

Men of Ice and Steel: Richard Kuklinski, Clark Kent, and the Fortress of Identity

DAVID AMADIO
Lincoln University, Pennsylvania

This, too, was myself.
Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

One of the most enduring and well-known aspects of Superman's mythology is the utter plainness of his alter-ego, newspaper reporter Clark Kent. As Superman plies the gifts of his interstellar heritage for all the world to see, Clark Kent leads a life of modesty and restraint, paced by the unfulfilled romantic pursuit of his co-worker, Lois Lane. This divergence of identity, a required field for any caped crusader, does, on occasion, direct the behavior of mere mortals, though instead of using their secret lives to better serve humanity, these Janus-faced individuals are up to something far more nefarious.

The grossest example of this phenomenon, far surpassing the adulterous politician or bilking Little League treasurer, is the story of Richard Kuklinski, a Mafia contract killer who came to be known in the annals of true crime as the Ice Man. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Kuklinski is reported to have murdered over 200 men for the crime bosses of New York City, all while maintaining a regular suburban existence in Dumont, New Jersey with his beloved wife Barbara and their three children, none of whom knew about his other life as a hit man. The devoted father who slept at the bedside of his ailing daughter Merrick and loved to feed the wild ducks at Demarest Pond could, by downshifting to his reptile brain, transform into a highly efficient apex predator, "a supernatural, malevolent force

ready to come out of the shadows and create chaos" (Carlo 206).

When merely glanced at, Superman and the Ice Man look like unequivocal moral opposites, the one bearing the torch of a global, messianic mission, the other meeting the dark demands of Lucifer himself. But studied more closely, the two begin to exhibit a host of similarities, the most striking of which is the fragmentation of self that divides their separate personas and keeps them in a constant state of friction. Both men suffer from an anxiety of personality, and through close readings of Philip Carlo's *The Ice Man*, John Byrne's landmark graphic novel *The Man of Steel*, and a number of other supplementary texts, including Richard Donner's *Superman: The Movie* and Park Deitz's prison interviews with Richard Kuklinski that aired on HBO, I will explore the roots and rituals of their shared anxiety, and explain the social and psychological results of what amounts to an ongoing, obsessive masquerade. Ensuring that the twain shall never meet—that the ice is properly thawed when Richard gets home to Dumont, and that the steel is buffered when Clark punches in at the Daily Planet—serves as the dramatic draw of their balancing act, but, as I hope to prove, legerdemain of this sort can be exhaustive and isolating. Their internal conflict always stalemates in a fortress of solitude, where each man is made to confront an image of his father, the entity responsible for bequeathing so much power and yet causing so much pain.

Origin Stories

Created in 1938 by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, Superman¹¹⁴, whose birth name is Kal-El, hails from the planet Krypton. In "Book One" of John Byrne's *The Man of Steel*, Jor-El, Superman's biological sire, describes Krypton as "a cold and heartless society, stripped of all human feeling, all human passion and life" (4). Its technological

¹¹⁴ Though Superman will always be the product of both historical context and the ideological perspective of his current creative steward, there is one trait that nevertheless remains consistent about his character: the bifurcated consciousness. This discussion will specify Byrne's and Donner's interpretations of that consciousness, accounting for how each one contributes to the drama of Superman's legendary duality.

advancements (robot attendants, grand consoles, matrix orbs) have left the people emotionally paralyzed and the natural environment increasingly unstable. On the eve of Krypton's destruction, which has been triggered by a radioactive chain reaction deep in the planet's core, Jor-El sends his infant son to Earth in a rocket ship, safeguarding his life. He knows the child's dense molecular structure will derive god-like power from our sun, but his final hope is that Kal-El, once invested of this power, will not use it to rule mankind but to help us realize our potential for good.

After landing in Smallville, a generic town in the American Midwest, the last Kryptonian is renamed "Clark" by his adoptive parents, John and Martha Kent, who introduce him to a life of rural simplicity. Under their care, he experiences the "human feeling" he would have been denied on his home planet. He internalizes the Kents' old-fashioned values, learning what it means to be an honest, respectful, responsible American. But the cultural incubator in which Clark matures is too humble to contain his legacy, and by the time he reaches adolescence he is burning to unleash the full range of his alien prowess.

