

# IN ONE BLOW: THE FUTILITY OF NIETZSCHE IN *ONE-PUNCH MAN*

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## Abstract

To say that Superman owes something of his existence to Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch* is not exactly a groundbreaking insight. The name itself, "Superman," is one of several standard translations of the German term.<sup>1</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's creation and the four-colored figures that followed in his footsteps all descend, at least in part, from this conception of the ideal man.<sup>2</sup> Initially, almost every one of these all-surpassing comic book demigods were seen as inherently positive; superior visions of humanity dedicated to the protection and uplifting of mere mortals because it was the right thing to do. Subsequent generations of comics readers and artists were less satisfied with the simple, altruistic vision of super-humanity, however, and contemplated how such fantastically overwhelming power might actually manifest itself in the real world of moral uncertainty and human frailty. Alan Moore in particular has been regularly cited (by scholars such as Iain

Thomson, Matthew Wolf-Meyer, and many others) as shattering the concept of superheroes with his radically deconstructive comic *Watchmen*. Yet Moore's grim vision of the real-world consequences of spectacular super-humans is not the only attempt at coming to terms with the *Übermensch*. Though far more lighthearted in tone, the manga *One-Punch Man* not only parodies the superhero genre as a whole, but acts as a direct critique of the Overman. By casting the hero Saitama as the perfect superior individual, and then exploring the unintended implications of such a condition, the *mangaka* ONE and Yusuke Murata show just how pointless Nietzsche's Overman actually is.

## It's a Bird, It's a Plane...

Published between 1883 and 1891, Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical narrative *Thus Spake Zarathustra* first postulated the evolutionary successor to humanity. Considering what form the post-human might take, the philosopher decided that the change would primarily be moral/psychological rather than physical. In his various writings on the subject, Nietzsche found fault with the strictures of tradition and religion. There was little upon which such antiquated practices were founded, other than the ossifying effects of time, and so he decided they must be set

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<sup>1</sup> NB: For the purposes of this essay, the terms *Übermensch* and its translation "Overman" will be used interchangeably, whereas Superman refers specifically to Clark Kent.

<sup>2</sup> Or, in later interpretations, woman. As a product of his time, Nietzsche focused primarily on the masculine ideal. Coincidentally, superhero comics were marketed primarily to young boys, and thus shared Nietzsche's lack of concern on the subject of the Over-woman.

aside for the species to progress. Thus, in the face of a meaningless moral system, the Overman creates his own code. In the context of adventure-fiction, these *Über*-ethics primarily concern the conflict between good and evil, law and order, or criminal and hero that has formed the core of such tales since their ancient inception.<sup>3</sup> Despots, villains, and fiends of all description necessarily fear the justice of the Overman, but so too do the law-abiding innocents, whose worldview he attacks. Ne'er-do-wells may break the law, "but in doing so [they] fortify the system of law itself created by the shepherds. The [Overman], however, by nature of moving beyond the usual categories of good and evil, challenges the entire moral paradigm altogether" (Robertson, 51). By standing above the laws and morals of the world at large, the *Übermensch* is an implicit threat to the pre-existing systems, upon which so many common people depend for safety and security. As such, he necessarily becomes a menace to the majority; a figure of sinister uncertainty. Not that the Overman is truly evil, however. Rather, he serves a distinct moral system that is so superior to the

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Nietzsche qualified and refined his ideal over the majority of his life, resulting in a body of work that is incredibly dense and complex, with a number of nuanced interpretations over which scholars have argued in the intervening century. Comics scholars in particular have established a relatively standard set of attributes for the *Übermensch* as he appears in superhero tales. C. K. Robertson, William Salter, J. Keeping, Chris Gavaler, and others have repeatedly made reference to the same passages from Nietzsche in establishing a code that is relevant to the specific concerns and narrative/media limitations of the Super Man: A standard which shall inform the bulk of this essay.

standard that it seems alien and malevolent to the masses (Keeping, 50).

