

FROM TOXIC TO POLITICALLY CORRECT: MASCULINITIES IN *AMERICAN PSYCHO* AND *DARKLY DREAMING DEXTER*

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American Psycho (1991) and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004) are two American novels known for having serial killers for protagonists. The gender performances of these two self-proclaimed psychopaths, however, could not be more different; one brings traditional portrayals of violent masculinity to extremes, while the other invents a new take on fictional masculinity. With his desire to punish women, desperation to one-up other men, and frequent attacks of gay panic, *American Psycho*'s protagonist Patrick Bateman presents the worst extreme of hegemonic masculinity (as discussed by Connell, O'Neil and others). Driven by his fragile nerves and an even more fragile ego, Patrick often loses control and kills innocent people, his violence all the more heinous and sexualized if the target is a woman. The protagonist of the *Dexter* series, on the other hand, is an asexual man who has no interest in sexualized violence. Self-possessed, cool-headed, and rational, he knows how to control his bloodlust and channel it productively by hunting other murderers. In pretending to be unremarkable, he positions himself as a submissive man, yet his ego is never threatened by women or other men. Jeff Lindsay's Dexter Morgan is proof that you can successfully write about a monstrous serial killer in a genre based on hypermasculine tropes without having your protagonist perpetuate the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: Hegemonic Masculinity, Counterhegemonic, Control, Crime Literature.

This paper finds a way to present *American Psycho* (1991), the infamous experimental novel, as rather trite and old-fashioned, and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), the commercially successful beginning of a crime drama franchise, as daring and original. When the publishers of Jeff Lindsay's first *Dexter* novel proudly quoted from David Pitt's *Booklist* review that Dexter Morgan is "one of the genre's most original, compelling characters to appear in years", I doubt any of them expected a scholar to devote over 10,000 words proving him right.

The viewpoint that has me making these claims is that of masculinity studies. I focus on the books' constructions of violent masculinity, separating the old and analyzing the new. I am not the first to identify the ideals of hegemonic masculinity within a literary protagonist, as this has been done by scholars before me. My main focus, however, is on analyzing counterhegemonic masculinity in the thoughts and behaviors of the other protagonist, which is a rarer endeavor. Aside from inspecting the character as a role model and reviewing the gender dynamics between him and the men and women in his life, I also test out a new approach: analyzing his journey and psychology in terms of power, ego, respect, and most importantly, control. But before I do that, allow me to explain how the paper was developed.

A Note on Real and Fictional Psychopathy

This paper was meant to be a literary analysis of two fictional psychopaths until my research on the medical terminology, while fascinating, convinced me that there would be very little merit to a paper focused on psychological accuracy regarding psychopathy within the two novels.

From popular fiction, you may know psychopaths as cold-blooded con-men, or grotesquely insane murderers, or another stereotype that falls somewhere in between. As a matter of fact, I intended to use my paper to show that in reaction to the misrepresentations popularized by crime dramas and horrors, the latest wave of fiction has embraced the secondary term, sociopath¹, in order to represent said condition in a more grounded manner. What might surprise you as much as it did me is that psychopathy and sociopathy are rather loose terms in the field of psychiatry as well.

The general consensus is that a psychopath is a person who does not qualify as insane, yet who has no conscience, is incapable of empathy, feels only shallow emotions and tends to lie, pretend, and manipulate (e.g. Cleckley 337-348, or Federman et al. 39). Other features, including the specific connection between psychopathy and violence, are being redefined with every new study. In 1964, pioneering researchers McCord and McCord remarked that “for 150 years, science has known of the psychopath’s existence; for at least 140 years, scientists have quarreled over the definition of this disorder” (2). Currently, there is no clear consensus whether psychopathy is a mental illness, a personality disorder, or perhaps something different altogether (Federman et al. 51), and the international industry standard for identifying psychopaths, called Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, is under criticism for being overly simplistic and reductionistic (Walters 133–148). According to Federman et al., the diagnosis is unstable because it was coined and is still being used to “motive-hunt for a motiveless malignity” (57), as the term follows “a legacy of catch-all descriptions of moral insanity dating from the nineteenth century” (38).