The tension between his genetic destiny and his normalized teenage state is no better demonstrated than in *Superman: The Movie*, released in 1978. Early in the first act, while working as the equipment manager for his high school football team, Clark is humiliated when his crush, Lana Lang, snubs him for a more popular suitor. As she drives off in the boy's convertible, Clark lets out his frustration by grabbing a football and punting it into the ozone. Later, on his way home, he successfully outruns a fast-moving train, thus putting the day's embarrassment behind him. These are quite spectacular coping mechanisms, but they are meant for much more than that, and Clark senses this deeply. The older he gets, the harder he finds it to deny the insistent message in his blood: You are the "ultimate immigrant" (Goodale 12). Little do his classmates know, the bashful loner scrubbing the quarterback's jock strap answers to a higher calling, one that will eventually uproot him from Smallville and cast him headlong into the wider world.

The environment in which Richard Kuklinski grew up differs sharply from Smallville, though it does bear a chilling

resemblance to the Krypton John Byrne describes. Raised in a housing project in Jersey City, Richard was the victim of almost daily physical abuse at the hands of his father, Stanley, a monstrous alcoholic who mercilessly beat "compassion and empathy out of his second-born" (Carlo 16). So cruel was Stanley's wrath that he killed Richard's younger brother Florian in a drunken frenzy, then, conspiring with his wife, told investigators that Florian had fallen down the stairs. In the words of psychologist Park Dietz, Florian's murder taught Richard "nothing but hatred," and confirmed Stanley as the boy's archetypal bully. In addition to his father, Richard was tormented by the nuns at his catholic school and a pack of delinquent kids from his neighborhood, in particular a brute named Charley Lane, the first person Richard ever killed.

Charley Lane's execution gave the 16-year-old Kuklinski a feeling of "invincibility," and he began to act like "someone who merited respect . . . a force to be reckoned with" (Carlo 29-30). More than just an ego boost, Kuklinski's early murders provided relief from the bullying he faced at every turn. "If you hurt somebody," he tells Park Dietz, "they'll leave you alone." He discovered that the most effective antidote to barbarism was more barbarism, and he fashioned himself a "slayer of bullies," eliminating anyone who pushed him around or made him feel inferior (Carlo 75). In a way, Richard had found his super-power.

At the conclusion of his interview with Richard at Trenton State Prison, Park Dietz diagnoses him with anti-social personality disorder and paranoid personality disorder, conditions having both environmental and genetic determinants. Born without a sense of fear and bred by a man who lobotomized his conscience, Richard could do very little to escape his frozen fate: he was doomed to become the Ice Man. Throughout his life, Richard neither trusted nor forgave anyone; vengeance was the governing principle in most of his relationships. A detriment to the average man, these traits turned out to be "major advantages in [Richard's] line of work," according to Dietz. But even as far back as Charley Lane, Richard admits to tapping into "something [he] couldn't control," an obscure and vicious energy that only grew in intensity after he was married, subjecting both him and his family to continual fracture and imbalance.

"Killing never bothered me," claims Richard, "but if I had a choice, I wouldn't."

The Diminishable Man

In *I and Thou*, the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber argues that human beings, if they are to achieve any level of understanding with their neighbors, must first learn to compose themselves as individuals. Unless a single subjective "I" is established on the part of addressor and addressee alike, the potential for meaningful contact and true reciprocity is limited. Here Buber discusses the composed self:

The unified I . . . occurs in lived actuality—the concentration of all forces into the core, the decisive moment of man. . . . The concentration of which I speak does not consider our instincts as too impure, the sensuous as too peripheral, or our emotions as too fleeting—everything must be included and integrated. What is wanted is not the abstracted self, but the whole undiminished man. (137)

A competing view of selfhood comes from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. "Man is not truly one," writes Stevenson in the novella's final chapter, "but truly two," suggesting that the nature of identity is dualistic. Exemplified in the obscene binary drama of Stevenson's title character(s), each of us is a battlefield upon which is fought "a perennial war among members" (73). If we follow this line of thinking, then even the most single-minded consciousness will fail to attain Buber's "undiminished" state, and instead be left with a pair of "abstracted," irreconcilable selves.

