

DEXTER: VILLAIN, HERO OR SIMPLY A MAN? THE
PERPETUATION OF TRADITIONAL MASCULINITY IN *DEXTER*

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The paper analyses how television series *Dexter* generates complicity with its serial killer protagonist, Dexter Morgan, not only by giving him a heroic edge that overrides the monstrosity of his crimes, but also by focusing on his attempts to blend in and pass undetected by posing as a caring partner, father and co-worker. Dexter's efforts to curve his inborn violence into submission and to appear as the New Man envisioned in our supposedly post-feminist state of affairs, however, do not prosper and the series ends up promoting an image of men as inherently aggressive, individualist and selfish. *Dexter*, I argue, does not manage to countermand a construction of masculinity based on violence and endorses a patriarchal ethos actively and stubbornly engaged in its self-preservation.

Keywords: cultural studies; serial killer fiction; psycho-horror; masculinity; television; *Dexter*

DEXTER: ¿VILLANO, HÉROE O SIMPLEMENTE UN HOMBRE?
PERPETUANDO LA MASCULINIDAD TRADICIONAL EN DEXTER

El artículo analiza cómo la serie Dexter genera complicidad con el asesino en serie protagonista, Dexter Morgan, no sólo proporcionándole atributos heroicos que nos hacen olvidar la monstruosidad de sus crímenes, sino también presentando a Dexter como un hombre 'normal' que intenta pasar inadvertido haciéndose pasar por un buen esposo, padre y compañero de trabajo. Los intentos de Dexter de controlar su violencia y estar a la altura del ideal postfeminista de lo que debe ser un hombre, sin embargo, no tienen éxito y la serie acaba promoviendo una imagen de la masculinidad basada en la agresión, la individualidad y el egoísmo. Dexter, por lo tanto, no logra desligar la masculinidad de la violencia y activamente promueve la supervivencia del sistema patriarcal.

Palabras clave: estudios culturales; ficción de asesinos en serie; psico-horror; masculinidad; televisión; Dexter

1. Introduction

The television series *Dexter* (Showtime 2006-), based on the novels by Jeff Lindsay,¹ is one of the most successful exponents of psycho-horror, a serial killer fiction subgenre in which the serial killer is the main protagonist and readers/audiences become direct witnesses of his thoughts and murders unmediated by an external agent that posits a moral frame to the serial killer's actions (Santaularia 2009: 157-78).² The popularity of psycho-horror – as well as of the other two subgenres that comprise serial killer fiction (the serial killer thriller and the slasher) – bespeaks American (and Western) audiences' interest in the serial killer phenomenon in a context in which the “convening of the public around scenes of violence ... has come to make up a *wound culture*: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons” (Seltzer 1998: 1). Not all fictional serial killers are men³ and not all their victims are women,⁴ but serial killer fiction tends to construct an image of masculinity linked to the expression of violence. Consequently, the genre is indicative of a patriarchal ethos which favours the creation of “social contexts which positively evaluate aggression and competitiveness” (Brittan 1989: 83) and in which “males are trained for a world of independent aggressive action” (Lipman-Blumen 1984: 55) to the extent that, in Michael S. Kimmel's words, “[v]iolence is often the single most evident marker of manhood” (2006: 278). Even though, in the serial killer thriller and the slasher, the serial killer's monstrosity is constructed, at least in part, by his violence and the atrocities he commits, this selfsame violence is presented as acceptable if perpetrated by the detective hero, who often uses violence to counteract the serial killer's threat – as for instance in the novel *Lazy Bones* by Mark Billingham – or acts as jury and executioner of the serial killer in examples such as the film *Se7en* (David Fincher 1995). Male violence is even more problematic in psycho-horror since, in this subgenre, the violence of the serial killer is not only presented as inherent but as somehow justifiable. In the case of Henry, the protagonist of John McNaughton's film *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), for instance, he is a victim of a deficient system which generated his psychopathologies when his mother, with no other option but prostitution to earn a living, forced her son to witness her sexual encounters with strangers. Mick and Mallory, in Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), are symptoms of a corrupt and sterile society which they want to stir from its contented stupor through anarchic acts of violence. To mention one last example, Blackburn, of Bradley Denton's homonymous novel, kills those who deserve some sort of punishment for their immoral or criminal acts.

¹ So far, Jeff Lindsay has published the following *Dexter* novels: *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), *Dearly Devoted Dexter* (2005), *Dexter in the Dark* (2007), *Dexter by Design* (2008) and *Dexter Is Delicious* (2010).

² Research for this article was conducted within the framework of the research group “Representación, ideología y recepción en la cultura audiovisual (RIRCA)”, Universitat de les Illes Balears, of which I am a member.

³ Female serial killers can be found, for example, in the novels *Tooth and Nail* by Ian Rankin or *The Angel of Darkness* by Caleb Carr, or in the films *Absence of the Good* (John Flynn 1999), *Monster* (Patty Jenkins 2003) or *88 Minutes* (Jon Avnet 2007).

⁴ The victims of the serial killer in the slasher are both males and females.