This is not to say that the figure Zarathustra prophesied was necessarily a misunderstood but benevolent individual. Indeed, Nietzsche had little use for the messianic urge that yoked true might into subservience. He saw Jesus as one with the power of a true *Übermensch* who submitted "to the will of his Father and [accepted] self-sacrifice to aid second-rate humanity," whereas, in his view, "right or wrong, a true superman imposes his own selfish order" (Gavaler, 170). The Overman is not one concerned with what others think is good or bad, but operates according to his own code and interests. Such a person goes about his or her own business with no thought for the dictates of a meaningless tradition. If society should benefit from the Overman's actions, well and good. If not, that is also well and good, so long as his own purposes are served (Robertson, 56). Ultimately, despite the similarity in name between the *Übermensch* and Superman, the former is "not a champion of the oppressed, but a champion of the superself" (Gavaler, 54).

Nietzsche's ideal is not only metaphysically super-human, however. His superiority to the common man was also a bodily one as, "contrasted with the weakness of the 'herd,' this *Übermensch* is independent, strong, and, above all, healthy" (Robertson, 51). This is not to say that the Overman is perforce super-strong. Rather, he represents a peak of human development; the best that humanity could achieve if free of disease, malformation, malnutrition, congenital weakness, and other limiting factors. For Nietzsche, "healthiness of body

was a foremost consideration (a not-unexpected premise, given the philosopher's own illness-ridden state)" (Robertson, 55). Still, this physical vigor was not only for its own sake, as the philosopher believed that the Overman could only come about through tribulation. The world is a hard place, and in it any would-be superhuman was sure to find "his dragon, the superdragon that is worthy of him" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, XLIII). Though a difficulty, this "superdragon" also acts as a blessing, for its opposition gives the Overman something against which to challenge himself, and thus to grow. "His underlying idea is that the men of the future will be men of power and can only be proved by opposition. He early saw the place of insecurity, peril, and danger in educating the race and bringing out its higher qualities" (Salter 431). The challenge to be met and overcome would require both strength of both a physical and metaphysical nature for the successors of humanity to succeed.

Given the prerequisite moral and corporeal fortitude, as well as the hardships necessary to prompt evolution, how then does a man become an Overman? Nietzsche insists that it is through the assertion of the self; what he later calls the "Will to Power."

Nietzsche spoke of a "dominant thought" or a "ruling idea" that motivates the creator...If we understand the "ruling idea" as that which governs this reconstruction of one's character, and if we identify it with the value (or values) that one creates, then the *Übermensch* is a person who creates a value by

organizing his or her character in a coherent way around the value, by making it the formative principle of his or her life. (Keeping, 52)

With this unifying principle as a motivating force, the Overman thus begins to train himself in body and spirit. It is an arduous process, being less akin to the origin of Superman and more to the transformations of self-made characters such as Doc Savage, Batman, or Ozymandias, who acquired their physical and mental abilities "laboriously and little by little, through much industry, self-constraint, limitation, through much obstinate, faithful repetition of the same labors, the same enunciations" (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 995). Indeed, based on name alone, one might be forgiven for thinking that Siegel and Shuster's Superman is the most iconic representation of the *Übermensch*. While the big blue Boy Scout may have initially had some superior tendencies, however, his radical nature was subsumed into the role of a conservative patrician upholding American ideals; the same sort of traditional morality against which Nietzsche railed. Moreover, despite his alter-ego as Clark Kent, Superman was not technically a man, in the sense that he was Kryptonian by birth. Therefore, "no matter how much wishing the audience did, they could never be Superman; they would never be able to do what he could do. Nietzsche had been clear that the *Übermensch* was not an unattainable, otherworldly dream, nor a next step in evolution that was beyond human beings to achieve" (Robertson, 53). Thus, though a definite part of his ancestry, Superman's

Nietzschean attributes are somewhat vestigial. The true Overman, in the spirit of Batman and Ozymandias, forges himself into a superior specimen of humanity, both morally and physically, and thus becomes what Nietzsche asserts is the next step in human evolution; what all should strive for.