Clark Kent and Superman are just that: irreconcilable. At the ground level is a mild-mannered journalist whom Lex Luthor deems "a trifle unsure of himself" (Byrne 9; "Book Four"). Mocking Clark in "The Myth of Superman," Umberto Eco takes things a bit further, calling him "fearful, timid, not overintelligent, awkward, nearsighted, and submissive to his matriarchal colleague, Lois Lane" (108). In Richard Donner's film, Lois refers to Clark as her "pet," and he doesn't seem at all insulted by it; in fact, he rather enjoys the designation. If

he's not puttering around at Lois's feet, or being chided by his boss for a lack of zeal, Clark is sitting at his desk in the middle of the newsroom, proofing his stories for typos. John Kent tells his son that in order to sell his alias to the world he will have to make him "stoop a tad" (Byrne 22; "Book One"). Clark takes this advice to the extreme, behaving in public as an Uberschlub, meek and low-down.

Superman, on the other hand, is an *Urbemensch*: assertive, confident, resourceful, strong. His physical exploits are myriad and legend, from catching a bullet in his bare hand to spinning the planet in the opposite direction to reverse the march of time. The son of Jor-El struts his stuff "within the context of extreme scientific possibility," aweing the masses while zipping through the air high above the city of Metropolis (Robinson 13). Suspended in that rarefied space, Superman is no longer chasing the scoop—he *is* the scoop. Midway through Donner's adaptation, Lois Lane invites Superman to her penthouse apartment for an interview, but after he takes her on a spontaneous aerial tour of the city (she remarks to herself that flying with him is "like holding hands with a god"), she becomes less interested in the scoop and more interested in the man. How does Superman respond to the sultry advances of Clark Kent's love interest? He remains a paragon of virtue, betraying not the faintest hint of carnal curiosity. He is able to keep the pet's urges in check because sex is not one of his chief planetary objectives. To perform the errand set forth by his father (helping mankind realize its capacity for good), Superman swears an "implicit vow of chastity," and sleeping with his first-ever groupie would surely break that vow, or at least wrinkle his skin-tight costume (Eco 115).

Richard Kuklinski and the Ice Man are another pair of selves that resists compatibility, or, as Buber says, "concentration." The one self, a six-and-a-half foot, 300-pound, homicidal polymath, was capable of liquidating a man in any number of ways: strangulation, torture, even poisoning. The Ice Man, writes Philip Carlo, was a "made-to-order killer" in whom "all the best physical traits of his bloodline seemed to manifest themselves" (142-143). He possessed highly developed faculties of hearing and smell, "could sit still for hours on end," and, despite his hulking frame, moved with the stealth and agility of a cat (162).

Working out of Roy DeMeo's Gemini Lounge, he prowled the streets of East New York by car and on foot, offing men for money, revenge, and sometimes just for sport. In conversation with Park Dietz, Richard says that the Ice Man was "a hard-working expeditor of sorts," which is little more than a retiree's euphemism for America's most prolific serial killer.

Just as Dr. Jekyll provides a "city of refuge" for the abominable Edward Hyde, Richard built for the Ice Man a haven in Dumont, where he was "safe of all men's respect, wealthy, beloved—the cloth laying for [him] in the dining room at home" (Stevenson 86-87). When he crossed the threshold between his two worlds, Richard would take off one mask and put on another, trading darkness for light, hate for love. In one instance, he killed a man named Paul Rothenberg and then drove home and watched TV with his wife while his children were upstairs sleeping. Dumont allowed Richard to forget (though not always fully) the heinous side of his personality, so that he could embrace in earnest the roles of husband, neighbor, parishioner, father. Below is the testimony of his oldest daughter Merrick:

