenschen: "Noch ist das Weib nicht der Freundschaft fähig: Katzen sind immer noch die Weiber, und Vögel. Oder, besten Falles, Kühe."⁵⁸⁸ This is an undeniably offensive and disrespectful characterization. It is slightly tempered, however, by the next line that Zarathustra speaks: "Noch ist das Weib nicht der Freundschaft fähig. Aber sagt mir, ihr Männer, wer von euch ist denn fähig der Freundschaft?" To say that women are not currently capable of friendship in Zarathustra's higher sense is not to say that they *never* will be. The men whom Zarathustra addresses are not yet Übermenschen, but clearly Zarathustra believes that they can still arrange their lives in service to the Übermensch's development. Nonetheless, the passage is still much harsher in its criticism of "das Weib" than "ihr Männer," for while Zarathustra gives specific advice on how men can achieve this higher sort of friendship, his remarks give the impression that this will remain much more difficult for women than for men.

Quantitatively, most of the criticism in Nietzsche's works is directed at "men," but his remarks in these instances are generally critiques of "mankind." Conversely, his criticisms of "women" appear to depend much more on the biological sex of the targeted group. Scholar Lynne Tirrell points out how curious it is that Nietzsche, who generally attacks "the more

⁵⁸⁸ Nietzsche, Z-I "Vom Freunde." See Chapter Three, Section 5 for further discussion of Zarathustra's speech "Vom Freunde" in context and in connection with *The Uncanny X-Men*.

standard philosophical oppositions such as good/evil, mind/body, truth/falsity, conscious/unconscious thought,” should have “more difficulty towing [sic] his own philosophical line” when it comes to the conventional opposition of “man/woman.”⁵⁸⁹ Nietzsche does at least let his readers know, in Part VII of *Jenseits*, that he is aware of his personal philosophical limitations on the subject of man/woman. He offers in one aphorism, if not an apology, then at least an acknowledgment of his own intellectual prejudices. He writes that, despite the fact that “[d]as Lernen verwandelt uns,” still “im Grunde von uns, ganz ‚da unten‘, giebt es freilich etwas Unbelehrbares, einen Granit von geistigem Fatum, von vorherbestimmter Entscheidung und Antwort auf vorherbestimmte ausgelesene Fragen.”⁵⁹⁰ It certainly stands out that, in the same work in which he writes, “Nur wer sich wandelt, bleibt mit mir verwandt,”⁵⁹¹ Nietzsche also says that there is one belief that he could not change even if he wanted to. Although the aphorisms that follow §231 are among the most misogynistic that Nietzsche ever wrote, he does preface them by reminding the reader how important it is, “dass man es von vernherein nunmehr Weiss, wie sehr es eben nur – *meine* Wahrheiten sind.”⁵⁹²

On the other hand, scholar Caroline Joan S. Picart notes that some of Nietzsche’s aphorisms in *Jenseits* and in other mid- to late-period works “reveal great insight, and perhaps, sympathy” toward the condition of women in modern European society.⁵⁹³ Picart specifically notes the aphorism “*Von der weiblichen Keuschheit*” in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in which

⁵⁸⁹ Tirrell, “Sexual Dualism and Women’s Self-Creation,” 162.

⁵⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *JGB* §231.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., “Nachgesang.”

⁵⁹² Even Walter Kaufmann, one of Nietzsche’s most tireless defenders, could only say: “If anything redeems section 232, and much of the remainder of part VII, it is surely the disclaimer in 231” (In *Beyond Good and Evil*, 353n). In his *Nietzsche*, however, Kaufmann attempts to underplay the importance of Nietzsche’s unfortunate pronouncements on “das Weib,” stating that even though “Nietzsche’s writings contain many all-too-human judgments—especially about women,” such judgments “are philosophically irrelevant” (84). This is clearly not true, as many before me have pointed out, and as I will show further on in this chapter.

⁵⁹³ Picart, *Resentment and the Feminine*, 76.

Nietzsche examines the hypocritical and psychologically damaging sexual moral standards to which women are held, calling out this phenomenon as “etwas ganz Erstaunliches und Ungeheures in der Erziehung der vornehmen Frauen” and exclaiming at the end: “Kurz, man kann nicht mild genug gegen die Frauen sein!”⁵⁹⁴ Picart holds—and she is not alone—that, although aphorisms like these reveal a greater sensitivity on Nietzsche’s part than do certain pronouncements in *Jenseits* and beyond, “[t]hey do not save him altogether from the charge of misogyny.”⁵⁹⁵ Tirrell further suggests that much of Nietzsche’s critique of “women” hinges on his perception that women “have not taken enough control of their self-creation,” concluding that “Nietzsche engages in blaming the victim.”⁵⁹⁶ It is important to note, however, that Nietzsche never *blames* women for being the way that they are. On the contrary, he understands very well that women have *had* to adapt their behavior and appearance to the expectations that men have placed on them: “Endlich die *Frauen*: man denke über die ganze Geschichte der Frauen nach, — *müssen* sie nicht zu allererst und -oberst Schauspielerinnen sein?”⁵⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s program of self-overcoming does not accept excuses for not pursuing one’s own development, however justifiable said excuses may be. Either individuals are strong enough to overcome the obstacles blocking their path to self-overcoming, or they are not. This is an admittedly strict position, but it does not limit self-overcoming to one sex-gender or the other.

Even if Nietzsche’s works do not *explicitly* grant the female sex-gender the same potential for self-overcoming as the male sex-gender, superhero comics clearly indicate that superheroes are *superpeople*, not just *supermen* (even though the representation of women in superhero comics has suffered from pervasive stereotyping and the sidelining of female heroes

⁵⁹⁴ Nietzsche, FW §71.

⁵⁹⁵ Picart, *Resentment and the Feminine*, 76.

⁵⁹⁶ Tirrell, “Sexual Dualism,” 160.

⁵⁹⁷ Nietzsche, FW §361.

and non-powered characters). Contemporary writers of *Wonder Woman* comics continue to address issues of female representation in superhero comics, and sometimes they do this in ways that resonate with Nietzsche's Übermensch. The standalone story "She's a Wonder" (*Wonder Woman #170*, July 2001), is a strong example of this resonance. The story attempts to tackle real-world concerns about the Wonder Woman character as though they were issues faced by Wonder Woman in the DC comic-book universe. The result is admittedly mixed: Wonder Woman's first appearance in the story is accompanied by green text boxes revealing Lois Lane's commentary on the superhero's hypersexualization and her (Lane's) participation in that same hypersexualization (see **Fig. 5.07** below; the entire issue is framed as a day-in-the-life interview between Lane and Wonder Woman). Two pages later, Lane's narrative informs us that Wonder Woman delivers a speech to a packed auditorium on "EQUALITY between the sexes, TOLERANCE, peaceful COEXISTENCE." Although the content of the speech is not presented to Lane's readers (or to us), she assures them (and us) that Wonder Woman's ability to command the audience's attention depends on the content of her speech and not on "the gold-embazoned CHESTPIECE" that draws the eye to Wonder Woman's ample bosom. Nevertheless, Lane cannot resist mocking Wonder Woman and sarcastically summarizing the nature of her speech as: "Social Philosophy 101, AMAZON style" (see **Fig. 5.08** below).

For better or worse, however, the contradictory nature of Wonder Woman's presentation in the story turns out to have been the point all along. In this issue, Wonder Woman's various identities (Wonder Woman; Diana, Princess of the Amazons; and Diana Prince in her downtime) are conflated as she simultaneously pursues all manner of tasks: she conducts scientific research into a cure for diabetes, is asked to judge a Wonder Woman look-alike contest on a talk show, serves as the Themysciran ambassador to the United States, works with disadvantaged youth,



Fig. 5.07 (Left) Kelly & Jimenez, “She’s A Wonder,” *Wonder Woman* #170, 277, full page.

Fig. 5.08 (Right) Kelly & Jimenez, “She’s A Wonder,” *Wonder Woman* #170, 279, panel 2.



teaches self-defense to Indonesian prostitutes, aids Rwandan refugees, delivers an impassioned but ultimately fruitless plea for world peace at the UN, asks a man out on a date (and is turned down), recalls a past adventure fighting robotic gargoyles, and shoots pool and the breeze with Lois Lane in a nondescript watering hole at the end of her impossibly long day. Lane finds it difficult to reconcile the blend of the extraordinary and the quotidian in Wonder Woman’s life, and at the end of the story she demands an accounting: “I want to know how you *own* your *contradictions*.”⁵⁹⁸ Wonder Woman’s answer two pages later has a distinctly Nietzschean

⁵⁹⁸ Kelly and Jimenez, “She’s A Wonder,” 292.

flavor: “It’s because I don’t allow myself to *hide* from them. I *force* myself to see what I could otherwise hide...” (see **Fig. 5.09** below). Two panels later, she elaborates: “With this lasso bound to my side, I *cannot* evade. I *cannot lie*. Not to myself. Every day, I wrap myself in the fires of Hestia and ask myself for the *truth*.” (See **Fig. 5.10** below).



Fig. 5.09 Kelly & Jimenez, “She’s A Wonder,” *Wonder Woman* #170, 294, panel 12.



Fig. 5.10 Kelly & Jimenez, “She’s A Wonder,” *Wonder Woman* #170, 295, panel 2.

Dressed in an everyday outfit, playing pool in a nondescript bar, Wonder Woman/Princess Diana/Diana Prince describes her very human struggle to create herself every day. For Nietzsche, this ability to bear contradictions—whether within a society or within oneself—is a mark of nobility:

Widersprechen können. — Jeder weiss jetzt, dass Widerspruch-Vertragen-können ein hohes Zeichen von Cultur ist. Einige wissen sogar, dass der höhere Mensch den Widerspruch gegen sich wünscht und hervorruft, um einen Fingerzeig über seine ihm bisher unbekannte Ungerechtigkeit zu bekommen. Aber das Widersprechen-Können, das

erlangte *gute* Gewissen bei der Feindseligkeit gegen das Gewohnte, Ueberlieferte, Geheiligte, — das ist mehr als jenes Beides und das eigentlich Grosse, Neue, Erstaunliche unserer Cultur, der Schritt aller Schritte des befreiten Geistes: wer weiss das? —⁵⁹⁹

To accept that one's inner contradictions can never be fully reconciled, but to welcome them anyway, is to Nietzsche a sign of nobility. He goes so far as to say that the higher type of human being actively wishes and calls forth ("hervorruft") such contradictions. Once higher individuals come to know themselves, especially their contradictions, they can synthesize a new self out of the contradictory elements of the old. In "She's A Wonder," Wonder Woman does not shrink from any of life's contradictory experiences, and in fact goes out of her way to challenge herself in her mission to uplift humanity. She also challenges what she sees as the status quo of violence and hatred between nations and between individuals. Without denying or repressing her sexuality, she refuses to be only sex symbol. She shows physical and moral strength in the face of corruption and danger, empowering others to do the same. To contradict social norms and traditional authority like this is, in Nietzsche's works, the mark of the *truly* emancipated spirit. In the above quotation, Nietzsche praises not only the ability to bear contradiction but the *ability to contradict*, to constantly upset "das Gewohnte, Ueberlieferte, Geheiligte." The ability to contradict everything once considered sacrosanct is the superlative "Schritt aller Schritte" that individuals and cultures must take to overcome themselves.