### **A Hero for Fun!**

This program of transformation is almost step-for-step the same followed by a young, unremarkable man named Saitama. Depressed and unemployed in modern Japan, he has been seeking a position as a salaryman; a modern archetype comparable to the “Gray Flannel Suit” of 1950s America. Confronted by one of the many monsters infesting the cities, Saitama is asked why he doesn’t run. “I just had an interview and failed miserably,” the young man returns. “I don’t care about anything now. I don’t even feel like running from you, Crablante. So what’re you gonna do if I don’t?” (ONE, “Punch 2,” 30). Not only is the normal vision of society and life pointless and unfulfilling, but the young man is so personally inept that he cannot even succeed at that. Thus, when confronted with a mortal threat from which most people would run screaming, Saitama cannot even muster the energy to care. Life is meaningless, so why bother trying to protect or sustain it? The hero-to-be descent into nihilism is only temporarily, however, and when the monstrous Crablante threatens a young brat, Saitama throws himself into the fray to save the boy, ultimately deciding that he will be a hero.

With this singular purpose fueling his decision, Saitama begins to train day-and-night. Through regular exercise, and by pitting himself against the endless tide of monsters emerging to threaten the populace, he grows piecemeal over three years until he becomes the truly super-human figure who will eventually be dubbed “The Caped Baldy.” A closer look at the hero’s training regimen is worthwhile, as it points to two particularly *Übermensch*-ian qualities. Having gained an apprentice—the cyborg Genos, who seeks to follow Saitama’s path to ultimate power—the hero attacks an underground complex experimenting in human/animal super-beings. When the strongest senses the protagonist’s true strength, he demands an explanation, to which Saitama responds:

One hundred push-ups. One hundred sit-ups. One hundred squats. And run ten kilometers. **Every Day!!** Also, eat three meals a day. Even just a banana will do for breakfast. To train your spirit, never use heat in the winter or air conditioning in the summer. It’ll almost kill you early on, and you’ll consider taking a day off. But I wanted to be a strong hero, so I persevered every day, even if I vomited blood. Even when I felt so heavy I could barely move, I did squats. Even if my arms made weird popping sounds, I did push-ups. One year later, I noticed a change...I was bald. And I’d gotten stronger. In other words, train so hard you lose your hair. That’s the only way to get strong. If you’re fiddling around with

a ‘new humanity’ and ‘evolution,’ you’ll never make it. Human strength lies in the ability to change **yourself!** (ONE, “Punch 11,” 70-73, emphasis in original).

Rather than relying on external shortcuts, such as genetic engineering, artificial evolution, or even the alien supremacy of Superman, Saitama promotes the will to change oneself. The Nietzschean “Will to Power,” the desire and drive to become better, coupled with a steady, incremental advance in physical and mental ability, allows the failed-salaryman to transform *himself* into the true Overman, capable of defeating any foe in the eponymous “one punch.” The program that Saitama describes would fit exactly with that proposed by Nietzsche (potential disagreements on the taste of bananas excepted).

Despite the clear philosophical parallels between Saitama’s regimen and the self-creation of an *Übermensch*, however, not every character is impressed with the hero’s metaphysical mastery. Every one of Saitama’s auditors is momentarily stunned, until his apprentice Genos haltingly stutters “Master...You are so...**FULL OF CRAP!** That is just regular strength training! It is not even that hard!” (ONE, “Punch 11,” 74-75, emphasis in original). Yet the Caped Baldy insists that really is the entirety of his secret. While this is played for laughs in the manga, in truth it reinforces the Nietzschean elements of the hero. The training regimen is valuable, especially in terms of the general health that the philosopher prized, but that is not in itself what elevates Saitama to the rank of Overman. Instead, it is the purpose,

the single-minded dedication, that allows him to elevate himself. In the pages of *One-Punch Man*, the “Will to Power” is literal. It is his intense determination, not the specific muscles grown through exercise, that changes the man Saitama into an *Übermensch*.