I will never forget how he was always there for me, how he helped sick children who had nothing in the hospitals where I often was as a child. He couldn't see a child suffer without wanting to help, running to help—doing something. I saw him bring children he didn't know food and toys and clothes without ever being asked. No other dad ever did that! He was no Ice Man. He was a caring, giving man with a heart as big and warm as the sun. (Carlo 397)

How does a man stuff a dead body into an oil drum and then turn around and give presents to sick and needy children? It's easy if that man is two different people. Sharing his life story with reporters, Richard often used the first-person collective when referring to himself, since the "we" comprised both the helper and the hunter, the guardian and the ghoul. What prevented Richard from ever seeing himself as a unified "I," and what forces Clark Kent to always change costumes *sub rosa*, is Stevenson's "perennial war among

members," a private skirmish that cannot go public, for if it ever were to, more than just the combatants would suffer.

The Hero without an Adversary

"Superman," states Umberto Eco, "finds himself in the worrisome narrative situation of being a hero without an adversary and therefore without the possibility of development" (110). Because he is nonpareil in his powers, Superman has never lost a fight. (Even man's greatest foe, Time, is but a plaything to Kal-El.) Eco defines a typical Superman story as "circular, static, immobilistic," and in both Donner and Byrne, the plot, following its petty surface complications, inevitably cycles back to the matter of Him, or, I should say, Them (122). Superman's only true nemesis, the thing that gives him panic and pause, is the full disclosure of his double life.

"Book One" of *The Man of Steel* ends with Clark Kent summoning his blood to safely land a plummeting space plane. His mother has not yet sewn his red-and-blue costume, so he performs this feat in plain clothes, with nothing sartorial to distinguish the alien from the native. After a mob of onlookers surrounds Clark, inducing "the worst, the greediest, the most covetous part[s] of everyone," he becomes convinced that the two identities must be segregated, not only to protect himself and the ones that he loves, but to bar the "wild animals" from abusing his service and descending into the madness of their demands.

The one character who knows his secret, aside from his parents, is Lana Lang. She tells Clark in "Book Five" that his revelation "tore open the seams of [her] life and left [her] empty" (13). Now his pining admirer, she wants him for herself, but considering his obligations to the world, such a union is impossible. By no means a "wild animal," Lana nevertheless endures a madness of kenning, and confronted with her pain, Clark resolves to continue the ruse. The innocent must be spared this damning knowledge.

Vigilance on the part of both identities decreases the likelihood of Clark Kent and Superman ever being fused in the collective mind. The Man of Steel remains "constantly alert" when out in the world, eyes peeled for anyone who might try to snap a picture of his "Superman face" (Byrne 21;

"Book Four"). Clandestine dressing rooms—for changing into and out of costume—are always secured, if not scouted ahead of time. And Clark, reporting on Superman for the Daily Planet, often drags red herrings through his stories to deflect suspicion and scrutiny. As long as he makes use of these cautionary practices, the fortress of identity is safe.

It nearly implodes, however, in the penultimate book of Byrne's graphic novel, "The Mirror, Crack'd." A botched experiment by Lex Luthor and the evil Dr. Teng results in a humanoid that is half-Superman and half-Clark Kent. The creature wears black-framed glasses and a green suit jacket, but underneath this pedestrian layer one can see the flowing red cape and swirling "S" insignia. Invested with Kryptonian strength and ability, it shows up outside the Daily Planet's downtown office, and a fracas ensues between the hybrid and the hero. Throughout the fight, Superman worries that the people of Metropolis will see the monster "dressed as both [his] identities . . . and put two and two together" (16). His anxiety peaks when the humanoid spirits away Lois Lane and surprises her with a mid-air kiss. The peck has the potential to finally resolve the matter of Them, but in lieu of epiphany, Lois is merely flummoxed, and the two selves carry on as remote and exclusive agents, "without the possibility of development."