What matters in "She's A Wonder" is not Wonder Woman's biological sex or gender identity, but rather her willingness to acknowledge her contradictions and constantly synthesize the many diverse aspects of her being into a coherent whole. This, in a word, is the essence of Nietzschean overcoming, both of one's self and of one's time. Nietzsche may have abandoned the terms "vollkommene Frau" and "vollkommene Mann" in favor of the masculine noun

⁵⁹⁹ Nietzsche, FW §297.

“Übermensch” in his later works, and he may have derided “Frauenemancipation” as he saw it practiced in his day, but nothing in his published works explicitly excludes women from the process of self-overcoming. The great strength of superhero comics is that the genre has the potential to pick up where Nietzsche left off and represent the potential of *all* biological sexes and gender identities for self-overcoming, even though this potential has, so far, been imperfectly or problematically realized.

4. Super-Parents: Superhero Comics and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra on Raising the Next Generation

It is relatively rare to see a superhero in the role of a parent, working alongside either an unpowered or superpowered spouse to raise a child. The idea of a “found family” occurs semi-frequently in superhero comics—the X-Men are one such example. And certainly, superheroes have had sidekicks since the Golden Age, and sometimes the mentor-mentee relationship evolves into something like a parent-child relationship (such is famously the case for Batman and Robin⁶⁰⁰). The presentation of these nontraditional “families” has rarely gone so far as to challenge the nuclear family model that was the U.S.-American social ideal in the postwar era (and largely still is today). Furthermore, superhero team-ups are more organizational than familial, and they typically allow for romantic entanglements that would be explicitly incestuous if the characters involved were biologically related (romance is a frequent occurrence among the

⁶⁰⁰ At various times, there have also been further members of an extended “Bat-Family,” an informal name given to Batman, Robin, Bat-Woman, Bat-Girl, and any others who have shared the Bat-Title through the years. Although not a “family” in a biological or even necessarily legal sense, the members of the Bat-Family care for one another in a decidedly familial way, although roles of parent and child are rather fluid. The issue is further complicated by fan response. Batman and Robin have been read not as father and son, but as homosexual lovers, since at least the mid-1940s. According to comics scholar Will Brooker, this sort of reading did not gain widespread popularity until the mid-1950s and 1960s, Fredric Wertham’s protestations to the contrary (cf. Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, Chapter 2: “1954: Censorship and Queer Readings”).

X-Men). Romantic subplots are common in superhero comics, but something as final as marriage is much less common. Superheroes having children, whether biological or adopted, is even rarer. Most likely, the nature of the genre is responsible for this phenomenon. Once a superhero's origins have been established (or re-established), each subsequent adventure follows a formulaic pattern in which the hero ends in roughly the same condition as he or she began—hence the relative infrequency of marriage and other relationship milestones, along with the general absence of aging. The birth of a child is a major event that fundamentally changes a superhero's narrative arc, and it is also more difficult to avoid aging a child than an adult superhero. It doesn't disturb us that Superman has been in his late 20s or early 30s for most of his eighty-five years in print, but we would notice if his child remained an infant for decades on end.

Nevertheless, superheroes will occasionally undertake to raise children (biological or adopted), and the archetypal superhero parent is, unsurprisingly, Superman. The idea of Superman fathering children, whether with humans, other surviving Kryptonians, or other superpowered beings (like Wonder Woman), is complex enough without the added problem of continuity. This description from the Superman Wiki neatly summarizes the problem:

This article serves to provide a list of instances in which **Superman has been depicted as a father**. The means by which include biological procreation, assisted fertilization, and adoption within the broad scope of imaginary stories, alternate realities, possible futures, and outright hoaxes. For Superman's lineage beyond his children, see the article about [Superman's Descendants](#). The page covering [Superman Clones](#) may also be of interest.⁶⁰¹

The page then lists 73 unique instances of Superman becoming or being a father. Many of these instances occur in “imaginary stories, alternate realities, possible futures, and outright hoaxes”

⁶⁰¹ FANDOM Comics Community, “Superman as a father.”

and so do not count as Superman’s “real” children. For the purposes of our investigation, I will examine two storylines in which Lois and Clark have children (one adopted, the other biological) and one storyline in which Superman and Wonder Woman have biological children together. In order of publication (although not necessarily of official chronology), they are: *Superman: Last Son* by Geoff Johns et al. (2007), *Superman Rebirth: Son of Superman Vol. 1* by Peter J. Tomasi et al. (2017), and *The Dark Knight: Master Race* by Frank Miller et al. (2017-18). There is a certain arbitrariness to these selections, but I have chosen to focus on these specific recent comics because, first of all, older comics are simply much more difficult to track down (many have not been republished in affordable collections). Secondly, the stories by Johns and Tomasi are part of the official DC chronology, rather than spin-offs or Elseworld stories that do not “really” take place.⁶⁰² Finally, of everything that I have read, I believe that these storylines will provide the most fruitful comparison with Nietzsche’s works as we consider the roles of male and female parents in raising children.

To say that Superman/Clark Kent and Lois Lane have a complicated relationship history is to dramatically understate the case. Eventually, however, Lois Lane learns that Clark Kent is Superman, and they start dating. After a number of fake-outs and non-canonical “weddings,”⁶⁰³ Lois and Clark eventually tie the knot in *Superman: The Wedding Album* (published in 1996—their courtship had lasted nearly 60 years), although various reboots and spin-offs since then have ignored or undone this event. *Superman: Last Son*, by Johns et al., was originally published

⁶⁰² It is also worth noting that, as far as I know, the “original” Superman *has* fathered a child, but at a point in DC chronology when the “original” Superman is no longer the “primary” Superman. As the result of several “Crisis” storylines, the various Earths in the DC Multiverse have been collapsed into one, and the storylines of most characters have been correspondingly streamlined—with the apparent exception of Superman, who, in at least one six-issue arc by Dan Jurgens et al. (2015), exists in two forms on the post-Crisis Earth. I will investigate this story arc in greater detail in the conclusion to this chapter.

⁶⁰³ See Cronin, “Times When Lois Lane Got Married in the Comics For Real!” for a helpful overview of the confusing chronology of Lois Lane’s marriages.

across four issues of *Action Comics* (#844-46, 851; December 2006-July 2007) and takes place in a continuity where Lois and Clark *are* married. In this story, a Kryptonian boy crash-lands on Earth. Superman is shaken to discover that he is not the sole Kryptonian survivor, and he forcibly removes the child from government custody. In his Clark Kent identity, he and his wife Lois Lane take the boy in as their own and name him Christopher.

As it turns out, Christopher is actually Lor-Zod, the son of General Zod and Ursa, leaders of villainous Kryptonians who have finally escaped from the Phantom Zone (an interdimensional prison to which they were sentenced and where they survived the destruction of Krypton). All manner of superhero hijinks ensues as Superman battles Zod, Ursa, and their militant followers, but the emotional crux of the story is Christopher's development. Although he is the son of megalomaniacal villains, Christopher is "good" and desires to live a heroic life, modeling his actions on Superman's example. Evidently, Superman's influence is strong, for Christopher rejects his biological parents and even sacrifices himself to close the Phantom Zone portal, trapping Zod and his army in interdimensional space once more (Christopher does not die—one of Superman's allies in the Phantom Zone promises to keep searching until he finds him). Before he seals the portal, Christopher expresses his gratitude toward Clark and Lois: "You gave me so much. A home. Family and friends."⁶⁰⁴ It is clear, however, that Christopher has received much more than this: thanks to Superman, Christopher has managed to overcome his biological parents' indoctrination and has adopted Superman's mission to protect humanity. As he flies into the portal, Christopher assumes Superman's typical flying pose: arms outstretched with fists determinedly closed (see **Fig. 5.11** below). He thanks Superman a final time before saying, "Up, up and away." This is one of Superman's most famous catchphrases, and the small

⁶⁰⁴ Johns et al., *Superman: Last Son*, 141.

font in which the words are printed indicates that Christopher says this quietly, to himself. He has fully internalized his adoptive father's moral message and resolutely embraces his fate.



Fig. 5.11 Johns, Donner, and Kubert, *Superman: Last Son*, 142, panels 2-6, with a partial image of panel 1 at top.

Despite Christopher thanking both Superman/Clark and Lois Lane, the latter does not appear until page 22 of the first issue, and even then it is to voice some (entirely reasonable) objections to Superman's plan to rescue the Kryptonian boy from government custody. When she reappears in the story's second issue, she still resists the idea of adopting Christopher:



Fig. 5.12 Johns, Donner, and Kubert, *Superman: Last Son*, 37, panels 4-6.

Her reservations are sensible: their lives do not allow them to devote the necessary attention to raising a child. That Lois objects to being a mother because her life's work is to "find the *truth*" resonates strongly with Nietzsche's pronouncements on the "free spirit" and seeker of knowledge for whom marriage and raising a family are nothing but distractions:

Aber ebenso ungereimt erscheint es, wenn Der, welcher die allgemeinste Erkenntniss und die Abschätzung des gesammten Daseins zu seiner Aufgabe erkoren hat, sich mit persönlichen Rücksichten auf eine Familie, auf Ernährung, Sicherung, Achtung von Weib und Kind, belastet und vor sein Teleskop jenen trüben Schleier aufspannt, durch welchen kaum einige Strahlen der fernen Gestirnwelt hindurchzudringen vermögen. So komme auch ich zu dem Satze, dass in den Angelegenheiten der höchsten philosophischen Art alle Verheiratheten verdächtig sind.⁶⁰⁵

Nietzsche writes that, for the sake of their life's work, certain individuals would do better to avoid marriage and childrearing—to the benefit of everyone involved. The events of *Last Son*, however, indicate that, while remaining childless might be the *best* approach for two work-oriented people like Clark and Lois, two extraordinary individuals can certainly rise to the occasion. By the end of the second chapter, Lois and Clark have rescued Christopher from

⁶⁰⁵ Nietzsche, MA-I §437.

Bizarro and proved to themselves that they can protect and care for him. Contrary to Nietzsche's assertion, the events of the story suggest that perhaps having a spouse and a child do not require much, if any, compromise on the part of those who, like Lois, have dedicated their lives to "finding the truth."