It is important to note, however, that it is not heroism, per se, that the Caped Baldy seeks. Or at least not the traditional understanding of heroism. He does not attempt to save the world out of a sense of altruism or service to the masses, but rather because he likes doing it. On his first appearance in the manga, a monster asks who he is, and the first words he says are “Someone who’s a hero for fun” (ONE, “Punch 1,” 18, see **Fig. 1**). His entire motivation is his own enjoyment. He does not fight for truth and justice, but because he enjoys it and wants to find an opponent who can actually test him. That this typically leads him to attack monsters and save the lives of endangered mortals is a pleasant bonus, but it is ultimately incidental to his activities. When fighting a giant superhuman that stands literal miles tall, Saitama fells him with one blow, as expected. When the dead body falls, however, it crashes onto City B, destroying it, to which the hero’s only response is “Oops” (ONE, “Punch 3,” 64). The loss of life and property is unfortunate, to be sure, but at the end of the day the Overman succeeded in his goals, so all is well.

And, as Zarathustra predicted, this alien *Übermensch* morality does not exactly endear the Caped Baldy to his fellow citizens. In one instance, Saitama destroys a meteor about to flatten City Z by punching

it, but the shattered fragments of stone still cause massive amounts of damage (though still less than the total destruction that the intact space-rock would have caused). Meeting Saitama in one of the rubble-strewn streets, a pair of jealous fellow-heroes attempt to turn the people against him. Tank-Top Black Hole, the instigator, shouts “You caused a **tragedy!** But you call yourself a **hero?!** Look around! **You** did this...Your **rash behavior** resulted in all this **suffering!** Don’t you even **want** to accept responsibility? You should give up being a hero!” (ONE, “Punch 22,” 106-108, emphasis in original). The trick works, and bystanders begin to call him names and shout for him to get lost. Tank-Top Black Hole uses the crowd’s anger as an excuse to attack Saitama, but naturally fails. As the hero stares down the crowd around them, he shouts out “**Shut up! Shut up!** Tell it to the **meteor**, you idiots! I’m not a hero because I want your approval! I do it because I **want** to! What do I care about the damage?! If you wanna hate me, then hate me!!” (ONE, “Punch 22,” 124-125, emphasis in original). This declaration of defiance is the epitome of the *Übermensch*, one who acknowledges only his own power as guiding principle, and refuses to submit to the constraints of an empty tradition.

Like Nietzsche’s Overman, Saitama does not care at all about how the common herds perceive or judge him. Indeed, in another instance, he intentionally sabotages his own reputation, as Tank-Top Black Hole had previously attempted to do for him. When a vicious monster called the Sea King attacks City J, it brutalizes several extremely powerful heroes in a bid to eat the town’s

citizens. Saitama arrives at the last moment, after all the heroes have fallen in an attempt to stall the creature, and slays it with a single punch. While most of the onlookers are grateful to be rescued, one questions the need for heroes who, even in a group, cannot save the people from a single monster, especially as they are provided for by public taxes. As the crowd begins to sour against the superheroes, Saitama turns and arrogantly claims credit for killing the monster, even if the other heroes had weakened it first, playing on an existing rumor that he is a fake who steals the credit for other heroes’ work. He asks the crowd to tend to the wounded heroes, saying that “If they die, I can’t use them anymore,” prompting the people to fully believe his unsavory reputation and declare “By comparison, the other heroes are **truly heroic!** If **they** hadn’t weakened the monster, we’d be dead! We should be deeply thankful to them (ONE, “Punch 28,” 152-153, emphasis in original). As an *Übermensch*, Saitama is neither ruled nor affected by conventional understandings of right and wrong. All that matters is his own purpose, and the fulfillment of his own desires.

Being a hero for fun, Saitama obviously values the role of “hero” (not as in a noble exemplar, but more someone who is allowed to run around and beat up monsters and bad guys), as well as the friends and comrades who were thrashed by the Sea King. When they are threatened, therefore, he casts himself as the villain to redeem the reputation of heroes in general. He is such a superior figure that he can absorb the abuse and hatred of the masses without concern,

and thus allow both himself and his friends to continue doing as they please.

