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Murder Most Foul

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16 March 2022

Love, Death, and Moral Standards

The early 2000s saw an explosion of forensic dramas. Shows like *Bones*, *Psych*, and *Criminal Minds* all premiered between September 2005 and October 2006. All shows have a team working with some form of law enforcement, be it the FBI, police, or CIA. They also feature main characters who deviate from social norms. *Bones*' Temperance Brennan is blunt and socially awkward, much like *Criminal Minds*' Spencer Reid. *Psych*'s Shawn Spencer is a man pretending to be a psychic, often behaving in atypical and outlandish ways to sell his act.

Showtime's *Dexter* also premiered in the same time period. It follows the Miami police as they work to catch killers in Florida. The show's titular character deviates from social norms, but not because he is social awkward or has an outlandish personality; Dexter is a serial killer.

Unlike other crime driven shows of the early 2000s, *Dexter* stands alone as a show with a protagonist who in any other procedural drama would be the antagonist. He kills someone in nearly every episode, he lies to the people he is closest to, and he enjoys every moment of it. In any other show, *Dexter* would be framed as a villain, a character for the audience to root against. But here, he is our hero, and we cannot help but like him.

This likeability of a character whose traits should make him unlikeable is instrumental to the show's success. *Dexter* ran for eight seasons and in 2021 received a miniseries sequel. If you

watched the show and did not find yourself enthralled by and rooting for Dexter, you were in the minority of Americans.

Telling a story which reframes the antagonist as the protagonist is not a new development in literature. John Gardner's *Grendel* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* retell *Beowulf* and *Jane Eyre* respectively from the antagonist's perspective. This reframing is seen less often in television, especially in the early 2000s. But this is the one of the most compelling aspects of Dexter's story.

Dexter Morgan is a protagonist who is aware that in the eyes of others, he is not a hero. His internal narration, which we the audience are privy to, shows us that while Dexter must lie and deceive those around him in order to fit in to society, he is honest with himself and by extension the viewer.

Our introduction to Dexter as a killer comes minutes into the pilot episode when he kidnaps and then kills a choir director who has killed multiple boys. The choir director begs Dexter for his life, saying that he "couldn't help himself." Dexter says that he understands completely, but that he could never kill children because he has standards.

The "kick the dog trope" is a trope used to demonstrate to the audience that a character is evil. The victim need not be an actual dog. What is necessary is that the perpetrator perform an act of violence unprompted, and that the victim be innocent and undeserving. The choir director killing children is a "kick the dog" moment, and Dexter affirming to the audience that he could never do something like that juxtaposes him as not a villain.

Dexter then proceeds to kill the choir director and we soon learn that our would-be hero is a serial killer. However, Dexter is not merely a serial killer, he is a vigilante. He does in fact have a moral compass, even if it is not his own.

Dexter chooses only victims who “deserve” to die. He is a killer who takes out other killers, technically saving lives in the act of killing. We see Dexter is selective in who he kills, and he is capable of changing his opinion on a would-be victim when presented with new information.

In the third episode of season one, we are introduced to Jeremy Downs, a 19-year-old boy recently released from a juvenile facility after having been arrested for the death of another boy. Dexter sees Jeremy as being like him, having a need to kill. But unlike Dexter, Jeremy seems to kill randomly. Dexter takes it upon himself to take Jeremy out in order to prevent him from killing again. However, when Dexter learns that the boy Jeremy killed had raped him, he lets him go. Dexter tells Jeremy that knowing the difference between who deserves to die and who does not could save his life one day.

Dexter, in a few words, attempts to instill his own moral compass for killing in Jeremy. He, admittedly, did not create his rule of only killing people who “deserve to die.” He guides his compass of victim selection according to “The Code of Harry.”

Harry was Dexter’s father and the only person who knew about his craving for killing. At the start of the season, Harry has already been dead for several years, but nonetheless he is still ever present in Dexter’s life. Throughout the season Dexter reflects on past incidents in his life where his father served as a mentor and guide to him.

Harry is not a perfect father; we come to learn that he kept many secrets from Dexter and depending on your view of morality, teaching his son how to kill people can be viewed as bad parenting. But there is no doubt that Harry loved Dexter.

A flashback to Dexter as a teen in the pilot episode shows the moment that Harry first suggests Dexter channel his urges to kill into something productive. Dexter is unsure if this is possible, if he can use the dark passenger in him for good. Harry tells him, “Remember this forever- you are my son, you are not alone, and you are loved.”

This is the most consistent throughline of Dexter’s character- his love for his father and in return Harry’s love for his son. Dexter, while being a show about solving crime, is also a show about family and love of others. This fact becomes apparent when examining the relationships between Dexter and those he is closest to.