Therefore, I find little purpose in analyzing how closely Patrick Bateman and Dexter Morgan resemble real psychopaths beyond a brief remark that for the purpose of their stories, both characters are written as more than just psychopaths. Patrick Bateman experiences multiple symptoms of different mental illnesses and self-diagnoses as insane on several occasions. Dexter Morgan is more than just a psychopath not only because he carries a bloodthirsty entity on the inside, but also because, as I will explain later, his best-case-scenario upbringing has equipped him with a code of honor and artificial empathy.

There might be, nevertheless, some merit in analyzing how *American Psycho* and the *Dexter* series make use of the various stereotypes that have been established around psychopaths in the world of fiction. I shall make my findings brief.

American Psycho combines all the major trends that surround stories where psychopaths are the indisputable villains. Patrick Bateman is an evil serial killer who commits sexualized violence upon women, an old trope from crime dramas; he also plays the role of a grotesquely insane slasher villain; and at the same time, he is a corporate psychopath, succeeding in the world of cut-throat capitalism much like *Wall Street*’s Gordon Gekko (1987). Ellis uses these trends to provoke morbid fascination and disgust as well as function as social satire regarding yuppie materialism, consumerism, and capitalism.

Darkly Dreaming Dexter, on the other hand, combines all the psychopathic antihero trends. Firstly, it presents Dexter as a genius investigator whose antisocial condition makes interacting with people difficult for him, alongside the eponymous protagonists in *Sherlock* (2010~) and *House* (2004-2012). Secondly, Dexter is a rare vigilante serial killer, a morally grey character whose actions effectively protect the

¹ Devised for the same symptoms, the term sociopath was intended to differentiate between hereditary psychopathy and psychopathy “forged entirely by social forces” (Hare 23). Even though the latter cause was never discovered or proved, some authors of medical and criminological texts still cling to these definitions, while others have come to use the words psychopath and sociopath as synonyms, and yet others have devised new ways to differentiate between the two. One distinction that has become common in American psychiatric practice is that psychopaths commit violent crimes where sociopaths make do with legal antisocial behavior or non-violent crimes at worst (Fintzy). Lindsay uses this distinction in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (e.g. 121).

innocent, much like those of the protagonist in the *John Wayne Cleaver* series (2009~). Finally, Dexter Morgan portrays a new development in the trope of the uncanny übermensch psychopath, popularized by the character of Hannibal Lecter. The books, written by Thomas Harris from 1981 onward, show Lecter as an imprisoned cannibal who is overly educated, overly sophisticated and overly skilled in criminal profiling. Too noble for the lowly motivations of typical serial killers, he kills and eats rude people when free, and when captured, he assists in the hunt on vulgar (and real-life inspired) serial killers such as Buffalo Bill. He makes an even more polished and seductive reappearance in 2013 in the artistic and cerebral television show *Hannibal*, where he assists in criminal profiling even before he is arrested. Meanwhile, Dexter's creator, Jeff Lindsay, took his own step within this trend towards the heroic, combining it with the other two tropes to create an original protagonist in the competition-heavy genre of crime literature; one with a unique voice that observes humanity from the outside and above, sharing insights that ironically, as I will discuss later, make the reader sympathize with him and perhaps even view him as a role model.

The Interfering Factor: Stories of Success and Failure

Before I move on to Patrick Bateman's and Dexter Morgan's portrayals of masculinity, I should address that the ways their gender performances are constructed in their respective stories are secondary to Ellis's and Lindsay's narrative intentions.