To the best of my knowledge, the Ice Man never squared off against an ill-contrived duplicate of himself, but if he had he probably would have killed it on sight. There was no one better than Richard at what he did for a living. He had no rivals, no challengers, no peers. Remi, an employer of his from Switzerland, "couldn't believe any one man could be so . . . efficient at making people—problems—disappear" (Carlo 347). But the one problem he could not make disappear with either a pistol or a blade was the chronic matter of his double life. The deeper Richard became entrenched in the underworld, the more he wanted to shield his family from the threats it posed. Doing so would be difficult, since he himself was a consummate danger.

It cannot be overstated how much Richard prized his family, especially his wife Barbara, whom he nicknamed "Lady." The product of a large and loving Italian-American clan, Barbara gave to Richard the life he had been deprived of as a child: Sunday dinners, birthday parties, exchanging

gifts at Christmas. Observing these traditions in Dumont, Richard felt "glad to be alive, at home and at peace" (Carlo 97). He understood that Lady represented the point of access to the "good" Richard; therefore, enshrining both her and the children became paramount. To this end, he "meticulously compartmentalized his life, never socializing with his employers in organized crime and taking care never to reveal anything to them about his family or where he lived" (Higginbotham 10). He never stored guns or weapons in the house, and spoke not a word to his family about the true nature of his work, using his day job at a film lab as a convenient cover. But even with these precautions, Richard still feared that someday the streets would come home, and that the people he cherished most would learn his secret. "If what he was doing came out it would be a terrible thing for them to have to live through" (Carlo 228).

Yet they were already living through it, albeit in snatches and glimpses. The measures Richard took to insulate his family from his other life did not extend to the temporary lapses in character he often experienced at home. While the identities of Clark Kent and Superman are set apart by a very rigid line of demarcation, those of Richard Kuklinski and the Ice Man were not as firmly fixed, and there were times when the latter would eclipse the former, and Dumont would be cast into darkness, flooded by a "more generous tide of blood" (Stevenson 82). In his frequent fits of rage, which were usually sparked by something as trivial as a sandwich that had not been made to his liking, the "bad" Richard would emerge to disrupt and dismantle. He flipped dinner tables and broke pieces of furniture, and when these brutalities failed to satisfy, he directed his anger at Barbara, the center of his universe. He broke her nose on more than one occasion, gave her countless black eyes, and once even held a knife to her ribs. Barbara Kuklinski, in an interview with the *Sidney Morning Herald*, said that she had always known her husband was a murderer. After his arrest in 1986, "all the odd things she had noticed about [him] tumbled into alignment" (Higginbotham 10). As the pillars of Dumont were falling at the hands of he who had erected them, Barbara saw the two Richards melting into one, and thus Lois's epiphany—delayed by the serial continuity of comics—was Lady's.

The Singularity of their Situation

Until lead investigator Pat Kane exposed him as the Iceman, Richard Kuklinski was the only person who knew the truth about his double life. Grave circumstances prohibited him from communicating that truth to another, so he became its sole possessor. Superman, too, bears the burden of a sequestered gospel. Save Lana Lang and the Kents, he alone knows what happens when the phone booth closes and the miraculous switch begins. There is pleasure in concealing such pivotal autobiography, but there is also profound loneliness. Misdirection, artifice, retreat—the man who trods such a path may never have an honest relationship with anyone, except, perhaps, the progenitor of his seclusion.

At the end of the first act of *Superman: The Movie*, after John Kent dies of a heart attack, Clark finds a glowing green crystal buried in the floor of the barn behind his house, the last vestige of the rocket ship in which he flew to Earth. The shard guides him to a remote enclave in the wintry highlands of the far north. Following its implicit instructions, Clark throws the crystal into the deep snow, and from the shallow slot is heaved a grand and glimmering redoubt. Clark spends the next 12 years in this “fortress of solitude,” learning about his “special heritage” from a talking hologram of his father. Even after he has matured and logged considerable flight time as Superman, Clark returns to the outpost for special counsel, and Jor-El is always there to impart, in a sober yet loving tone, his oldest and most resonant bits of Kryptonian wisdom.