Paradoxically, in some examples of psycho-horror and other serial killer fictions, the construction of the serial killer's masculinity is also related to the preservation of moral values, justice and/or the law and order. Hannibal Lecter, the cannibal serial killer in Thomas Harris' novels, can by no means be regarded as a redresser of society's wrongs, but he 'only' kills those who offend his sense of good taste – he calls them 'free-range rude' in the novel *Hannibal* – or those who jeopardise Clarice Starling's career prospects or endanger her life, so he acts according to a perverse sense of duty. John Doe in *Seven* commits his crimes in order to teach a moral lesson to a society which detective William Somerset qualifies as indolent and apathetic. In a futuristic society in which 'gynocide' (the murder of women) has become a pandemic, the serial killer Wittgenstein of Philip Kerr's *A Philosophical Investigation* kills "[t]omorrow's gynocidal maniacs" (1992: 165), so he saves the police "the time and trouble of catching them. Not to mention the lives of all the innocent women they might eventually kill" (1992: 43). The victims of Clifford Banks' 'executions', as he calls them, in the last six episodes of *Murder One* (ABC 1995-1997) are criminals who escape the legal system after anomalous trials or unfair sentences. Blackburn's chosen preys in Denton's novel mentioned above are robbers, child abusers, rapists and other types of criminals who pass undetected in society. He takes for granted his actions do not deserve condemnation since, as he argues, there are "laws deeper and more rigid than those shaped by the inconstant fools who place themselves above us, and a man who knows and keeps those laws is beyond the judgement of such fools. That man must never seek absolution, for where no absolution is needed, none can be given" (1993: 203). In these stories, therefore, the serial killer fulfils an almost (super)heroic role since he devotes his life to rid society of its anomalous and criminal elements.

2. Dexter: Villain and Hero

These two characteristics of serial killers in fiction – their inherent violence and, in some cases, their sense of justice – coalesce in the protagonist of *Dexter*, which, as a good example of psycho-horror, follows the exploits and thoughts of Morgan Dexter, a blood splatter expert for the Miami Metro Police who leads a double life as serial killer. By principle, Dexter does not kill innocent people. Instead, he puts his serial killer skills at the service of society cleaning Miami's mean streets of murderers who operate beneath the radar of Miami's Metro Police Homicide Department. Dexter does incorporate the attributes that characterise villains in serial killer fiction. To start with, he is presented as empty, unable to feel anything. Already in the series' pilot, 'Dexter', he introduces himself as "Dexter Morgan. I don't know what made me the way I am but whatever it was left a hollow place inside. People fake a lot of human interactions. And I feel like I fake them all" (1.1).⁵ Consequently, Dexter becomes, in his own words, "a master of disguise" who spends his time pretending he is not a monster and who takes his roles as brother, friend and boyfriend just as "part of his costume collection" (1.1) he uses in order pass undetected in society. Secondly, Dexter enjoys killing. His violent

⁵ Titles of episodes are given the first time they are mentioned. For successive references to the same episodes, season and episode numbers only are provided between brackets.

instincts – his Dark Passenger, as he calls them – define his essence and determine the activities he undertakes in his free time, when he “hides in the shadows” (‘If I Had a Hammer’ 4.6) in order to commit his murders. Even though he only kills criminals, he does so moved by his craving and blood-lust. As Dexter’s stepsister, Deb, also a police officer, tells FBI’s special agent Frank Lundy when Dexter’s bodies are discovered, “You don’t kill that many people because it’s a chore but because you enjoy it” (‘See-Through’ 2.4). Finally, Dexter, follows the pattern of other villainous serial killers and is presented as a product of a cycle of violence which, in serial killer fiction, perpetuates itself from parents to children.⁶ Dexter’s mother, Laura Moser, was a police informant who was killed by the drug dealers she snitched on. They dismembered her body with a chainsaw in a container park. Her sons, Dexter and Brian, were with her and witnessed the massacre. Dexter, a “[l]ittle bird with a broken wing” (‘Born Free’ 1.12), was adopted by police detective Harry Morgan. Brian, however, was a “fucked up kid” (1.12) who was institutionalised for a mental disorder and eventually became the Ice Truck Killer, a prototypical serial killer who targets on prostitutes. In spite of Harry’s care (or maybe, as we will see, because of it), Dexter became the Bay Harbour Butcher – a nickname he is given by the media when Dexter’s bodies are discovered. Consequently, as Dexter puts it, “Something nameless was born [in a container]. Something that lives in the deepest, darkest hole of a thing called Dexter” (1.12). This ‘something nameless’ is a “human bloodhound incited by the scent of darkness” (‘It’s Alive!’ 2.1) who operates according to a strict code of survival.