### **Don't Get Stronger**

The hero Saitama begins as a typical mortal in a world of turmoil. He faces the realization that life as it is commonly lived is meaningless, and thus decides to forge his own path forward, becoming a hero. Driven by a fierce, almost supernatural, determination, he trains for several years until, over time, his physical and mental state reach the human pinnacle and surpass it; until he stands above the crowd's petty morality, a true exemplar of the *Übermensch*. And what does he gain? Does he save the world through his own genius, as Ozymandias in *Watchmen*, or live Bruce Wayne's easy life of a playboy and secret adventurer? No. Instead, Saitama lives in a small, one-person apartment in an abandoned section of City Z, spending his time destroying world-ending threats with no recognition and little remuneration or worrying about sales on groceries. In the world of *One-Punch Man*, the Overman is Over-bored. At the start of the series, Saitama has become so superior, not only to everyday mortals but to other superheroes, that he defeats every foe in a single punch. And because of that, his life lacks zest. When fighting the aforementioned giant, for example, Saitama is subject to a flurry of building-leveling blows. The monster, thinking himself victorious, laments the accidental death of his brother moments before, saying "I am the strongest man. So...what? It feels empty," to which Saitama, from within a deep crater left by

the punches, replies "Tell me about it...Overwhelming strength is boring" (ONE, "Punch 3," 58-64). Whereupon he jumps through the air and decks the beast in the jaw, killing him. Similarly, in a later arc involving a martial arts tournament, the hero faces off against a fighter who is also vastly superior to his opponents, having defeated all of them in a single kick. His strength is nothing compared to the ultimate *Übermensch*, however, as none of his attacks so much as ruffle the Caped Baldy. Even those that the hero allows to connect do little more than leave a scuff mark. As the two talk mid-contest, it becomes apparent that Suiryu, the martial artist, is so strong that he uses his power to live a life of ease, entering tournaments and effortlessly destroying his foes whenever he wants the prize money or to have fun. He counsels Saitama to do the same, to which the hero replies "*I* have some advice for *you*. If you wanna have fun you should avoid getting any stronger" (ONE, "Punch 70," 144-145, emphasis in original).

While the dialogue and storylines fully convey Saitama's *Über*-ennui, it is the visuals that truly demonstrate the difference between an *Übermensch* and a normal (super-) human. Much of the hero's visual style comes from the original incarnation of *One-Punch Man*, which was initially produced as a webcomic, written and drawn by ONE. His artwork was largely amateurish, but when the manga was formally published in *Shonen Jump*, artist Yusuke Murata was brought on to illustrate the stories, giving them a highly professional look. Nevertheless, Murata maintained much of the distinct aesthetic of

the main character. In almost every instance of his appearance, Saitama's face is a marked contrast from his surroundings. In the first issue, for example, he destroys a horned, purple creature. As his fist blows a hole through the screaming monster's torso, the background is filled with dramatic lines radiating away from the point of impact, lending a distinct energy to the scene. The fiend's body is highly detailed, veins standing rigid along bulging muscles as his eyes pop out and his flesh is torn to shreds by the force of the blow. In contrast to this dense, stimulating backdrop, Saitama's face is utterly placid. His eyebrows, mouth, and the tops of his eyes are all straight lines, devoid of any passion or intensity, while his head is little more than a featureless egg, especially in contrast to the high level of detail on the monster. He is flat, where the rest of the world is vivid and alive. Even the border lines that separate his character from the background are drawn slightly but noticeably thicker on Saitama, causing him to stand out in jarring graphic dissonance (see **Fig. 2**). Time and again the simplicity with which Saitama is drawn is presented in direct contrast to other characters, be they humans, heroes, or monsters. The Overman is so far removed from the rest of the world that he does not even resemble it anymore.

This is not to say that the Caped Baldy has only one expression, however. In truth, there are times when his passions are roused and the hero becomes as visually defined and dynamic as any other character in the series. In one such instance, he leaps into the air, delivering a flurry of blows at his enemy. His hands move so quickly that they are blurred streaks of white encircling him,

while his ovoid face suddenly sports sharply defined cheekbones and a distinct brow. In the following panel, infuriated by the foe's escape, his face is contorted with rage. The veins stand out rigidly on his face and neck, his eyebrows are furrowed, and where before his face was entirely flat in now has depth and definition (ONE, "Punch 5," 95-96, see **Fig. 3 and 4**). This battle does not lend any particular *joie de vivre* to Saitama, however, as all of this effort has been exerted in the attempt to swat a mosquito. At other times, he is roused to ire by missing a sale at the grocery store, being beaten at a game by an *otaku* friend, or when his dreams supply the challenge that reality cannot. Having propelled himself from mundanity to the heights of power, it is now only the utterly normal and universal that can excite him. The daily grievances and worries that plague everyone are all that prompt a response in the hero.