Dexter’s sister Debra does not know about Dexter’s dark passenger. But she loves her brother, and he loves her. Dexter’s internal monologue tells us Deb is “the only person in the world who loves me.” He finds comfort in this fact; he thinks it is nice. He then remarks that while he does not have feelings, “if I could have feelings at all I'd have them for Deb.”

The sibling relationship between Dexter and Debra is at the center of the climax of the first season. We come to find that The Ice Truck Killer, the season’s main antagonist, is Rudy Cooper, a prosthetic doctor who has been dating Debra. In another twist reveal, we learn that Rudy is really Brian Moser, Dexter’s biological brother. The two were separated after a traumatic incident where the boys were locked in a shipping container and witnessed the murder of their mother. Dexter was adopted by the Morgans following the incident while Brian was sent to a psychiatric facility.

Brian, like Dexter, is a serial killer. But Brian has no “Code of Harry” to follow, he kills indiscriminately, and he wants Dexter to do the same. The climax of the season comes about when Brian leads Dexter into a room where Debra is strapped to a table and unconscious. Dexter is then made to choose between his adopted sister who does not really know the true him, or his biological brother who understands his need to kill.

In the end Dexter chooses Debra, turning on Brian and trying to kill him. Although Dexter is initially unsuccessful, he does eventually track down Brian and kill him, staging his murder to look like a suicide.

The most important people in Dexter’s life are his family. When Debra has been taken by Brian, he panics and drops everything to find her and ensure she is not another victim of The Ice Truck Killer. Harry is his moral compass and guides Dexter in all aspects of his life. Dexter does not believe he can feel, but through his actions and internal dialogue it is clear that he loves the Morgans.

Family dynamics also plays a hand in the relationship between Dexter and his girlfriend Rita. Dexter serves as a surrogate father for Rita’s children, Cody and Astor. He is attentive with them, plays with them, and is overall a good caretaker. In the sixth episode of season one, Dexter is confronted with the possibility of being discovered as a serial killer. He spends much of the episode grappling with how him being revealed as a serial killer would affect Rita and the kids. The episode ends with a birthday party for Astor, where Dexter’s internal monologue has him reflecting on how he is grateful he was not caught, but he knows that his days are numbered. He thinks, “I realize now my days are numbered so I better make the most of them” as he looks on at Rita and Astor and picks up Cody to roughhouse with him.

The juxtaposition of the setting and Dexter's internal dialogue tells the audience that Dexter truly does care for Rita and the kids outside of just keeping up appearances and seeming normal. He loves them.

When Rita's soon-to-be-ex-husband Paul, an abuser and drug addict, is released from prison, this creates conflict in not just Rita and the kids' lives, but Dexter's as well. He is protective of Rita and the kids. He is concerned about Paul being around them and he is concerned by how distraught Paul makes Rita.

Dexter eventually frames Paul as having broken parole so that he will be arrested again and therefore less of a problem. The framing leading up to this action makes the audience think that Dexter is going to kill Paul. But as terrible as Paul is, he is not a killer, and therefore does not qualify as a victim under "The Code of Harry."

Dexter seems to have never framed someone for a crime before. He exclusively kills people as a form of punishment, often because he views the law as having not done an adequate job. But killing Paul would have created additional distress for Rita, Astor, and Cody. He views putting Paul in jail as a kindness to them. He does it because he loves them.

Dexter confesses throughout the season that he is not a good person, that he is empty inside and has no emotions. But his actions betray this. Even if his motivations are often unclear or superficial, his actions tell the real story of who he is.

The audience is allowed to like and root for Dexter because of his actions, not in spite of them. He is a killer who only takes out other killers, a trait that makes him by comparison a righteous serial killer. He does not kill indiscriminately, a fact that makes the audience able to not fear him. After all, you the viewer of the show are not at risk of being a victim of Dexter

because you are a decent person. You can take comfort in that fact and simply observe his actions worry free.

Dexter's behavior towards his family further allows us to root for him. He does not have a "kick the dog" moment. He cares for Deb, he respects Harry. He is mindful of Rita's needs and is the perfect father figure to Astor and Cody. Dexter is by every measure a standup guy; he just happens to also kill people.

Because of this, we can root for him, we can relate to him. Serial killers are often depicted as cruel, killing the innocent, and caring for no one. Dexter is kind, he does not kill innocent people, and he clearly cares for those closest to him- the people he loves.

Dexter is a show that puts the audience in the mind of its titular anti-hero. He is a gray character who exists between good and bad, between vengeance and justice, between right and wrong. He maintains a façade of normalcy not only for his own benefit, but to protect those closest to him. We can root for Dexter and accept him wholly as the protagonist because despite his claims that he is in many ways not human, his interactions with others and his stream of consciousness that only the audience is privy to tells us otherwise. Dexter might be a killer, but he is just as human as the rest of us.

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