In spite of his criminal activities and villainous nature, Dexter’s character is intended to canvass the audience’s approval. Trained by his adoptive father to put his inherent violent instincts to good use by killing those who deserve to die and to spare innocent victims and children, Dexter searches “for the ones that think they’ve beaten the system” (‘Popping Cherry’ 1.3). Consequently, he thinks he is “a bargain for the system” (‘There’s Something About Harry’ 2.10), feels he “[brings] order to the chaos, [which] fills [him] with civil pride” (2.1) and acts like “it’s [his] job to save lives” (1.3). Dexter is, furthermore, an attentive boyfriend (husband in the fourth season) who looks after Rita and her kids (Cody and Astor, from Rita’s second marriage) and a caring father of his son with Rita, Harrison. During the four seasons, he protects Rita from her abusive ex-husband and is ready to give a helping hand every time she is in trouble; picks up the children after school; baby-sits when Rita is working; prepares breakfasts, lunches and suppers; and is in charge of domestic repairs. As he asserts, “I’m the helpful handyman. How evil can I possibly be?” (‘Left Turn Ahead’ 2.11). Taking into account Dexter’s capacity to show affection (or, at least, fake it), his remorse when he murders an innocent victim – such as when he kills District Attorney Miguel Prado’s brother, Oscar, by mistake in ‘Our Father’ (3.1) –, his sense of piety when he agrees to put his friend Camilla – who suffers from terminal lung cancer – out of her misery in ‘Easy As Pie’ (3.7), and his role as executioner of Miami’s bad guys, Dexter is not so

⁶ In the episode ‘Wide Open’ of television series *Millennium* (Fox 1996-1999), for example, the serial killer investigated by the series’ protagonists, Frank Black and detective Bob Bletcher, kills wealthy families. As Bletcher explains, “His parents abandoned him. He saw his uncle and aunt being tortured by a farm hand. Tragedy begets tragedy” (1.9).

different from comic superheroes like Captain America, Spider-Man, Batman or Superman, who, in Antonio Ballesteros's words, are exponents of the defenders of the system that try to correct its cracks and crevices (2000: 73).⁷ In fact, when it is discovered that Dexter's victims are criminals, the media give Dexter the nickname the Dark Defender and they deal with him with the respect and admiration that Superman himself would deserve. In people's imagination, Dexter becomes the Stalker of the Night – a clear reference to cult TV series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (ABC 1972) – whose “blade of vengeance turns wrong into right” (“The Dark Defender” 2.5). Dexter himself cannot help but notice his resemblance to superheroes. As he states, “it does seem we have a lot in common. Tragic beginnings, secret identities, part human, part mutant, [and making reference to Doakes, the only detective of Miami's Metro Police Homicide Department who is aware of his real nature] archenemies” (2.5). He even uses references to superheroes on various occasions. When incriminating algae found in Dexter's uncovered bodies is traced back to the pier where he keeps his boat, he says it “might as well be kryptonite. If it's traced back to me, I'll be helpless” (2.5); when he pretends a drug-addiction to account for his nocturnal escapades, he thinks it's a good excuse since it explains “why [he disappears] at all hours in the night like Clark fucking Kent” (“Waiting to Exhale” 2.2); and, to mention another example, when district attorney Miguel Prado finds out about Dexter's actions and asks him to become his mentor and share his expertise in order to deal with criminals ‘the Dexter style’, Dexter thinks they look like Batman and Robin (“All in the Family” 3.4).

Even though Dexter is a killer, the society that serves as his hunting ground is presented as deficient, if not rotten to the core, so his role as Dark Defender is even more justifiable in the series' diegesis. The police work hard but “at a solve rate for murder of about twenty per cent in Miami ... [it] is a great place for [Dexter] to hone [his] craft” (1.1). The illegal immigrants who manage to enter the States become victims of coyotes who will not let them free unless their family pay a surprise release fee. If they cannot pay, they disappear. Consequently, for the “poor bastards ... freedom [becomes] just another word for one more way to get fucked” (“Love American Style” 1.5). According to FBI estimates “there are at least fifty serial killers active in the USA today” (“Circle of Friends” 1.7). The legal system is manipulated by lawyers like Ellen Wolf, who, in the words of the district attorney, “shits on justice” (3.7), and, as a consequence, known criminals like Jamie Jaworski, a rapist and murderer (1.1), or Freebo, a drug dealer (3.1), are released after deficient trials. In fact, prisons let free “25,000 inmates a year” (1.3). Meanwhile, innocent men like Chiqui Hynes (“Finding Freebo” 3.2) or Eddie Noonan (“Remains to Be Seen” 4.2) are sentenced for crimes they did not commit. The district attorney, Miguel Prado, even complains that he has five floors filled with lawyers and the entire police department at his service but he cannot serve justice (“*Sí Se Puede*” 3.6). The Homicide Department's chief, Captain Matthews, on the other hand, takes decisions which promote his political interests and public image and not justice. In fact, he turns Lieutenant Maria Laguerta – an intuitive and hardworking detective – into the scapegoat of one of his many blunders and demotes

⁷ The actual quote reads as follows: “*exponente[s] de la encrucijada ética de un defensor del sistema que trata de corregir las grietas y fisuras que acometen a éste*”.

her to work “in the ball-park with all the other detectives” (‘Truth Be Told’ 1.11). On the home front, things are not much better. Paul Bennet, Rita’s ex-husband, was a “drug-using, wife-beating redneck” (1.11). Arthur Mitchell is a serial killer and also an abusive husband and father in season four. Indeed, in a context in which, as Dexter asserts, “there is a rotten world out there” and “bad things do not end when you walk home” (‘Lost Boys’ 4.10), the audience’s sympathy for Dexter’s actions is guaranteed.