But Superman does not have the luxury of communing with the godhead on a daily basis. Most of the time he dwells in a “castle of separation where [he] conducts a dialogue with himself” about—what else?—himself (Buber 152). Here, Superman and Clark function as each other’s confidante, and while the arrangement yields some existential nuggets (“It was Krypton that made me Superman, but it is the Earth that makes me human!!!”), the castle of separation feels no less hermitic because of it (Byrne 22; “Book Six”). Which prompts one to marvel at how long Kal-El has gone on this way. If Superman’s ultimate problem is the full disclosure of his double life, then his most

outstanding accomplishment has to be keeping that life a secret. Umberto Eco points out that "Superman's double identity . . . permits a suspense characteristic," and I believe it is just this characteristic that forms the heart of the Superman Experience, if I may call it that (108). Those who have read the comics and watched the movies will admit that their greatest thrill comes from the anticipation of Superman finally baring it all. Yet he refrains, and the audience comes away with the same desperate irony: Superman loves the world unremittingly, but he can never be a part of it.

Detachment is likewise a theme in Richard Kuklinski's life. Dating back to his early days in Jersey City, decades before he shot and killed mafia kingpin Paul Castellano in front of a Manhattan steak house, Richard had "always felt like an outsider, like [he] didn't belong" (Carlo 192). Over the years, various accomplices tried to befriend Richard, to make him feel less like an outcast, but he rejected their sympathies, preferring to be alone. Friendship had such little value for Richard because he believed, as do so many who suffer from paranoid personality disorder, that the world was against him, that a handshake was no different than a punch in the gut. "I'm probably the loneliest person in the world," Richard tells Park Dietz in the last of his HBO interviews. He cracks a smile as he says this, but it is the wry smile of the fugitive, the defector, the ghost—those whose social position is defined primarily by loss.

The only individuals with whom Richard had any significant contact were his victims. When Richard's employers would ask him to make a target suffer, he would take the mark to a certain cave in Bucks County, Pennsylvania and feed him to the rats that nested there. Philip Carlo recounts the Ice Man's sacrifice of a playboy who had crossed a Sicilian mobster:

Within two days Richard snatched the playboy and took him to the caves in Bucks County where he knew the rats lived. Richard had with him strips of rawhide . . . He stripped the playboy, wet the rawhide strips, wrapped one around each arm, one around his forehead. . . . As the rawhide grew taut, Richard watched the playboy suffering, amused, detached, telling [him] why this was happening. . . . He stayed

there for some time . . . watching him suffer, hearing his pleas. (192)

The Sicilian had not asked Richard to stay with the playboy, nor had he given him instructions to deliver an explanatory lecture. These things he did of his own volition, for his own private ends. Looking down at the mark, it can be imagined that Richard was not seeing the face of a whimpering lecher; he was seeing the face of the archetypal bully, Stanley Kuklinski. Since Stanley had died before Richard had had the chance to kill him, the cave became a torture chamber in which the Ice Man got to repeatedly stage, with the help of a colony of man-eating vermin, his father's metaphorical death. This explains why he would film the rodents feasting on the bodies and then watch the footage alone in his office. He wanted to make sure that Stanley had suffered, and that his younger brother Florian—who, had he lived, may have saved Richard from loneliness—was rightfully avenged.

Conclusion

At the end of this discussion, there is a tendency to want to condemn our subjects for their respective hoaxes. The furtive manner in which they conduct their lives, always keeping half of themselves hidden from view, foments in us a passion for the truth. We accuse Richard Kuklinski and Clark Kent of duplicity, and call for them to raze the fortress of identity and aspire to Buber's undiminished man. But I would argue that these judgments are too high-minded, an effect of our insatiable need for transparency. Rather than chastise these men for their protean behavior, I am inclined to look at them as models of discernment and discretion. As they shuffle between selves, neither Richard nor Clark is motivated by an explicit urge to deceive; they are simply trying to salvage their privacy. To have a life outside their terrible and sometimes uncontrollable powers, they are forced to adhere to a code of silence. In an age where entire digital realms exist for the multitudinous proclamations of both saints and savages, perhaps there is something to be learned from Ice and Steel: the value of reticence.

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