Lois's ultimate contribution to Christopher's development is, however, minimal. She disappears from the story for large stretches of time, and when she is threatened by Zod and Ursa toward the end, Christopher stands up for her—not necessarily out of filial love, but because that is "[w]hat Superman would do."⁶⁰⁶ Christopher models his behavior upon his male adoptive parent—and he is not the only "Son of Superman" to do so. In Tomasi et al.'s *Superman Rebirth: Son of Superman Vol. 1*, Lois and Clark have had a biological son named Jonathan (after Superman's adoptive father), and it once more falls to Superman to initiate their son into the world beyond the idyllic Kansas farm to which the family had retreated.⁶⁰⁷ Superman brings young Jonathan with him on a mission to rescue the crew of a nuclear submarine, instructing his son to "listen, watch, and learn, okay?"⁶⁰⁸ Jon is relegated to observer status because he is still struggling with his developing superpowers and his own identity. His father is his primary source of guidance here, as illustrated by the exchange depicted in **Fig. 5.13** below. Superman acknowledges that Jon will have to take up the Superman mantle and "embrace the 'S' for yourself." It sounds at first as though Jon has the choice to follow in his father's footsteps or go his own way, but Superman never really treats the latter as an option. In the panels above, he

⁶⁰⁶ Johns, Donner, and Kubert, *Last Son*, 97.

⁶⁰⁷ For what it is worth, I offer the following synopsis: This Superman/Clark Kent is the "New Earth" Superman who, along with his wife and son, finds himself on "Prime Earth" after the events of the "Flashpoint" storyline (this storyline made "Prime Earth" the mainstream reality for DC comics in 2011; "New Earth" had been the mainstream reality from 1986 to 2011). The "Prime Earth" Superman died fighting Doomsday, and the "New Earth" Superman, who initially hid his existence, has decided to become "Prime Earth's" new Superman (even though, technically, he is the old Superman... One begins to see the problem of continuity in superhero comics).

⁶⁰⁸ Tomasi et al., *Son of Superman*, n.p.

immediately launches into a lecture on how “character” is more important than superpowers— that “doing the right thing when no one else will” is what sets a Superman (or Superboy) above the rest. Superman is clearly the authority figure in his son’s life: he fills most of the left-hand panel, thick-necked, broad-shouldered, and surrounded by an infinity of stars, whereas Jon seems to shrink away from his father and from the reader, barely filling a quarter of the right-hand panel, eyes downcast, and surrounded by the nondescript whiteness of the snowy ground. Even his speech is more disjointed than his father’s, full of ellipses and consisting of three semi-disconnected balloons. Jon is as hesitant as his father is self-assured.

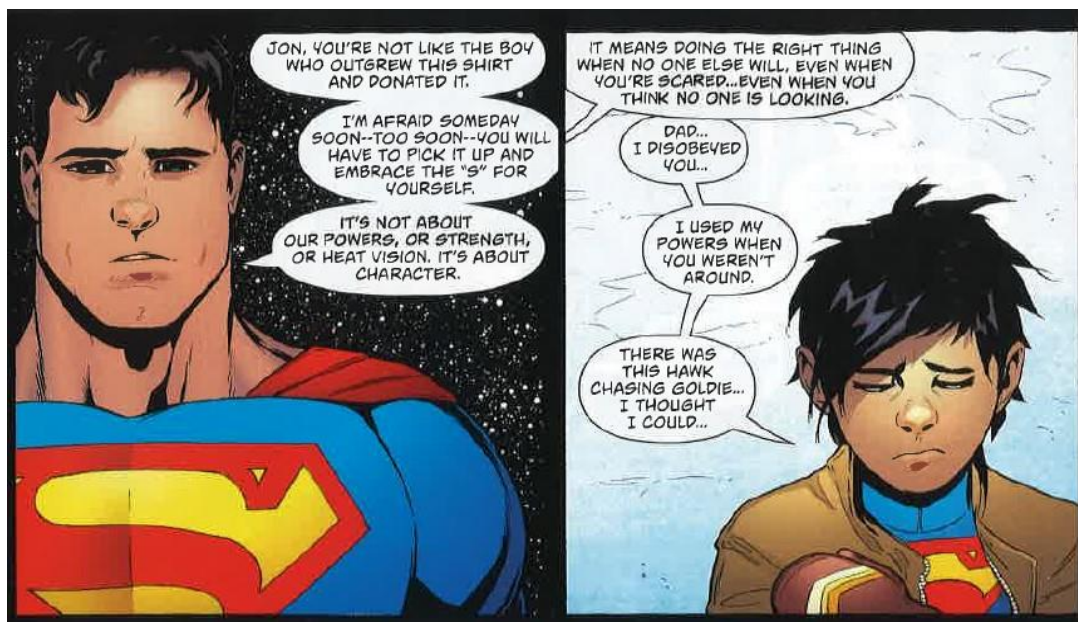


Fig. 5.13 Tomasi et al., *Superman Rebirth: Son of Superman Vol. 1*, n.p., panels 1-2.

Although the relationship between father and son is the main focus of the narrative, Lois Lane has a greater influence on her child in this story than in *Last Son*. Still, hers is a supporting role: she functions as a caregiver who tends to her warrior-husband’s wounds (Jon accidentally

strikes his father with a heat-ray during the submarine incident) and at one point even explicitly tells Clark/Superman that *he* must be their son's primary mentor:



Fig. 5.14 Tomasi et al.,
*Superman Rebirth: Son of
Superman Vol. 1*, n.p., panel 6.

The fact that Lois plays a supporting role is representative, although in a much less grisly fashion, of the phenomenon in superhero comics now known as “fridging.” In 1999, Gail Simone, who would later come to write comics for DC (including a Wonder Woman series, which we will examine more closely in Section 5 below), created a website called “Women in Refrigerators.” The title was inspired by a page in *Green Lantern* #54 (Volume 3, 1994⁶⁰⁹), in which Kyle Ranor, the eponymous Green Lantern, comes home to discover that Alexandra “Alex” DeWitt, his girlfriend, has been murdered and stuffed into a refrigerator. In Simone’s own words, “I realized one day that most of my favorite female comics characters had met untimely and often icky ends.”⁶¹⁰ Simone then compiled a list of superheroines who had been “killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had

⁶⁰⁹ The volume number here refers to the iteration of Green Lantern. “Volume 3” signifies that this is the second time the line has been rebooted and the numbering restarted since the character’s inception and original series numbering in 1940.

⁶¹⁰ Simone, “Women in Refrigerators,” “Homepage.”

other life-derailing tragedies befall her[.]”⁶¹¹ The list is extensive—and it only catalogues superheroines who have been “fridged” (as the term has come to be used), not including the plethora of girlfriends, fiancés, and wives who have met similarly violent fates.⁶¹² The term “fridging” has come to signify, as Carolyn Cocca summarizes it, the trope within superhero comics whereby “a female character’s actions, or what happens to her, just furthers the development of a male character.”⁶¹³ In this way, many female characters are subordinated to male characters, functioning primarily to advance the male character’s story (either indirectly, by dying in a manner that drives a male character to further or renewed action, or directly, by remaining alive but taking a backseat to the action). Lois Lane does not die in Tomasi et al.’s *Son of Superman*, but her role is generally to provide physical and emotional support for her husband and son.

This tendency resonates with Nietzsche’s works. Although the seventh part of *MA-I*, “Weib und Kind,” presents Nietzsche’s most fair-minded pronouncements on “das Weib” and his almost progressive ideas of marriage,⁶¹⁴ the section also contains aphorisms that explicitly uphold conventional gender roles according to which a wife supports her husband’s work by tending to home and hearth. “Die Frauen wollen dienen und haben darin ihr Glück; und der Freigeist will nicht bedient sein und hat darin sein Glück,”⁶¹⁵ he writes in an aphorism titled “*Missklang zweier Consonanzen*” (and quoted here in full). This aphorism is one of many in this

⁶¹¹ Ibid., “The List.”

⁶¹² According to Simone, she compiled her list “ignoring for the moment the wives/girlfriends of superheroes - a whole ‘nother problem[.]” (“Women in Refrigerators,” “The List”).

⁶¹³ Cocca, *Superwomen*, 44.

⁶¹⁴ For example: “Der beste Freund wird wahrscheinlich die beste Gattin bekommen, weil die gute Ehe auf dem Talent zur Freundschaft beruht” (MA-I §378). §406 presents “*Die Ehe als langes Gespräch*,” in which Nietzsche asserts that the most important question a man must ask himself when choosing a wife is: “glaubst du, dich mit dieser Frau bis in’s Alter hinein gut zu unterhalten? Alles Andere in der Ehe ist transitorisch, aber die meiste Zeit des Verkehrs gehört dem Gespräche an.” We would still call this good advice today, adding only that potential spouses of all genders should ask themselves this question.

⁶¹⁵ Nietzsche, MA-I §432.

section that serves primarily to portray the irreconcilability of the free spirit's exalted mission with the quotidian dullness of marriage, but that also very clearly ascribes servility to women. Nothing in Nietzsche's later works contradicts this idea. Zarathustra's speech "Von Kind und Ehe" is addressed to male listeners and not to their future wives, who are simply named as the object of their future husbands' search. Nietzsche's comments in *Jenseits* certainly do not ascribe agency to women. Nietzsche's sister, herself a dedicated traditionalist (as we have already seen), is convinced that her brother cited Cosima Wagner as the epitome of womanly nobility because she directed all her energies in support of her husband's artistic works and cultural goals.⁶¹⁶ This is one instance wherein Förster-Nietzsche's interpretation of her brother's philosophy is not *explicitly* contradicted by what her brother actually wrote.

This being said, Tomasi et al.'s Lois Lane does at one point directly impart a lesson to her son. When Jon is angered by the Eradicator, an artificial Kryptonian super-intelligence that has taken corporeal form, Lois calms her son and reminds him that he is the child of two worlds, and that greatness can be his if he makes the active choice to choose greatness over revenge:



Fig. 5.15 Tomasi et al., *Superman Rebirth: Son of Superman Vol. 1*, n.p., panels 5-7.

⁶¹⁶ Cf. Förster-Nietzsche, *Nietzsche und die Frauen seiner Zeit*, the chapters "Cosima Wagner" and "Hilfreiche Frauen."

Whereas in **Fig. 5.13** Superman and Jonathan are presented in separate panels, here mother and son are pictured *together*. Lois touches Jon's chest above his heart, and although her point was presented much earlier by Superman (that Jon must choose to embrace his super-identity), it is only now that Jon fully internalizes the message. It took both parents working together to give their son the support he needed to embrace his dual identity. This combined effort, coupled with Lois's statement that her son has "the best of both worlds" within him, *also* recalls Zarathustra's speech "Von Kind und Ehe." For although Zarathustra does not directly address future fathers *and mothers*, he does present the following ideal of marriage: "Ehe: so heisse ich den Willen zu Zweien, das Eine zu schaffen, das mehr ist, als die es schufen."⁶¹⁷ If it were not already clear enough that this is an image of the *Übermensch*, Zarathustra explicitly challenges his (male) listeners at the end of the speech: "Durst dem Schaffenden, Pfeil und Sehnsucht zum *Übermenschen*: sprich, mein Bruder, ist diess dein Wille zur Ehe?" The primary responsibility of a husband and wife is to raise a child that will be of a "higher type" than they are: "Nicht nur fort sollst du dich pflanzen, sondern hinauf!" Lois and Clark assume this level of responsibility for their son. Although they are both there to guide him, *he* must be the one to ultimately decide what kind of person, and what kind of superhero, he is going to be.