3. Dexter as ‘New Man’

Dexter’s ambiguity (which is made evident in the two nicknames he is given throughout the series, the Bay Harbour Butcher and the Dark Defender) as killer and redresser of injustices, therefore, determines the series’ appeal and the audience’s sympathetic approach to the character. In fact, quality television – defined by Robin Nelson as television programmes which are “perceived to be of exceptional quality, canonical even” (2007: 55) produced, as is the case of *Dexter*, for subscription channels – often tries to “elicit a shock of new insight” (Nelson 2007: 107) by “allowing existential shadows to play across its surface gloss” (Nelson 2007: 28) and presenting characters who breach moral, as well as generic, boundaries and who sit awkwardly between heroic and villainous roles.⁸ However, Dexter’s allure as a character depends also on his portrayal as a prototypical male whose violent instincts fit uncomfortably in urban, industrialised societies in which “the pursuit of manhood via displays of physical prowess and courage seem increasingly obsolete” (Segal 1990: 130). Dexter insists on proclaiming his singularity and extraordinary nature. In ‘Let’s Give the Boy a Hand’, for example, he declares he is “not a man nor a beast” but “something new entirely” (1.4). But as he tries to soften his rough edges and manage his inborn aggression to pose as the perfect boyfriend, husband, father, brother and colleague, he is not so different from contemporary men urged “by broad ... consensus ... to abandon what is imagined to be traditional masculinity in order to get in touch with their feelings and develop their emotional articulacy” (MacInnes 2006: 323). The New Man – a term which makes reference to men who “have caved in to feminism” (Connell 2005: 14) and who are prototypically identified as being “anti-sexist, caring, sharing [men]” (Beynon 2002: 115) – may be, as Imelda Whelehan sustains, a creation of “adland” (2000: 5), a “media vision of what pro-feminist men would look like” (2000: 61). However, he remains an aspirational figure in narratives in which men have to learn to manage their aggression as a response to a supposed genderquake that threatens to make them redundant if they do not go through a rehabilitation process and embrace their feminine side (and share domestic chores). In this context, therefore, Dexter’s on-going effort to repress his Dark Passenger is also the fight of many modern-day men who are forced to adapt to the demands of women or perish, or, at least, remain single.

⁸ Like Dexter, characters like Vic Mackey or Gregory House, of quality TV series *The Shield* (Fox 2002-2008) and *House M.D.* (Fox 2004-) respectively, include criminal elements in their make-up. Both House and Mackey save lives. However, House is a drug-addict who needs to bend the system to get his doses on too many occasions; Vic Mackey is corrupt and, already in the first episode, kills an undercover officer recruited to bring Vic down.

Dexter fears his attempts to become the New Man envisioned in post-feminist literature are doomed to failure. In episode 1.5, for example, after having had sex with Rita for the first time, she feels they have reached a new level of intimacy. Dexter thinks otherwise: “She doesn’t know yet I don’t have a next level. Eventually, she’ll call me a science project and slam the door at my face”. In ‘Crocodile’ he even asserts, “I can kill a guy, dismember his body and be home on time for *Letterman*, but knowing what to say when my girlfriend’s feeling insecure, I’m totally lost” (1.2). In spite of his scepticism, he tries hard and he does all the right things he thinks a caring boyfriend is supposed to do. He, for instance, watches films like *Terms of Endearment* with Rita, even though he cannot bring himself to cry – he thinks to himself, “Maybe if I don’t blink, my eyes will tear up” (1.5). He even meets Rita’s mother and plays the good guy in front of her; after all, he knows how to pretend with parents, “the key is simply to think of them as aliens from a distant universe. You have fibres and threads unknown to us. Your ancient customs intrigue me” (2.4). The process of becoming Rita’s husband and father of their son is equally difficult for Dexter. Rita will only consent to marry him if he is able to express true love, since his first reaction on finding out she is pregnant and his words, “[w]e should get married” (3.4), only manage to make her vomit. In a context in which, in Pearce and Stacey’s words, “individuals are educated in the ‘narratives of romance’ from such an early age that there is little hope of immunity” (1995: 12), Dexter has to resort to the language of romantic fiction and he proposes to Rita using the exact words uttered by a murder suspect who, incidentally, had constructed an ideal infatuation not actually returned by the object of her affection, also conditioned by fictional ideals of romantic bliss (3.4). For a man used to pretence, he does not understand that women do not always say what they think and he has to buy an engagement ring Rita said she did not need (‘The Damage a Man Can Do’ 3.8). During Rita’s pregnancy, Dexter experiences what he regards as “the worst moment of his life” (‘The Lion Sleeps Tonight’ 3.2): a yoga class in which the instructor tells them to express themselves freely and to be as beautiful as they feel. When Harrison, his son, is born, Dexter’s opinion of children undergoes a transformation. Before then, he thought they were adorable. Now he only sees them as “bundles of uncertainty and germs” (3.2). In spite of his anxiety about children, he becomes a responsible father who changes diapers, gets up at night when Harrison wakes up crying, feeds him and sings him songs over the phone to make him sleep. He even gives up his lonesome cowboy pose and disguises himself as family man who lives in a suburban home equipped with communal swimming-pool and surrounded by neighbours and their children, prepares barbecues and learns to accept what he calls “the pleasures of masculine comradeship” (4.6) when he strikes a friendship (and partnership in crime) with Miguel Prado. As a good husband, he also agrees to marriage counselling sessions when Rita discovers he has kept his apartment after marriage in order to be able to escape from Rita and the children when he feels overwhelmed. Dexter has apparently responded to a post-feminist society that expects its men to be able to cope with the demands at home. As he himself explains, “I became a husband, a father. I had to evolve. It was the only way to survive” (4.6).