This is the ultimate fate of the *Übermensch*, and ONE's contribution to the conversations surrounding the socio-cultural role of superheroes. The Nietzschean "Will to Power" can lead one to the heights of excellence, but if followed to completion it also leads to a rather pointless existence. Saitama himself lays out his conundrum:

The evil running rampant around the world shows no sign of disappearing. It hasn't changed since I became a hero for fun. In other words, I'm having no effect on society. I'm not sad about that. I do this for fun, so I just need to satisfy myself. Fighting evil in the name of justice excited and pleased me when I had lost the

will to live. But now I have a big problem. My emotions are dulling. I have no fear, no joy, no tension, no anger. In exchange for strength, have I lost something important as a human being? Emotions used to swirl within me when I fought. Fear, impatience, anger. But now...day after day, after one punch, I go home unharmed and wash my gloves. When I fight super-humans and monsters, there is no clash of spirits. They're like bugs. (ONE, "Punch 5," 92-93)

Instead of the life of adventure and excitement that he expected, the hero's fulfillment of the promise of super-humanity only leads to boredom and detachment from all but the most petty aspects of life. It is not the life that readers of Superman and other comics were promised. And that is the point. Since his inception in 1938, Superman and his breed have served as a form of wish fulfillment; the dream of power and strength offered to the weak and oppressed. While not wrong in itself, however, unthinking identification with the Overman can lead to a highly problematic worldview wherein the exceptionalism of an individual justifies tyranny and abuse. Alan Moore and the other creators involved in the deconstruction of superheroes offered a counter to this image of the *Übermensch*. They suggested that such an individual might not be so appealing if met in the real world, where power has a much greater tendency to corrupt. From the perspective of the common individual, Nietzsche's push towards superiority would lead to a

dystopian nightmare. While this argument caused many readers to think about the implications of their beloved genre, it does not entirely disenchant one with the notion of supreme power. After all, oppression is not so nightmarish if one is the superior oppressor. What an other-focused individual (following the Messianic model that Nietzsche so despised) may find objectionable does not necessarily concern an egotist like the Overman. So *One-Punch Man* provides the anti-Nietzschean argument for such egotists. A reader should not unthinkingly follow the path of personal superiority, not because it will make them abhorrent to others, but because it is so incredibly dull. ONE and Yusuke Murata are essentially telling their readers that if they have dreams of becoming an Aryan Superman and bending the world to their iron will, it is doable, but they would probably have a lot more fun just playing some video games with a buddy.