Zarathustra states that the will to create a child who is greater than both parents requires that spouses love each other: "Über euch hinaus sollt ihr einst lieben! So *lernt* erst lieben!" This love, however, is not based on romantic-sexual attraction. Instead, mutual respect and reverence between husband and wife are of primary importance: "Ehrfurcht vor einander nenne ich Ehe als vor den Wollenden eines solchen Willens."⁶¹⁸ Of marriage on the basis of romantic love or

⁶¹⁷ This and subsequent quotations in the following two paragraphs all come from Nietzsche, Z-I, "Von Kind und Ehe."

⁶¹⁸ See Chapter Two, page 115 on the multiple meanings contained in the word "Ehrfurcht."

sexual attraction, Zarathustra has only the following to say: “Viele kurze Thorheiten – das heisst bei euch Liebe.” The fact that both of Jon Kent’s parents are clearly attracted to one another suggests that the subordination of sexual gratification in a marriage might just be a Nietzschean idiosyncrasy.⁶¹⁹ Nevertheless, Zarathustra challenges his listeners (who, it must again be said, are all male) to find wives who are spiritually formidable enough to mother higher generations. This implies that, if such women do not exist already, they *can* exist. As early as 1922, it was clear, at least to commentators like August Messer, “wie das Weib Nietzsches Eheideal unmöglich entsprechen könnte, wenn es lediglich Geschlechtswesen, lediglich ‚Weibchen‘ wäre (wie das im Abschnitt ‚Von alten und jungen Weiblein‘ eigentlich vorausgesetzt ist).”⁶²⁰ Even if Zarathustra believes what he says about women in the earlier speech (and as we saw in Section 2 above, this is a big “if”), his comments on marriage clearly indicate that “das Weib” is capable of being more than she (allegedly) is at present. Nor does Zarathustra let his male listeners off the hook, either: “Du bist jung und wünschst dir Kind und Ehe,” he says to them; “Aber ich frage dich: bist du ein Mensch, der ein Kind sich wünschen *darf*?” Although the figure of Zarathustra is unfairly critical of women, he also consistently calls out contemporary men as similarly

⁶¹⁹ Although Zarathustra does not give explicit instruction on what husbands and wives should do with their excess sexual energy, Nietzsche in an earlier work proposes a radical solution: “die Ehe in ihrer höheren Auffassung gedacht, [...] bedarf wahrscheinlich, wie man besorgen muss, einer natürlichen Beihülfe, des *Concubinats*” (MA-I §424). Nietzsche does not deny male sexual urges (in fact, he even defends sexual intercourse against those religious critics who brand the act with the label of “original sin,” as, for example, in Z-III “Von den drei Bösen” §2), but he does suggest that asking a wife to gratify her husband’s sexual needs on top of being a good mother and homemaker is asking too much. “Eine gute Gattin, welche Freundin, Gehülfin, Gebälerin, Mutter, Familienhaupt, Verwalterin sein soll, ja vielleicht abgesondert von dem Manne ihrem eigenen Geschäft und Amte vorzustehen hat, kann nicht zugleich Concubine sein: es hiesse im Allgemeinen zu viel von ihr verlangen” (Nietzsche, MA-I §424). It is not clear whether or not this means that Nietzsche’s ideal wife-mother is a generally asexual being, or if he simply believed in accordance with the times that women did not experience sexual desire to the same degree as men (although then one must wonder where these concubines are coming from). At any rate, Nietzsche makes it clear in this aphorism that a marriage entered into “zum Zweck der Erzeugung und Erziehung einer neuen Generation” will include sexual intercourse solely as “ein seltenes, gelegentliches Mittel für einen grösseren Zweck.”

⁶²⁰ Messer, *Erläuterungen*, 54.

deficient. In his estimation, men and women have a long way to go before they are individually developed enough to bear the responsibility of raising a child together.

Although men and women must come together in order to sire and raise a child, they have distinct parental roles according to Zarathustra's teachings. "So will ich Mann und Weib: kriegstüchtig den Einen, gebärtüchtig das Andre," Nietzsche's fictional prophet declares.⁶²¹ Superman/Clark Kent and Lois Lane generally adhere to a division of labor that mirrors this pronouncement: the male parent is the fighter, and the female parent the nurturer. But *Son of Superman* partially transcends this division in its final act, depicting an unambiguously "kriegstüchtige" Lois Lane. When the chips are down, Lois Lane dons one of Batman's spare mecha-Batsuits and rushes to her child's defense:



Fig. 5.16 Tomasi et al., *Superman Rebirth: Son of Superman Vol. 1*, n.p., panels 1-2.

⁶²¹ Nietzsche, Z-III "Von alten und neuen Tafeln" §23.

Two things are happening here. First, we see a female character—who, like Batman, possesses no superpowers of her own—go toe-to-toe with an opponent who has temporarily incapacitated the mighty Superman. The scene turns the heretofore stereotypical presentation of gender roles on its head as a mother proves herself to be her husband’s equal in a physical contest against a common enemy. The scene appears to overturn Zarathustra’s pronouncement—but I have not quoted it in full. The sentence in its entirety reads: “So will ich Mann und Weib: kriegstüchtig den Einen, gebärtüchtig das Andre, *beide aber tanztüchtig mit Kopf und Beinen.*”⁶²² It is too easy to quote Nietzsche incompletely, and when we do, we can end up with a very warped understanding of what his works are actually communicating. When read in full, this pronouncement indicates that although Zarathustra desires that we recognize the (purported) differences between men and women, the two sexes in their ideal forms also have much *in common*. Dancing in *Zarathustra* represents one’s overcoming of the self and the times, as in the fourth and final part of the work when Zarathustra reprimands the “höheren Menschen” that he has gathered around himself for not knowing “wie man tanzen muss — über euch hinweg tanzen!”⁶²³ Although Zarathustra proclaims men fit for war and women for bearing children, *both* must be fit for dancing; that is, fit for self-overcoming. This may not be gender equality as we conceive of it today, but it does finally suggest that, yes, *there can be male and female Übermenschen*, even if each sex-gender will manifest its respective Übermensch-nature differently.

The second aspect of this scene worth noting is that, although she is fighting with just as much ferocity as her husband, Lois refers to herself using a metaphor drawn from the natural world. After soundly thrashing the Eradicator, she tells it that it would do well to “never mess

⁶²² Ibid., emphasis added.

⁶²³ Nietzsche, Z-IV “Vom höheren Menschen” §20.

with the baby bear when the mama bear is nearby.” On the one hand, this metaphor suggests that she (with the help of advanced technology) is nearly Superman’s equal in terms of ferocity. On the other hand, her figurative language suggests that she only musters her powers of physical protection when her maternal instincts are triggered on an instinctual level. This connection to nature reveals a gendered component once we notice that Superman is rarely, if ever, compared to a natural force. No nature-based imagery is used in Tomasi et al.’s story to describe Superman’s powers. In fact, ever since the inception of the character, Superman has been compared to distinctly man-made phenomena: the first issue of *Action Comics* tells us that Superman can “hurdle a twenty-story building,” “raise tremendous weights” (he lifts a steel beam), “run faster than an express train,” and that “nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!” (See **Fig. 1.06** in Chapter One above.⁶²⁴) Lois Lane’s depiction in *Son of Superman* suggests that a mother is more closely connected to the natural world than to the modern world of technology—an idea that is especially surprising given that Lois Lane is inhabiting a mechanized super-suit when she says this.

Nietzsche also claims that women are more intimately connected with nature than men are in §239 of *Jenseits*:

Das, was am Weibe Respekt und oft genug Furcht einflösst, ist seine *Natur*, die „natürlicher“ ist als die des Mannes, seine ächte raubthierhafte listige Geschmeidigkeit, seine Tigerkrallen unter dem Handschuh, seine Naivetät im Egoismus, seine Unerziehbarkeit und innerliche Wildheit, das Unfassliche, Weite, Schweifende seiner Begierden und Tugenden.....⁶²⁵

⁶²⁴ The same page gives a “scientific explanation of Clark Kent’s amazing strength” and does indirectly compare the superhero to ants and grasshoppers, who respectively can lift many times their own body weight and jump incredible distances relative to their size. While it is true that insects are part of nature, the ants and grasshoppers are never mentioned again, and the opening panel of every issue of *Action Comics* after #6 repeats the description of Superman’s abilities in modern technological terms.

⁶²⁵ Nietzsche, JGB §239.

Nietzsche's idea here—that woman's "nature" is "more natural" than man's "nature"—feels uncharacteristically tautological. Every "nature" is "natural," and while it could make sense to assert that it is in the nature of one sex-gender to remain more closely related to the "natural world," Nietzsche's actual phrasing comes across as rather vacuous. This supports Oppel's view that even Nietzsche is not taking his own opinions on women seriously in these aphorisms. Nevertheless, Nietzsche offers up this pronouncement for his readers' consideration, and his reception history in Europe and the United States at the turn of the century indicates that many readers found this to be an apt characterization of "das Weib." And superhero comics like *Son of Superman* indicate that this symbolization of "woman" as a ferocious mammal—a "raubtheirhafte" creature like a "Tiger" or a "mama bear"—has not entirely lost its appeal.

Tomasi et al. are not the only recent big names in superhero comics to maintain this symbolic split between the natural realm of the mother and the technological realm of the father. The creative team behind Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight: Master Race* (2017-18) is a veritable who's who of comic-book artists, and the association of motherhood with primal nature and fatherhood with technological modernity is strongly reinforced throughout the work. The story begins in Gotham City, and every panel of the first three pages is dominated by heavy black brushstrokes and saturated in the harsh blue-and-red pattern of police emergency lights. Then, a two-page spread shows the black silhouette of Gotham's skyline against a harsh rising sun. After a final page showing Gotham's new police commissioner stepping up to a thicket of black microphones, a hard cut between pages takes us to a primeval jungle landscape. Wonder Woman is fighting a minotaur, and as the rain-drenched scene unfolds, we notice with some surprise that Wonder Woman has an infant strapped to her back! She easily defeats the monster

without endangering the child, finally pausing atop her fallen foe to breastfeed the boy. Both mother and son are surrounded by the lush greens of a verdant rainforest (see **Fig. 5.17** below).



Fig. 5.17 Miller et al., *Dark Knight: Master Race*, n.p., full page.