4. Endorsing traditional masculinity and patriarchy

Dexter's attempts to become a New Man, however, clash with constructions of masculinity based on aggression and competitiveness still privileged in a society in which patriarchal values are "tenacious, fluid, and, like a particularly nasty virus, resistant to any attempts to eradicate [them]" (Whelehan 2000: 4). This situation is even more evident at this particular time in history when pacifism is being superseded by strong militarist principles after the 9/11 terrorist attempts and the ongoing 'War Against Terror', a state of affairs that is the object of much interest in fiction.⁹ The series does not apparently sanction masculine aggression and Dexter is not the only man who has to learn to repress his Dark Passenger. The men of Miami Metro Police Homicide Department – Angel Batista, Vince Masuka and Joey Quinn – do not only have to accept the authority of female lieutenants Maria Laguerta and, after she is demoted for a time, Esme Pascale. They also have to undergo a domestication process in order to survive. Angel Batista evolves from happy divorcee and womaniser *extraordinaire* in the first and second seasons to become a sensible man in love with detective Barbara Gianna in the third season and husband of Maria Laguerta in the fourth season. Angel's virility, *la pasión*, as he calls it, is never in question but his violent instincts have to be contained. When detective Barbara Gianna is the victim of an aggression, Angel's first impulse is to locate the aggressor and beat him up. Dexter, who knows what he is talking about, advises him not to do it since it would mean opening doors that might let in who knows what. Angel follows the advice; he arrests the aggressor and takes him to the precinct. On this occasion, as he tells Dexter, "there are doors that remain locked" ('Go Your Own Way' 3.10). Joey Quinn is a detective who has been transferred from vice after he was accused of being responsible for his partner's, Stewart, death. As is revealed in episode 3.8, however, Quinn was not to blame. His mistake was to protect his partner and not to inform about his meth addiction. After shooting an unarmed drug-dealer, Stewart became unstable and committed suicide. Underneath his smooth good looks and his façade of unrepentant womaniser, Quinn also hides great sensibility and an ability to soothe traumatised witnesses – Deb calls him "the witness-whisperer" (3.8). Vince Masuka, on the other hand, does not change as the series develops. Because of his lab-rat job as forensic expert, Masuka does not have to show aggression in order to prove his virility. However, his sexist jokes and tasteless commentaries turn him into a somehow funny but altogether disagreeable character who does not have friends to share his moments of success or anybody to spend Thanksgiving with.

⁹ In Kathy Reichs' *Devil Bones*, for example, heroine Temperance Brennan describes the state of anxiety and the subsequent aggression that has resulted as a response to the terrorist attempts in the United States in the following terms: "We fear terrorists, snipers, hurricanes, epidemics. And the worst part is we've lost faith in the government's ability to protect us. We feel powerless and that causes constant anxiety, makes us fear things we don't understand. ... That plus the fact that people have lost confidence in the system on other grounds. ... There's a growing belief that, too often, the guilty go free. ... A bonehead like Lingo [a commissioner who uses the media to express his reactionary ideas] stirs the public into a froth and some citizen vigilante appoints himself judge and jury" (2009: 366).

The series also effectively puts into evidence the iniquities committed in the secret theatre of home and the misuse of authority in patriarchal familial constructs through the presentation of dominant and aggressive fathers. 'Devil daddies', in fact proliferate in psycho-horror. Mallory's father in *Natural Born Killers*, for instance, beats his wife, is vulgar and offensive, and sexually abuses his daughter. The mother allows it. Blackburn's father in Denton's novel ill-treats his wife, who unable to cope with the situation, abandons her husband taking her daughter with her. She leaves Blackburn behind and he becomes the recipient of his father's ill-repressed anger. The emotional sterility of Quentin P.'s father is portrayed in Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie*. In *Dexter*, all father figures are either aggressive or have questionable ethics. As has been mentioned, Rita's ex-husband hit and raped his wife on a regular basis. Doakes' father was an ex-special forces officer who abused his wife and children. Angel Batista was an unfaithful husband and, after his divorce, he had sex with prostitutes. Miguel Prado's father was a university professor who had to flee to the States; his demise from well-known intellectual to non-entity emigrant turned him into a drunkard who used violence against his family. His sons are not much better. Oscar Prado was a drug-user. Miguel Prado is unfaithful and violent, as well as a killer. Ramon Prado cannot control his aggressiveness. As has also been mentioned, Arthur Mitchell is a serial killer, Trinity, and an abusive father. He abandoned the daughter of his first marriage, Christine Hill, and he terrorises his present family. As Jonah, his eldest son, explains, "We look like the perfect family but when [my father] is home, there is no life" ('Hungry Man' 4.9). Thanksgiving *chez* Mitchell is portrayed in the same episode. The perfect family smokescreen vanishes to reveal all forms of abuse: Mitchell breaks his son's thumb, verbally assaults his wife and keeps his daughter locked in her room. Mitchell's father was also a drunkard who, after the death of his daughter and his wife's suicide, recurrently beat his son. The image of fathers (and, by defect, of patriarchy) portrayed in the series is far from positive. As Dexter asserts, "Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes they are the people who should protect us: a policeman, a father, a blood splatter analyst" ('Dex Takes a Holiday' 4.4).