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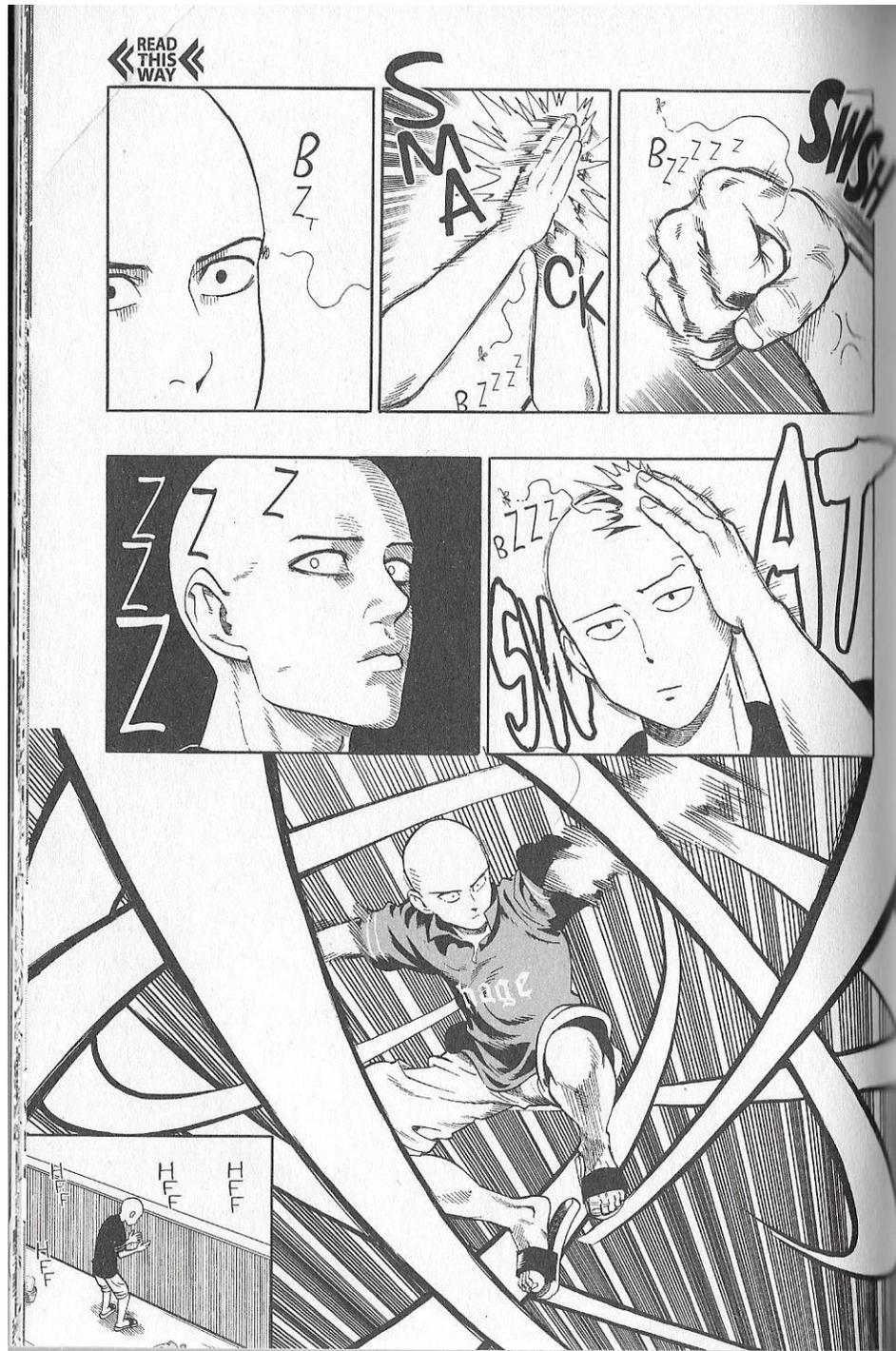
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**Fig. 1** Saitama's first words. ONE, art by Yusuke Murata. "Punch 1: One Punch." *One-Punch Man*, Vol. 01, translated by John Werry, 2015, 5-26, pp. 18.



**Fig. 2** Saitama destroys a monster. Note the differences between the detailed background/monster to the aesthetics of Saitama's face. ONE, art by Yusuke Murata. "Punch 1: One Punch." One-Punch Man, Vol. 01, translated by John Werry, 2015, 5-26, pp. 24-25.



**Fig. 3** Saitama exerts effort to destroy a mosquito. ONE, art by Yusuke Murata. “Punch 5: Itch Explosion.” *One-Punch Man*, Vol. 01, translated by John Werry, 2015, 91-112, pp. 94.



**Fig. 4** When roused, such as by the mosquito's escape, Saitama's face becomes much more detailed. ONE, art by Yusuke Murata. "Punch 5: Itch Explosion." *One-Punch Man*, Vol. 01, translated by John Werry, 2015, 91-112, pp. 95.



**Fig. 5** Saitama (in disguise) faces off against the martial artist Suiryu. Note the contrasting visual styles of the two figures. ONE, art by Yusuke Murata. “Punch 70: Strength is Fun.” *One-Punch Man*, Vol. 13, translated by John Werry, 2018, 95-150, pp. 96-97.