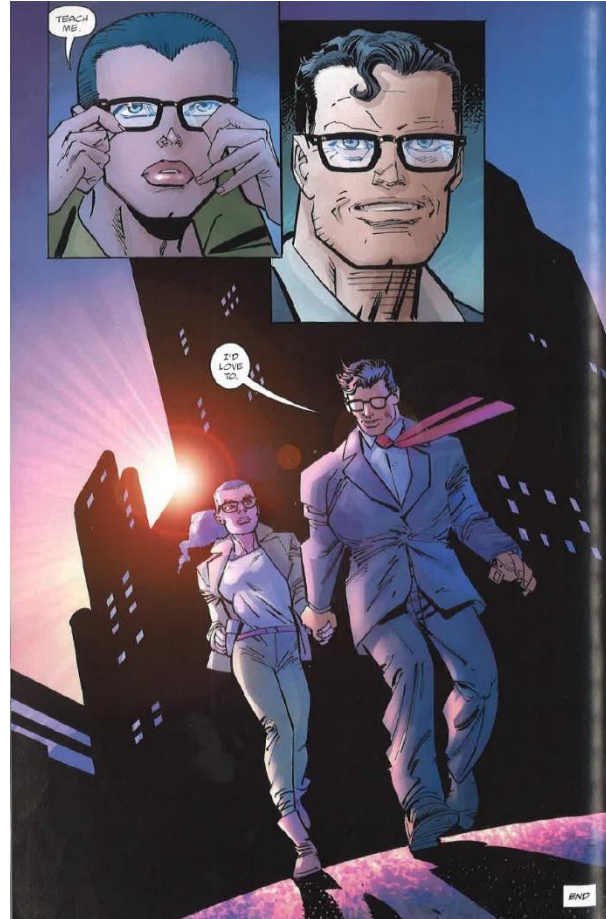


Fig. 5.18 Miller et al., *Dark Knight: Master Race*, n.p., full page.

We discover in the following pages that this battle has taken place on Paradise Island, home to the Amazons. Their buildings are ancient and overgrown with creeping plants, contrasting sharply with the harsh artificiality of the Gotham cityscape. Although war will come to this paradise, Wonder Woman never leaves the island during the course of the narrative. As the story progresses, we learn that the baby boy—named Jonathan—is the younger of Wonder Woman’s two children fathered by Superman. The other, a teenage girl named Lara, is torn

between her Amazonian and Kryptonian roots. In a dramatic sparring session with her mother, she rejects Wonder Woman and the Amazonian way of life and leaves Paradise Island for Metropolis and Gotham City. Here, the main part of her character arc plays out as she first joins Quar and his Kryptonian rebels in a battle against Earth's heroes, including her father. By the end of the narrative, she of course comes around and helps Superman, Batman, Batwoman, and the Amazons defeat the villainous Kryptonians in a final confrontation that begins in Metropolis and ends on Paradise Island. At story's end, Lara does not return to her mother in Themyscira (the Amazon capital), choosing instead to remain in Metropolis with her father, from whom she wishes to learn how to be a superhuman in modern society. Wonder Woman does not appear in this closing sequence, and the final page shows how different the father's world is from the mother's (compare **Fig. 5.18** to **Fig. 5.17**). This is the modern world of skyscrapers and macadamized roads, the world of technology's triumph over nature. It is the father's duty to introduce his children—first Lara, and someday Jonathan, too—to the civilized world once they grow beyond their mother's primeval environment.

This story suggests that while there is honor and worth in Wonder Woman's existence on Paradise Island, the Amazonian way of life is ultimately insufficient preparation for a life in the modern world. This is a far cry from Marston's original stories in *Sensation Comics* and *Wonder Woman*. In Marston's comics, Paradise Island was meant to serve as *the* model according to which the "world of men" would be remade. This message is not present in Miller's work, nor is it as strongly conveyed in other recent iterations of Wonder Woman.⁶²⁶ Differences between the

⁶²⁶ In the two main *New 52* series featuring Wonder Woman (*Wonder Woman* and *Superman/Wonder Woman*), the Amazons are turned into serpents and Hippolyta, Wonder Woman's mother, to stone by a jealous Hera. Consequently, neither the Amazons nor their homeland play a large role in either series beyond motivating Wonder Woman to find a remedy to her sisters' reptilian condition. Paradise Island is no longer a paradise, let alone a model example of human society.

sexes are present in both versions, but where Marston's version touts these differences as proof of womankind's fitness for leading the species, Miller et al.'s narrative suggests that, while "strong female characters" abound, there is a natural progression from the "more natural" world of the mother to the modern technological world of the father. Miller's story presents no explicit argument that the former is in any way inferior to or less essential than the latter, but it is clear by story's end that one is the start, the other the finish.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra professes a similar position: both sex-genders have important roles to play in the coming of the *Übermensch*, but these roles are based on a stark conception of difference that frequently gives the more active role to men and the more passive role to women—unless the latter are provoked into revealing the "Tiger" within. Nietzsche's works are often interpreted to argue in support the perpetuation of conventional sex-gender stereotypes, and superhero comics are frequently shown to do the same. There is no indication that this resonance is purposeful: aside from the references to "Zarathustra's Peitsche" discussed in Section 2 of this chapter, superhero comics tend not to reference Nietzsche on the subject of sex-gender. Nevertheless, exploring the two in conjunction with one another helps us clarify what each has to say on the matter, and illuminates the particular strengths and shortcomings of both. Ever since the debut of Marston and Peters's Wonder Woman, however, there have been creators who seek to break the mold when it comes to sex and gender in superhero stories, and this movement has experienced a resurgence in recent decades. In the next section, we will examine several new directions being taken for Wonder Woman and other female comic-book characters. First, however, I will introduce one final, surprising (though not entirely unproblematic) aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy of sex-gender.

5. New Takes on an Old Superheroine and Nietzsche's Gender-Blending Definition of the "Genie"

We have seen in the preceding sections that the presentation of "das Weib" in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is more nuanced than the speech "Vom alten und jungen Weiblein," which uncritically reproduces conventional nineteenth-century sex-gender stereotypes, may initially lead readers to believe. Beyond what we have already seen, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* also frequently uses pregnancy-based metaphors when he describes typically *male* creative types, which Opiel takes as evidence that *Zarathustra* (and, by extension, Nietzsche) is making a case for his listeners to overcome prevalent sex-gender stereotypes. "Throughout much of his book, *Zarathustra* is pregnant, heavy with the future, and he urges metaphoric pregnancies on his male followers,"⁶²⁷ writes Opiel, noting that this is present from the very beginning of the philosophical novel. "Ich sage euch: man muss noch Chaos in sich haben, um einen tanzenden Stern gebären zu können," *Zarathustra* informs the people in the marketplace.⁶²⁸ The "dancing star" to which *Zarathustra* refers is the *Übermensch*, whom *Zarathustra* has just announced in the previous section. This "gebären" is literal in the sense that the *Übermensch* will be born of future generations, but it is also metaphorical: *Zarathustra* does not specify that only one sex or the other can "bear" the *Übermensch*, only that "one" (the impersonal German "man") must have chaos within oneself to be capable of "bearing" the *Übermensch*.

Opiel further cites a number of other instances of *Zarathustra*'s metaphorical pregnancy, most notably a passage from the speech "Auf den glückseligen Inseln" in the second part, in which Nietzsche's prophet proclaims: "Dass der Schaffende selber das Kind sei, das neu geboren werde, dazu muss er auch die Gebälerin sein wollen und der Schmerz der Gebälerin."⁶²⁹ "Der

⁶²⁷ Opiel, *Nietzsche on Gender*, 160.

⁶²⁸ Nietzsche, Z-I, "Zarathustra's Vorrede," §5.

⁶²⁹ Opiel discusses this passage in *Nietzsche on Gender*, 159.

Schaffende” is a gendered noun that implies a male figure, but this male figure is on the one hand genderless (it is simply “das Kind,” sex-gender not otherwise specified) and on the other hand decisively female, as this “creator” must desire to be a “Gebälerin” (lit. “one who gives birth,” i.e. a “mother”) and to take the pain of childbirth upon him-/her-/itself. Oppel also cites an instance from *Morgenröthe* in which Nietzsche makes this connection between ostensibly male creators and the specifically female experience of pregnancy in other works. “Giebt es einen weihevolleren Zustand, als den der Schwangerschaft?” he asks rhetorically.⁶³⁰ This is metaphorical pregnancy of thought or of action (“Und sei das Erwartete ein Gedanke, eine That”), and Nietzsche writes that those who are pregnant in this sense entertain the hope that “,Es ist etwas Grösseres, das hier wächst, als wir sind“[.]”⁶³¹ Like the ideal parents of whom Zarathustra speaks, this passage in *Morgenröthe* suggests that all those who are pregnant with a thought or a deed hope to “give birth” to something greater than themselves. Although Nietzsche does not use the term “Selbst-Überwindung” in *Morgenröthe*, the language of this particular aphorism calls the notion strongly to mind.

Nietzsche continues to use metaphors of pregnancy and birth in post-*Zarathustra* works, most notably in *Jenseits*. In one aphorism in “Achstes Hauptstück: Völker und Vaterländer,” Nietzsche describes “zwei Arten des Genie’s: eins, welches vor allem zeugt und zeugen will, und ein andres, welches sich gern befruchten lässt und gebiert.”⁶³² Contrary to form, the philosopher of “Rangordnung der Werthe” does *not* establish an explicit hierarchy in this case. Rather than declaring one type of *Genie* to be higher than the other, Nietzsche instead only asserts that the

⁶³⁰ Nietzsche, M §552. Oppel quotes the passage in English translation (without specifying the translator) on p. 160. Oppel then quotes Sheridan Hough’s interpretation of this passage before moving on to another example from *Zarathustra*.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Nietzsche, JGB §248.

culture he admires above all others, that of the ancient Greeks, embodies the second type (along with the French, another culture Nietzsche esteems highly), while the Jews, Romans, and possibly Germans exemplify the first type. Nietzsche concludes the aphorism by stating: “Diese zwei Arten des Genie’s suchen sich, wie Mann und Weib; aber sie missverstehen auch einander, — wie Mann und Weib.” Although this conclusion reasserts the eternal strife between “Mann und Weib,” the vast potentials of both cultural types is also reaffirmed, along with the possibility that the two types could yet come together—as when a man and a woman come together and produce a child—and create something far greater than either component part.

As he does with the *Genie*, Nietzsche also relates the metaphor of pregnancy to philosophical endeavors, further blurring the sex-gender dichotomy that he has so rigidly erected elsewhere. In one of the final aphorisms of *Jenseits*’s “Neuntes Hauptstück: was ist vornehm?” Nietzsche writes that a philosopher “ist ein Mensch, der beständig ausserordentliche Dinge erlebt, sieht, hört, argwöhnt, hofft, träumt; [...] der selbst vielleicht ein Gewitter ist, welches mit neuen Blitzen schwanger geht[.]”⁶³³ This immediately calls the Übermensch to mind: Zarathustra says in the “Vorrede” that he is “ein Verkündiger des Blitzes” and that “dieser Blitz aber heisst Übermensch.”⁶³⁴ In fact, in Part III, Zarathustra suggests, in an ecstatic ode to Eternity, that he is “schwanger von Blitzen, die Ja! sagen, Ja! lachen [...]”—that is, pregnant with the Übermensch.⁶³⁵ And in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche calls contemplative types “male mothers:” “Die Schwangerschaft hat die Weiber milder, abwartender, furchtsamer, unterwerfungslustiger gemacht; und ebenso erzeugt die geistige Schwangerschaft den Charakter der Contemplativen, welcher dem weiblichen Charakter verwandt ist: — es sind die männlichen

⁶³³ Nietzsche, JGB §292.

⁶³⁴ Nietzsche, Z-I “Zarathustra’s Vorrede” §4.

⁶³⁵ Nietzsche, Z-III “Die Sieben Siegel” §1.