Not even Harry Morgan, apparently a perfect husband, exemplary father and hero policeman, is faultless. Throughout the series, Dexter and Deb discover the truth about Harry. He cheated on his wife with a police informant – Laura Moser, Dexter's mother – and he was indirectly responsible for her death when he convinced her to act as bait in an undercover police operation. As explained, she ended up dismembered in a container. The negative presentation of patriarchy in the series and the systematic deconstruction of its major exponent, Harry Morgan, do not manage to obliterate Harry's voice, which remains as a form of patriarchal conscience even after his death. Harry taught Dexter to use his killer instincts to go after murderers but he "walked in on what he created" (2.10) and, after witnessing Dexter's first killing, he committed suicide. However, his ideas prevail as flashbacks in which Dexter recalls Harry's teachings or as a mental image of Harry that, Jiminy-Cricket-like, guides and comments on Dexter's actions. Even though Harry's 'ghost' is a product of Dexter's mind and conscience, this personification in Harry, a pervasive father-figure in the series, is significant. Harry's lore emerges not only as an individual code Dexter has to follow to pass undetected as he kills bad guys but also as the embodiment of 'the Law of the

Father', the patriarchal values that need to be preserved at all costs to guarantee Dexter's invulnerability in particular and, in general, the survival of the 'traditional man' in danger of extinction. Harry's code, therefore, responds to a perceived crisis of patriarchal authority in a changing social climate that can no longer be indifferent to the claims of feminists and other anti-patriarchal groups that seek a redistribution of power and a re-articulation of masculinity. However, in Beynon's words, the "weakening of patriarchy" (2002: 80) has not resulted in its dismantlement. Instead, it has entrenched itself behind values based on survival, selfishness, individualism and aggression. Traditional patriarchal familial arrangements, meanwhile, have not been superseded by more liberal and gender-balanced configurations. In a context in which fathers cannot always assert their authority on economic grounds and women are supposedly free to look for alternative partners or go solo if things are uncongenial at home, the patriarchal family unit is in crisis and, unfortunately, way too often explodes in examples of family violence. *Dexter* exposes this situation but does not provide valid alternatives. If anything, the family emerges in the series as a site of trouble and, even when things work and its members lead comfortable lives, it is pictured as a burden that curtails men's freedom and as a domesticator of men's natural instincts, a situation that exacerbates men's anger and violent reactions.

It is symptomatic that Harry's code does not serve the purpose of eroding Dexter's aggression. Instead, its main objective is to channel it and put it to good use by training Dexter to use it against criminals. Consequently, the series justifies the need to employ violence instead of repressing it. Furthermore, Harry's code promotes selfishness. In one of the most significant episodes in this respect, 'Blinded by the Light' (4.3), Dexter destroys the security light that has been set up in order to protect the family from intruders. Dexter feels trapped in a residential area surrounded by neighbours and he thinks that with the security light his nocturnal escapades can be easily detected. Dexter prioritises his own survival before the safety of the family, which is irresponsible taking into account that his night-time activities can endanger his family; in fact, they do have terrible consequences, as we will see. Dexter's attitude differs substantially from other series' criminal hunters. In the pilot of the series *Millennium*, for instance, the protagonist, Frank Black, installs security lights in his house after receiving threatening letters. Frank Black's attempts to protect his family are ineffective but, at least, he tries and his main priority is the safety of his family. The only thing that Dexter takes into account is his own protection and Harry's code is, first and foremost, a survival manual designed to guarantee he is not caught. There is only one moment in the series when Dexter questions the validity of the code. When Doakes discovers Dexter's secret identity, Dexter has the opportunity to kill him in order to prevent him from revealing this information to the police. Harry's code was designed to kill murderers and Doakes is an innocent man. Dexter contemplates turning himself in, but Lila – a *Fatal Attraction*-like character obsessed with Dexter and who knows about his recreational activities and accepts him for what he is – kills Doakes for him. Dexter should be sorry for Doakes but his main feeling is relief. He even emerges as more self-righteous after the ordeal. He says, "I passed through the flames and rose from the ashes again. I've never been one to put much weight in the idea of a higher power but, if I didn't know better, I'd have to believe some force out there wants me to keep doing what I'm doing"

(‘The British Invasion’ 2.12). The only thing he has learnt from the experience is that he should be careful never to leave loose ends and that he needs Harry’s code, since, after all, it has “kept [him] alive to incredible trials” (2.12). Following Harry’s code, he kills Lila – who can no longer be regarded as innocent after she has disposed of Doakes – and, in this way, he gets rid of the only person who, for the time being, could incriminate him.