Mütter.”⁶³⁶ That this passage indicates that conventional sex-gender divisions are not as rigid in Nietzsche’s philosophical works as he elsewhere presents them to be would be difficult⁶³⁷ to deny. With passages such as these, we can lend further credence to Oppel’s thesis that by “acquiring feminine traits, ‘man’ has become a new being, beyond himself.” This leads Oppel to conclude that the “inference for ‘woman’ is that she too may move beyond the stereotypes to become a complete human self. Nietzsche’s revisions create ‘whole’ human beings; [...] it opens up entirely new possibilities for self-identification.”⁶³⁸ The evidence that Oppel draws from Zarathustra, coupled with the further examples furnished here, support the interpretation that, although Nietzsche does unfairly criticize contemporary “woman” as deficient and weak-minded, his works also allow for the possibility of overcoming sex-gender stereotypes as human beings of both sex-genders strive to enhance themselves.

The majority of superhero comics have long been plagued by issues of gender representation. Simone’s “Women in Refrigerators” website was not the first fan-led response to

⁶³⁶ Nietzsche, FW §72.

⁶³⁷ Difficult, but apparently not impossible: Christine Battersby certainly gives it her best shot in “Female Creativity and Temporal Discontinuity: Slips and Skips of Remembrance in Nietzsche and Freud.” The following quotation is representative of Battersby’s argumentation:

Nietzsche’s own disgust at the female body, with its potential for pregnancy, seems to have led him to transfer his own discomfiture onto women themselves. Trapped in immanence and bodily shame, the Nietzschean woman is unable to skip and leap in a truly creative way: unable to escape the mundane – biological – rhythms that shape her life. Nietzsche is, of course, renowned for emphasizing the role of the body in the process of creation and of thought. It was, however, above all a male body that Nietzsche had in mind, and this becomes clear not only when he describes the creative process in terms of the male body – “Physiologically: the creative instinct of the artist and the distribution of semen in his blood (Nachlass 1887, 8[1], KSA 12.325) – but also when he appropriates the language of pregnancy and of birth-giving for his own creative processes, but in ways that portray giving birth as a life and death struggle for the mother-to-be: ‘What was it that then preserved me? Only ever pregnancy. And every time that the work was born, my life hung on a thin thread.’ (Nachlass 1882/83, 5[1], KSA 10.197)” (126).

The careful reader will note that Battersby draws only from the *Nachlass*, and not Nietzsche’s published works, in support of this particular argument. Contrary to Battersby, we have seen that when we examine Nietzsche’s published positions, we find highly visceral (or “fleshy,” as Battersby would say) imagery that presents the creative individual as something both male and female, something that blurs traditional societal constructions of gender and that gives birth to works and ideas that descend from and simultaneously transcend both the male and the female creative urges that spawn it.

⁶³⁸ Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender*, 5.

this disparity, nor has it been the last. Scholarly critiques of gender representation have also proliferated in the wake of fan-based criticisms. Superhero comics are adapting, albeit slowly, to these criticisms and calls for change. One of the most popular superhero comics that directly addresses the intersection of gender with other aspects of identity is the *Ms. Marvel* series. The protagonist, Kamala Khan, is a teenage Muslim Pakistani-American, and the creative team behind the series is equally diverse. Many of the protagonist's strengths, as summarized by Gibson in "Youth, Ethnicity, Faith, Feminism, Fandom in *Ms. Marvel*" (2018), resonate strongly with the characteristics of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* that I have presented throughout this dissertation. Kamala and her friends are presented as "a questioning generation that offers challenges to supposed societal norms"⁶³⁹ (the second collected edition of *Ms. Marvel* comics even bears the title: *Generation Why*). The act of "coming together and [the] overcoming of differences"⁶⁴⁰ plays a key role in the series, as Kamala struggles against conventional superhero threats while also tackling issues of self-identity, family, and faith. Although she does not go as far as to reject the religion into which she was born (indeed, her "faith is depicted here as the core of her character, choices, and actions"⁶⁴¹), she nevertheless "does not blindly engage with her faith but questions it and challenges its authority figures."⁶⁴² Her character ultimately demonstrates that the issue of gender is not primarily reducible to biological sex, an idea that Nietzsche presents as well—but only as it applies to creative male persons.

Ms. Marvel is certainly worth reading, not least of all because it is a good superhero story with a refreshing sense of humor (an aspect largely overlooked in Gibson's analysis of the series). We have come this far with Wonder Woman, however, and so we will conclude this

⁶³⁹ Gibson, "Youth, Ethnicity, Faith, Feminism, Fandom in *Ms. Marvel*," 26.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*

chapter with a final consideration of her journey in recent decades. Marston and Peter's Golden-Age *Wonder Woman* stands alone as a comic that takes differences of sex-gender as given, but for "pro-woman" ends. The character has since had her fair share of reboots: first under the direction of George Pérez in 1987, then under John Byrne from 1995-98, under Gail Simone beginning in 2007, under a variety of writers and artists as part of the *New 52!* in 2011, and under Greg Rucka beginning in 2016. This is to name but a few of the most recent. We will focus in more detail on Gail Simone's version in a moment, but first, several common aspects of the character as she has been presented since 1987 can be drawn from the myriad materials listed above.

Whether she is the child of an Olympian god or a vessel given life by the gods in answer to her mother's prayers, Wonder Woman is associated above all with Truth with a capital "T." Her magic lasso does not command obedience so much as it reveals an individual's true intentions. It can also reveal the truthful answer to any question that Wonder Woman (or anyone else in possession of the lasso) asks of anyone who touches or is touched by the lasso. Wonder Woman always has "Truth" on her side—specifically, on her right hip. Her quest is for Truth as much as it is for justice and the protection of the innocent, and she is willing to sacrifice even personal happiness (sometimes, but not always, in the form of family) in this pursuit, a quality she shares with the Nietzschean "Freigeist." Unlike Nietzsche's "Freigeist," however, Wonder Woman strongly prefers socialization to isolation. She returns frequently to Themyscira, the capital of Paradise Island, to reconnect with her mother and Amazon sisters; and in every iteration, she attracts a motley crew of supporting characters, from Etta Candy (today an Air Force lieutenant rather than the candy-gobbling sorority queen she was in Marston's original version) to a tribe of super-gorillas.

She also complements her super-deeds with heroics on a more humanly attainable scale. As we saw in the “She’s a Wonder!” (*Wonder Woman #170*) storyline discussed in Section 2 above, Wonder Woman wears many hats, working to protect the innocent and change the warmongering ways of “Patriarch’s world” through diplomacy, medical research, and social activism in addition to battling supervillains. In so doing, she combines the distinct roles occupied by two other famous characters, one male and one female: Lois Lane and Superman. Lois Lane has always been a hard-hitting reporter, but as the decades wore on, she came to international prominence as an investigative journalist using the pen, rather than the sword, to combat injustice, corruption, and evil. In *Superman: Lois and Clark* (2015), by Dan Jurgens, Lee Weeks, and Scott Hanna, Lois Lane publishes a series of books exposing one corrupt organization after another, while her husband, the New Earth Superman, takes up the mantle of the deceased Prime Earth Superman and engages in much derring-do. Lois is a superhero in her own right—she even has a secret identity! She publishes her exposés under the pseudonym “Author X,” and the parallels between her work and that of her superhuman husband is reinforced in an exchange between both parents and their son Jonathan (see **Fig. 5.19** below).⁶⁴³ The division of heroic labor in this series is simply the result of Superman’s superpowers and Lois Lane’s lack thereof; there is nothing to indicate that this division is in any way due to gender. Nevertheless, the association exists, and it is one that has existed for as long as there have been Superman comics.

⁶⁴³ Sadly, this aspect of Lois’s character is completely absent from the narrative events of 2017’s *Superman Rebirth: Son of Superman Volume 1* (discussed in Section 3 above). *Superman: Lois and Clark*, published in 2015, is specifically labeled the “Road to Rebirth,” but much of Lois’s character development in this prequel series is missing from the sequel series.



Fig. 5.19 Jurgens, Weeks, and Hanna, *Road to Rebirth: Superman: Lois and Clark*, n.p., panels 2-5.

Contemporary versions of Wonder Woman, on the other hand, combine Superman and Lois's respective strategies for defending the innocent and making the world a better place. In Greg Rucka et al.'s version, for example, Wonder Woman constantly transitions between her superhero identity and her role as the Themysciran Ambassador to the United Nations. She is also a social activist and even publishes a book espousing her philosophical values. This union of conventionally separate roles is perfectly captured in a panel from the second issue of Rucka's run as writer, in which Wonder Woman, dressed in a Themysciran gown but wearing the golden tiara of her superhero costume, meets Lois Lane and Clark Kent at a book signing (see Fig. 5.20 below). In her character, the disparate roles of Lane and Kent are united; consequently, she transcends the conventional division and becomes a symbol of something greater. The fact that Wonder Woman's book is one of personal philosophy further increases the resonance between her character and Nietzsche's "pregnant" philosophers. Finally, this presentation of her character destabilizes conventions of the superhero genre, making us question why, say, Batman, with his

Fig. 5.20 Rucka et al.,
Wonder Woman, “Down
to Earth, Part One,” n.p.,
panel 1.



nearly unlimited financial resources, does not adopt a similarly multi-pronged approach to crimefighting.

We come at last to Gail Simone’s turn as writer for the *Wonder Woman* series. Simone provides us with the most interesting take on the character in decades. Wonder Woman can frequently come across as an unattainable ideal. No human being could possibly do everything that Wonder Woman does, and to top it all off, she makes it look so *easy* (to be fair, so do most superheroes). Certainly, Wonder Woman faces difficult challenges, from god-powered supervillains to seemingly intractable social forces, but she frequently begins and ends every story arc about as perfectly developed as she was before (again, a trait she shares with most superheroes). Simone’s Wonder Woman, on the other hand, is a dynamic character who struggles with issues of personal identity and moral mission—issues with which readers can readily empathize (superheroic action sequences aside, of course). Simone addresses the paradox of Wonder Woman’s character head-on: how can a superhero devoted to peace justify the use of violence? Simone’s Wonder Woman struggles with this question, and we readers feel

as though we are working through the problem with her. She opposes her own instincts of rage and revenge as frequently as external foes, but the peace she achieves within herself is fragile.

The greatest challenge to her dedication not to take life unless absolutely necessary comes when she fights a supervillain that is the concept of genocide incarnated in a superhuman body.⁶⁴⁴ Over the course of the multi-issue narrative, Wonder Woman learns that several villains whose lives she had previously spared are responsible for unleashing Genocide upon the world, and she questions whether or not her reluctance to get blood on her hands is a selfish act:



Fig. 5.21 Simone et al., *Wonder Woman* #31, 167, panels 2-5, the top portion of panel 6 visible.

⁶⁴⁴ Technically, it is Wonder Woman's own corpse, from some unspecified future time, brought back to the present day and reanimated, with the soil from sites of real-world historical genocides incorporated into the body in order to infuse it with the concept of genocide. These details are not immediately relevant to our purposes here, but they are a good reminder of the general wackiness of even the most "serious" superhero comics!