Dexter’s survival depends also on being able to blend in. Consequently, he uses Rita and the children to pose as a normal person. He becomes a husband and father because, as he says, “it sounds honest. Harmless” (3.4). Even though he develops undefined feelings for Rita and the kids, it is all “props. The camouflage of a family man” (4.4). His family, however, increasingly becomes a burden that makes his life difficult and limits his freedom, and Harry’s voice is always there to remind him how overwhelming family duties are. No wonder Dexter procrastinates when Rita suggests she should sell her house and they should buy a bigger house to live together when they get married. Dexter enjoys what he regards as his last moments of freedom before marriage being alone in his apartment and he appreciates the wisdom of the warning in the swimming-pool of his condo, “No children allowed” (‘Turning Biminese’ 3.5). In fact, he keeps his apartment after marriage until Rita discovers it by accident because, as he explains, “it is private and the most sacred” and the only thing that prevents his “mask from slipping off” (‘Dirty Harry’ 4.5). Even though he claims his family is important, work always comes first – which includes his job as blood splatter expert and his serial killing chores. He even finds it difficult to come home after work because “there are too many people [there]” (4.3). Harrison’s arrival does not help. The baby does not let him sleep and Dexter despairs as his sleeping pattern is disrupted, as well as his job and his double life. The credits of the series show Dexter’s morning rituals as he wakes up, showers, shaves, gets dressed, has breakfast and leaves, fresh-faced, for work. In the first episode of the fourth season, ‘Living the Dream’, Dexter, already a father, wakes up to his morning routine but things do not go as usual. His t-shirt has traces of Harrison’s vomit; his shoelace tears; he does not have time for breakfast; and he looks altogether shabby and sleepy. He now knows why serial killers prototypically remain single, solitary and introverted. Giving a statement in court, he messes up his notes and, as a result, the accused, Benny Gomez, walks free. Ready to redress the injustice, Dexter hurries to get rid of Benny but his killing ritual is interrupted by a call from Rita telling him to go to the pharmacy to get some medicines for the baby. On his way there, he falls asleep, has a car accident and has to be taken to hospital. The incident almost costs him his life and, what is worse, threatens to reveal his real identity. Harry appears immediately to remind him “if it hadn’t been for Harrison, this would never have happened” (4.2). When Dexter, at last, has a few days of freedom when Rita and the kids leave to attend a wedding, he celebrates by going after a killer, Zoey Kruger, who murdered her husband and daughter. Among all possible killers, it is significant that he chooses, as Harry reminds him, a woman “who killed all her family in order to be free” (4.4).

Dexter’s family is, all in all, a liability that turns Dexter’s life into a nightmare and does nothing to tame his aggression. If anything, it aggravates his violence, which is revealed when he expresses his thoughts. When a neighbouring dog bothers Rita and the kids with its unending barking, Dexter goes to see the dog’s owner, who suggests

they should use earplugs. Dexter knows how he “could do things better for Rita. But that would be wrong” (1.4). Doakes, suspicious of Dexter’s activities, tails him throughout season two. Unable to “[have] some fun”, Dexter feels his life is “all Jekyll and no Hyde. No moon-lit play-dates, no late-night social calls, not one”, so he “really need[s] to kill someone” (2.1). Dexter is, certainly, “on edge. 38 days, 16 hours and 12 minutes since [he] killed [his last victim]” (2.1). Dexter’s reaction to the yoga instructor’s words during the session he goes to with Rita is to think he could probably kill her before she could notice (3.3). In season four, he kills another innocent victim by mistake and he is so frustrated that he “need[s] to stab something” (‘Road Kill’ 4.8). Dexter does try to be a better person. When Rita intuits he hides something, he confesses a false drug-addiction. The similarities between the series and Robert Louis Stevenson’s famous story “The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde” become even more evident since, like Jekyll, Dexter also has a double life and needs his own doses (his murders) to free his repressed instincts. Prompted by Rita, Dexter starts attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings. At first, he sees the meetings as part of his cover-up but he progressively comes to think that they can help him control his own Mr Hyde, his Dark Passenger. However, as in the case of Jekyll, Dexter’s Dark Passenger has a life of its own and cannot be repressed. As he explains, “Recovery isn’t an option. When you let your guard down, you are open for attack or capture. I need to embrace who I am. Who I’ve always been” (‘Morning Comes’ 2.8). Driving to his next kill he feels “all [his] senses sharpened. It’s like [he’s] been living underwater, holding [his] breath, and now [he] can finally breathe” (2.8). Dexter cannot change because “we are what we are” (3.3) and his Dark Passenger is part of Dexter, “like a miner working. Always hitting, always reminding [him] that he is inside, alive” (4.1).