Wonder Woman defeats Genocide and is at first content to watch her helpless opponent drown. While she is not averse to killing her enemies “to save an innocent life in the heat of battle,”⁶⁴⁵ as she later puts it, she discovers in this moment that it is quite another thing to stand by and watch an incapacitated and vanquished enemy, no longer a threat to anyone, die a horrible death. “Right or wrong, I will not murder,” she says to herself (see **Fig. 5.22** below); “I will not knowingly take a life today when any other option exists.” Wonder Woman reaffirms her commitment to her individual moral code regardless of whether her actions are considered “right or wrong” by those around her. In Nietzschean terms, she has adopted an existence “beyond good and evil,” relying on her own conscience to guide her, rather than adopting a moral code given to her by one purported authority or another.

While this is a defining moment for Wonder Woman, the panel layout of **Fig. 5.22** reminds us of the *dangers* inherent in such a moral position. Ares, God of War, has rescued Genocide’s soul, and his sword, thrusting into the panel above, foreshadows his eventual intrusion into the scene in later issues. Wonder Woman’s decision to “never knowingly take a life today when any other option exists,” whether “right or wrong,” has dramatic and frequently disastrous consequences—for her, for her fellow Amazons, and for the rest of the world. This is what makes Simone’s version of the character so interesting: her choices have moral weight, and her story withholds from readers the easy reassurance that, for example, Superman comics generally provide (namely, that “truth, justice, and the American Way” will always triumph). In Simone’s universe, Wonder Woman’s existence is troubled: she will even renounce her Amazonian status when, in a later issue, her moral code will not allow her to blindly obey the Olympian gods who rule the Amazons. Her character evolves continuously; consequently,

⁶⁴⁵ Simone, *Wonder Woman: Rise of the Olympian*, 188.



Fig. 5.22 Simone et al., *Wonder Woman* #31, 171, panels 1-3, with portions of panels 4 and 5 visible.

Simone’s narratives resonate strongly with Nietzschean themes of human self-overcoming and the long, challenging road to the Übermensch. After every battle won, every obstacle overcome, Simone’s Wonder Woman is a different person than she was before. She learns, she grows, she *overcomes* the person she used to be and reinvents herself anew. As in **Fig. 5.23** below, she is never just “Diana:” she is “*Diana Reassembled.*”

Nietzsche’s works challenge male readers to overcome themselves and their time and “give birth” to the Übermensch. From this, scholars like Oppel extrapolate an implicit challenge to female readers to do the same. Recent superhero comics, featuring heroes from Wonder Woman to Ms. Marvel, depict female characters who challenge social and moral authority while

engaging in individual and collective processes of self-overcoming. From this, we may infer a similar challenge for male characters to do the same. Indeed, more nuanced representation of all genders in superhero comics is underway, even if it is not always explicitly present in the majority of mainstream comics. To borrow Nietzsche's metaphor, some superhero comics are pregnant with possibility, and we shall soon see what new forms the genre will take.



Fig. 5.23 Simone et al., *Wonder Woman* #37, 83, full page.

Conclusion

1. Interpretation of Findings and Final Remarks

My dissertation has shown, first of all, that superhero comics and their critical reception form a facet of Nietzsche's own reception history. Nietzsche's reception in the superhero genre began with the critics of that genre, who in the 1940s and 1950s produced numerous anti-comics articles, essays, and books that generally did not differentiate between Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and the Third Reich's appropriation of the concept. Later, Nietzschean language and ideas were taken up by the creators of superhero comic-book narratives, beginning around the 1970s and continuing through the turn of the twenty-first century. In recent decades, the locus of Nietzsche's reception within the genre has once more shifted from the comics themselves to the body of secondary literature surrounding them. Authors of popular philosophical essays and scholarly articles and monographs use Nietzsche (among other philosophers drawn primarily from the Western tradition) in their analyses of superhero comics. The treatment of Nietzsche's philosophical concepts in these recent secondary works is ambivalent overall. Regardless of any given author's attitude toward such Nietzschean concepts as the *Übermensch*, the "will to power," or "master- and slave-morality," however, commentators continue to engage with material drawn from his works. This suggests that the resonance between the ideas put forth in Nietzsche's works and the representations of superhumans in comics has not lessened over time—if anything, the increasing number of comparisons between the two suggests that this resonance is being more strongly felt today than it was previously.

In my dissertation, I collected as many instances of direct reference to Nietzsche as I could find within superhero comic books and the secondary literature on the subject. Having

identified key points of relevance between Nietzsche's works and superhero comics, I organized each chapter around an issue that I had determined to be of great thematic relevance in both bodies of work. The first chapter set out to investigate the relationship between Nietzsche's Übermensch, U.S.-American comic-book superheroes, and power. I discovered by chapter's end that the highest expressions of Nietzsche's "Wille zur Macht" are to be found in acts of moral valuation and self-overcoming. The glorification of physical strength (which can be found in Nietzsche's works) is subordinated in favor of spiritual growth and self-mastery. I also found that the argument that superhero comics rely on action and violence as their primary means of conflict resolution is well founded. On a superficial level, superhero comics may satisfy the reader's desire for easy answers in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles. Violence is also a frequent form of entertainment within U.S.-American popular culture, and violence in superhero comics serves to excite and even shock readers—who in turn keep coming back for more. I discovered, however, that certain superhero comics featuring Superman and Batman present narratives that focus on character growth in a Nietzschean sense. Although superhero character development is action-oriented and mediated by violence, there are moments, however short-lived, during which superheroes consciously grapple with what it means *to be* a superhero, and sometimes even overcome the unreflective versions of themselves that they were at the beginning of the story. That such instances of self-overcoming are much more prevalent in recent comics than in early comics suggests that as the genre has aged, it has also matured.

Chapter Two began by exploring the resonance between Nietzsche's concepts of "Herren-Moral" and "Sklaven-Moral" as presented in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887) and Roy Thomas's supervillain "Master Man" (in *Invaders*, 1975-79). Although critics drew connections between Nietzsche's Übermensch and comic-book superheroes as early as the 1940s and 1950s,

it took until the 1970s for the creators of superhero comics to begin explicitly referencing Nietzsche in their works.⁶⁴⁶ Perhaps this was due to the comics industry's general avoidance during that time of all subject material deemed even remotely controversial according to the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority. Even though Nietzsche had been largely "rehabilitated" within academic circles, his reputation in U.S.-American popular culture lagged behind. By the 1970s, however, the strictures of the CCA had relaxed somewhat, and more controversial topics could be addressed.⁶⁴⁷ Thomas's supervillains "Master Man" and "Warrior Woman" epitomize everything that, in prior decades, *superheroes* had been accused of being. Thomas's works associate the late philosopher's ideas with the bad buys, counterintuitively—but effectively—*using* Nietzsche to distance superheroes *from* Nietzsche. Once I took a closer look at the actual relationship of Nietzsche's Übermensch to his concepts of "master- and slave-morality," however, I concluded that Nietzsche's Übermensch has more in common with superheroes than supervillains. It would have been a monumental task, however, for Thomas's *Invaders* to defend both superheroes *and* Nietzsche against the accusations of the early polemicists who lumped the two together.

The third chapter examined the question of groups or "races" of superhuman beings. I had found that the association of Nietzsche's Übermensch with the eugenics movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries persisted even in twenty-first century comics studies literature. Once again, the long shadow of the Third Reich had reared its ugly head, and the

⁶⁴⁶ As far as I have been able to tell. As I discuss in the second section of this conclusion, my familiarity with superhero comics pre-1960 has been limited by issues of cost and accessibility.

⁶⁴⁷ *The Amazing Spider-Man #96*, published in 1971, represented a turning point in comic-book censorship. Peter Parker's close friend Harry Osborne becomes addicted to drugs (not otherwise specified), and Spider-Man's triumph in the issue comes when he gets the villainous Norman Osborne (a.k.a. The Green Goblin) to stop wreaking havoc on New York City and tend to his neglected son. The Code had implicitly forbidden the depiction of drug use in any context, and this particular comic book was published despite being denied the CCA's stamp of approval. The Code altered its rules, permitting the depiction of drug use—but only in a negative light. .

general impression appears to remain in the popular imagination that any race of self-proclaimed “superhumans” would wage a war of extermination against “ordinary” human beings. I found this to be the case in a number of superhero comics, but one series stood out among the rest: *The Uncanny X-Men* (1963-2011). In this series, the relationship of superhuman and human characters was ambiguous, with the *latter* acting as the aggressors as often as, if not even more frequently than, the former. The series’ titular mutants were the results of natural genetic mutation, and at least one storyline depicted the draconian efforts of “ordinary” humans to exterminate the mutant population via selective breeding. This resonated strongly with concerns that Nietzsche commentators have historically held regarding Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, but a close examination of Nietzsche’s published works revealed that he did not conceive of the *Übermensch* in terms of biological evolution or selective breeding. In fact, I found that Nietzsche’s works do not treat the idea of a “race” of *Übermenschen* as a serious consideration at all. Nevertheless, certain passages in *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883) revealed a communal aspect to the *Übermensch*’s development. Productive relationships with friends and foes play a far more important role than mere accidents of birth in the growth of the exceptional individual toward the *Übermensch*. This led me to conclude that what makes the X-Men extraordinary is not so much their mutant powers as their support for one another. Over the course of the series, physical training occasionally takes a backseat to an emphasis on moral growth and self-overcoming. It is perhaps significant that this community of superheroes debuted in the 1960s, a decade that, in our popular imagination, is viewed as a poignant moment in U.S.-American cultural history where individualism and the nuclear family were displaced, however briefly and by whatever real percentage of the population, in favor of a dream of communal living.

Chapter Four began with a three-part analysis of the strong resonance between characters in Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986) and the crisis of moral authority addressed in Nietzsche's later works. Expanding to consider other recent superhero comics, I discovered that, with a few *Watchmen*-inspired exceptions, the figure of the superhero functions as a preserver of the moral and social status quo. This stands in direct contrast to Nietzsche's Übermensch-ideal, for Nietzsche's works praise above all others those individuals who challenge prevailing moral institutions and upset the complacency of the masses. Before *Watchmen*, superheroes were unquestionably meant to be our defenders, protectors, and saviors. Considering the context in which superheroes first arose, this savior-complex is not surprising. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two young Jewish men from Cleveland, Ohio, created Superman against the backdrop of European fascism and anti-Semitism. Superheroes went to war against the Axis Powers even before the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor precipitated the United States' official entrance into the Second World War. Afterward, the savior complex in superhero comics would have provided a welcome escape from the constant anxieties of the Cold War. In these comics, even the worst-case scenario would always be successfully overcome and the U.S.-American way of life preserved. Perhaps, then, *Watchmen* represents the moment when this optimism had finally run out, when, in the wake of the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, and Reagan-era economic policies, public disillusionment had grown so pervasive that even superhero narratives couldn't provide relief. Perhaps this is why *Watchmen* resonates so strongly with Nietzsche's works: Nietzsche, too, was writing during a time when the reigning moral authority had lost its last vestiges of legitimacy. Nietzsche's works call readers' attention to the fact that the latest advancements in scientific theory (principally Darwin's theory of evolution) had rendered the

Christian faith incompatible with humanity's empirical knowledge of the world, leaving the human moral imagination adrift in the vastness of Copernican space.

Fortunately, the resonance between Nietzsche's works and superhero comics regarding the crisis of moral values does not end on this somber note. Superheroes demonstrate a certain resilience in the face of repeated disaster. Constantly presented with opportunities to hang up the cape (or cowl, or whatever other costume they wear) and live a "normal" life, superheroes always choose to continue living the life of a superhero. They thereby accept the challenges and sacrifices that come with the territory and serve to inspire others by example. Nietzsche's works are similarly hopeful, expressing a worldview according to which, in the absence of any absolute moral authority, human existence is justified by the brief flashes of greatness that flare up from among our ranks. I have found that part of Nietzsche's answer to nihilism (he never developed a programmatic response to the crisis—that would have been inimical to his anti-systematic style) lies in the *Übermensch*'s life-affirming attitude, which, even in the face of sorrow and suffering, desires nothing more than the eternal recurrence of this life, with all its sorrows as well as all its joys.

The fifth and final chapter brought the issue of gender representation in superhero comics into dialogue with passages in Nietzsche's works regarding sex-gender.⁶⁴⁸ Nietzsche's works (and Nietzsche himself) have been charged with "Frauenfeindlichkeit" (misogyny) ever since they were first published in the late nineteenth century. Superhero comics, too, have been critiqued for their representation of female characters (and more recently for their general lack of non-cisgender characters), since even female superheroes are frequently sidelined in favor of

⁶⁴⁸ As noted in Chapter Five, Nietzsche does not distinguish between sex and gender in his works, and so I have followed Frances Opper's lead in referring to "sex-gender" when discussing Nietzsche's philosophical pronouncements on "men" and "women."

plotlines focusing on their male counterparts. Currently, however, reconsidering gender representation in superhero comics is at the forefront of popular and scholarly attention, and an argument is being convincingly made that developments on this front hold the greatest potential to change superhero comics in a lasting way. The “deconstruction of the superhero”⁶⁴⁹ that began with *Watchmen* could not result in the overcoming of the superhero as such, for to do so would not be in the best financial interests of the superhero comic-book and film industries. Nevertheless, it could be possible to change the means that superheroes use to achieve their do-gooder ends. Shifting the genre’s emphasis on violence to more pacifist methods would be a highly visible change, and as we saw in Chapter Five, female characters have been placed at the forefront of this movement. Marston’s Wonder Woman did not punish criminals, removing them instead to “Reform Island” for rehabilitation. Wonder Woman’s actions—indeed, her entire character—was conceived as Marston’s alternative to the violence-glorifying male superhero. Thus, writes Lillian Robinson, “the female superhero originates in an act of criticism—a challenge to the masculinist world of super-hero adventures[.]”⁶⁵⁰ The creators, editors, and publishers of superhero comics may not have responded positively to this criticism at the time—after Marston’s death in 1947, Wonder Woman was relegated to the role of secretary to the Justice League of America—but the genre has proven much more open to such changes in recent decades. Nietzsche’s gender-bending description of the artistic genius, which I discussed in this chapter, resonate strongly with the call in comics scholarship for superhero stories that “give men and women access to those characteristics (such as pacifism or emotional expressiveness) that have traditionally been viewed as feminine by removing the stigma attached

⁶⁴⁹ Thomson, “Deconstructing the Hero,” 111.

⁶⁵⁰ Robinson, *Wonder Women*, 7.

to them[.]”⁶⁵¹ Although Nietzsche’s martial writing style might not lend itself to the promotion of pacifism, the subtle ways in which his works cause readers to question conventional Western sex-gender stereotypes, as I have presented them in Chapter Five, suggest that his philosophy will continue to be relevant to discussions of sex and gender in popular media today.

2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Originally, I conceived this dissertation to encompass Nietzsche’s influence on and presence in comics of all genres and from many different national traditions. Very quickly, however, I discovered that the sheer volume of such material was too vast for a single research project, and so I chose to restrict the scope of my analysis to U.S.-American superhero comics. Even then, the amount of material was enormous. I focused first on tracking down every comic book in which direct references to Nietzsche are present, a task I accomplished by parsing comic-book database catalogues and comics studies bibliographies, as well as by making extensive Google searches. Still, it is almost certain that some overt references have been missed. My study is also skewed more heavily toward well-known superheroes and to comics published between 1960 and the present. Both limitations are due to the difficulty of procuring less popular comics published between 1940 and 1960, as the majority have not been reprinted in affordable collected volumes.

Furthermore, my dissertation does not account for Nietzsche-related comics in other genres. I know there are several “graphic guides” to Nietzsche, for example, and even one self-published graphic adaptation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nathan Kilburn (2015), but I have not included them in this study. Many comics produced in other nations also contain references

⁶⁵¹ Gorum, Prescott, and Smith, “Introduction,” 5.

to Nietzsche that would be worth further exploration. Curiously, however, native German comics contain few references to Nietzsche, and such references as do exist tend to be rather oblique. This in itself is a phenomenon worth further study. In Peer Meter and Barbara Yelin's *Gift*, for example, the main narrative is a flashback, but the frame story depicts a young Lou Salomé on her way to meet the almost-blind author of a book with the working title "Der Pflugschar" (Nietzsche's early working title for *Morgenröthe*). I also discovered that there have been very few German-language superhero comics that are not imported translations of U.S.-American comics, and recent German superhero comics like *Liga deutscher Helden* (2017) and *Austrian Superheroes* (2018-present) do not directly reference Nietzsche (so far). Nevertheless, such works show clear evidence of *Watchmen*'s influence and resonate strongly with Nietzschean themes of moral existence "beyond good and evil."

I have found more direct engagement with Nietzsche's life, legacy, and works in French-language comics. The biographic graphic novel *Nietzsche* (2010), written by philosopher Michel Onfray and drawn by artist Maximilien Le Roy, is (obviously) a prime example of Nietzsche-based comic books. Unlike a conventional, text-based biography of Nietzsche (of which there are many), this graphic novel stitches together related episodes from Nietzsche's life into a collage that, much like Nietzsche's works themselves, leaves readers to synthesize a cohesive whole out of a collection of disparate parts. The moments from Nietzsche's life that Onfray and Le Roy have chosen to depict include the anecdotal⁶⁵² and even the speculative, portraying Nietzsche's mental collapse as a gradual, years-long progression toward madness in a series of

⁶⁵² Such as Nietzsche's alleged experience in a brothel in Cologne. However likely this story may be, the only record of it comes in the recollections of Nietzsche's Pforta schoolmate and university friend Paul Deussen. According to this account, a bewildered Nietzsche was led astray by a guide who was supposed to take him to a restaurant. While Deussen's version ends when Nietzsche flees the establishment after regaining his composure by playing at a piano, Onfray and Le Roy go further and depict a sexual liaison between Nietzsche and an unnamed prostitute (cf. Deussen, *Erinnerungen an Friedrich Nietzsche*, 24; and Onfray & Le Roy, *Nietzsche*, 19-21).



Fig. 6.01 Onfray & Le Roy, *Nietzsche*, pages 102-3.

garishly colored multi-page sequences like the one shown in **Fig. 6.01** above. These sequences suggest that a character of Nietzsche's own imagining (Zarathustra) came to seem more real to him than his own existence. Although such a psychological state on Nietzsche's part is not verifiable, the emotional effect on the reader is intense. The artistic license and creative liberties taken by Onfray and Le Roy thus blur the line between a graphic novel and a work of graphic non-fiction.

This graphic novel is also able to present Nietzsche's later works in their natural habitat, so to speak. It is well documented that Nietzsche would take long walks every day and jot down ideas as they would occur to him. These notes would form the basis of aphorisms that later appeared in his published works, and Nietzsche expresses the importance of physical movement

for his philosophical contemplation in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*: “Wir gehören nicht zu Denen, die erst zwischen Büchern, auf den Anstoss von Büchern zu Gedanken kommen — unsre Gewohnheit ist, im Freien zu denken, gehend, springend, steigend, tanzend, am liebsten auf einsamen Bergen oder dicht am Meere, da wo selbst die Wege nachdenklich werden.”⁶⁵³ The hybrid image-text form of comics allows Onfray and Le Roy to return Nietzsche’s words, conceived as they were “im Freien,” to their original context (see **Fig. 6.02** below).



Fig. 6.02 Onfray & Le Roy, *Nietzsche*, pages 104-5.

Writer and artist Nicolas Wild’s 2013 graphic novel *Ainsi se tut Zarathoustra* (translated into German as *Also schwieg Zarathoustra*), the title of which is a clear play on Nietzsche’s *Also*

⁶⁵³ Nietzsche, FW §366.

sprach Zarathustra, depicts the author-artist's fictional journey to present-day Iran. The story is part crime drama, part social commentary, and part examination of Zoroastrianism as it is practiced in the twenty-first century. Nietzsche is explicitly referenced only in passing,⁶⁵⁴ but the work itself resonates strongly with Nietzschean pronouncements regarding the relevance of ancient religious moral systems to modern society. French comics have also been the first to translate the 2018 manga series *Nietzsche ga Kyoto ni yattekite* (French title *Dans les pas de Nietzsche*) by Mariru Harada, Tsukasa Araki, and Igura Sugimoto. Although it has not yet appeared in English, I understand the basic premise of the series to be that Nietzsche, reincarnated as a young man in present-day Kyoto, befriends a young woman and proceeds to remark on the world around him in a Nietzsche-esque fashion. Other manga series might contain similarly overt references to Nietzsche and/or resonate strongly with the ideas put forth in his philosophical works, and as such would be worth exploring through a Nietzschean lens as part of a future research endeavor.

I also restricted my exploration of the Nietzsche-superhero resonance to superhero *comics* and did not account for other media. Again, this was done simply because superhero comics alone provide more material than any one person could read in an entire lifetime. Many of the popular philosophical essays I read brought Nietzsche's ideas into dialogue with superhero films as well as comics; consequently, scholarly investigation into the resonance between Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and film portrayals of superheroes would also be a fruitful avenue for future research. And as with comics, so too are there references to and resonance with Nietzsche's life and work in film and television artifacts originating in other countries. The Japanese anime series *PsychoPass* contains at least one overt reference to Nietzsche, and the

⁶⁵⁴ Wild, *Also schwieg Zarathustra*, 104.

series itself raises poignant questions regarding free will and moral conformism. Furthermore, a colleague at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach drew my attention to the Japanese video game trilogy *Xenosaga*. Each installment's subtitle is taken directly from one of the original German titles of Nietzsche's works: *Der Wille zur Macht* (2002), *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (2004), and *Also sprach Zarathustra* (2006). The series was also adapted into an anime series in 2005. I have neither played the game nor seen the anime, but the titles suggest a clear connection to Nietzsche. Further inquiry into other popular media would doubtless reveal a great number of works that resonate strongly with Nietzsche's philosophical writings.

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