Harry’s authority and his values prevail in the series. They do not make Dexter happier but they effectively keep him alive in spite of the collateral damages that result from his aggressive behaviour. In fact, the innocent victims of Dexter’s violence increase exponentially as the series develops. Dexter kills two innocent people by mistake even when he follows Harry’s code: Oscar Prado – Freebo, a murderous drug-dealer, was the intended victim, but Oscar walked into Freebo’s place when Dexter was waiting for him (3.1) – and Jonathan Farrow – whom Dexter kills wrongly thinking he is the perpetrator of a series of murders of South American models who had entered the country illegally (‘Slack Tide’ 4.7). The only four people who are aware of Dexter’s real identity – his brother (Brian), Lila, Doakes and Miguel Prado – also end up dead. Brian – like Dexter, a serial killer – dies in Dexter’s execution table, as well as Lila and Miguel. Brian, Lila and Miguel are not innocent but if Dexter kills them it is to protect his identity first and foremost. The fact that they are murderers is just a convenient excuse to get rid of them. Doakes is killed by Lila but only because Dexter unconsciously leads her to him. Consequently, he is to blame for his death. Doakes’ death, furthermore, does not generate remorse. Dexter thinks to himself, “Doakes wasn’t so bad ... But the truly tragic thing would be to let his sacrifice go to waste. There’s only one way I can think to honour him. I have to embrace my freedom” (2.12). Dexter is also indirectly responsible for Ellen Wolf’s death – an innocent lawyer murdered by Miguel following Dexter’s method and teachings because she does her job well and thinks that criminals deserve to have a competent defence (‘About Last Night’ 3.9) – and Kyle Butler, whose death is

even more poignant. Kyle Butler is the name Dexter uses in order to approach serial killer Trinity. When Trinity begins to suspect that Dexter is after him, he looks for Kyle Butler's address in the phonebook and kills him. Kyle Butler's only sin, therefore, is to have the name Dexter chose to hide his identity.

Other innocent people suffer the consequences of "hurricane Dexter's path of destruction" (2.11). Angel Batista is disgraced in front of everybody when falsely accused by Lila of sexual aggression – a situation, which, again, Dexter generates when he breaks up with Lila and she goes after his friends in revenge. Maria Laguerta loses her former partner and friend when Doakes dies. FBI agent Frank Lundy has to retire in disgrace when he blunders during the investigation of Dexter's uncovered bodies, a situation that Dexter propitiates. But Dexter's most tragic innocent victim is Rita, who dies murdered by Trinity in the heartbreaking final scene of season four's last episode, 'The Getaway' (4.12). Dexter is aware of Trinity's identity almost from the beginning. However, he decides not to kill him just yet so that he can have time to approach him and learn from his façade of (apparently) perfect family man. When eventually Dexter decides to kill him, it is too late for Rita. Trinity has already discovered Dexter's identity and home address and he has murdered Rita following his ritual, leaving her bleeding to death in the bathtub. When Dexter returns home after Trinity has been in his execution table, he finds Rita in her blood bath and, what is worse, his son, Harrison, is with her on the bathroom floor, soaked in blood. The cycle, it seems, will start again. Dexter will not be able to repress his Dark Passenger and his son will pay the consequences. Given the circumstances, Dexter should give up Harry's code. However, this is not what he does. Dexter's last words at the end of the episode leave no room for doubt: "We were born in blood, the two of us. Harry was right. I thought I could change what I am, keep my family safe. But it doesn't matter what I do, what I choose. I am the problem. It's destiny" (4.12).

5. Conclusion

The series, to conclude, promotes a construction of masculinity based on aggression and individuality. The series is advertised as a different product and, in fact, it is, at least on generic grounds. The serial killer in *Dexter* is not the prototypical monster of slashers and serial killer thrillers that must be destroyed at all costs. He is not the hateful fiend that inhabits other psycho-horror examples, such as Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* or Early Grayce in Dominic Sena's film *Kalifornia* (1993). He is not even an archetypal sublime and atrocious Gothic villain like Hannibal Lecter. *Dexter's* originality lies in the 'normality' of the serial killer. Even though Dexter is a vocational killer, he is only a man who blunders, makes mistakes and tries to do the right things. This particular presentation of the serial killer, together with his role as executioner of bad guys, determines the complicity the character generates. After all, he is a likeable character whose irreverent cynicism and sense of humour, as well as his attempts to blend in and fight his aggression, manage to overwrite the atrocities of his murders, his cold blood and his inherent violent instincts. The series does not ultimately contemplate a reformulation of masculinity or the dismantling of patriarchal values. The Dark Passenger, in the end, is an

inherent part of the character that cannot be eradicated, that is in danger of extinction because of the domestication processes that threaten to turn men into sentimental weaklings, and that needs to be preserved to guarantee the survival of patriarchal authority. Dexter, all in all, conforms to “the prevailing American image of masculinity ... that cycles endlessly through a numbing stream of movies, TV shows, novels, advertisements, and pop tunes. He’s a man because he won’t be stopped. He’ll fight attempts to tamp him down; if he has to, he’ll use his gun” (Faludi 2000: 10). It remains to be seen if Dexter will pay for his crimes in the fifth season and if Harrison will eventually escape the cycle of violence generated by his father, and, in this way, the series will articulate a discourse in favour of the domestic man who has to suppress his violence in order to survive. For the time being, Harrison’s destiny is written in his name (Harry’s son) and women, at least Rita, do not live to tell.

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