American Psycho is a novel with a closed story that experiments with an abject villain turned into a protagonist for the purpose of morbidity and satire. As such, it is a story about a despicable man who thrives in Wall Street banking, yet satisfying even his most heinous desires never makes him happy as he hurdles towards a complete disintegration of the self. Creatively speaking, these factors seem to dictate much of Patrick Bateman's gender performance rather than the other way around: in order to show the emptiness of materialist lifestyles, Patrick must live a miserable existence; in order to satirize the carelessness of an extremely capitalist society, Patrick must be an inept serial killer whose many mistakes are ignored; and in order for the novel to arouse controversy and therefore become noticeable, Patrick's behavior must be truly disgusting. This is mostly why, as I will detail later, Patrick Bateman is a failure as a serial killer as well as a man.

Darkly Dreaming Dexter, on the other hand, is the first in a series of novels that aims to fit into the popular genre of realistic crime literature while standing out with a twist – a new kind of protagonist with an original, morbid, yet readable and entertaining voice. As such, it is a story of Dexter Morgan, a killer of killers, successfully dealing with his first real challenge, a new serial killer in Miami whose crime scenes make Dexter emotionally involved like never before. Once the challenge is dealt with, Dexter returns to his idyllic life, ready for a sequel. The connection between this type of story and the protagonist's gender performance is not difficult to spot. Further below, I dive deeper into the ways Dexter strangely triumphs both as a man and a serial killer without resorting to the oppressive strategies of hegemonic masculinity.

The Usual Suspect: Violence and Hegemonic Masculinity

From the inception of men's and masculinity studies in the 1970s, the focus has been on those sociocultural ideals that encourage men to be oppressive, domineering, and violent. Gender-wise, the uppermost position in the society that reaps most benefits and opportunities has been identified as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony, in this sense, means the ascendancy of a group of men not only over women, but also over other men, through culturally embedded means such as mass media content or economic policies rather than direct threats and violence (Connell 184). It does, however, often allow, condone, or encourage violence that keeps these men in power and justifies their superiority – such as beating up whoever they consider sexually perverse (Ibid.).

The list of harmful behaviors analyzed by scholars only grew from there. In 1989, an English sociologist summarized that cultural masculinity standards encourage men to be not only prone to violence, but also unable to express emotions aside from anger, afraid of admitting any kind of weakness or dependency, sexist, and homophobic (Brittan). A summary of research between 1983 and 2008 reiterates the negative effects of hegemonic masculinity as restrictive emotionality, restrictive sexual and affectionate behavior, healthcare problems, homophobia, obsession with achievement and success, and socialized issues when it comes to control, power, and competition (O’Neil, “Summarizing 25 Years of Research”). These behaviors are not considered mere side effects of hegemonic masculinity, but its core dynamics, as they are deemed necessary for said men to assume their place at the top and to maintain it. After all, “[h]egemonic masculinity’ is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women” (Connell 183), and the kind of person that achieves such dominance must be an independent, invulnerable island of a man.

When these behaviors accumulate to a dangerous degree, social workers and scholars reach for other terms, from hypermasculinity (David and Brannon), to gender role conflict (O’Neil, “Male Sex-Role Conflict”), or toxic masculinity, i.e. “the rigid, restrictive, sexist enactment of stereotypical male roles” (Isacco et al. 371) that “serve[s] to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (Kupers 714), but also “depression, anxiety, stress, feelings of shame, an inability to put words to feelings (i.e., alexithymia), use of unhealthy coping strategies, alcohol and substance abuse, and low self-esteem” (Isacco et al. 371). Kupers explains how basing one’s standards of masculinity around domination (and the control and respect that come with it) can lead to substance abuse and domestic violence, providing a very old example “where the man feels chronically disrespected at work and in the community, drinks alcohol to numb the pain, and proceeds to beat or otherwise abuse the woman he is closest to” (717).

Admittedly, serial killers, who are mostly male, present an extraordinary extreme of such behaviors, but their motivation, in both reality and fiction, traditionally does revolve around power and domination. In *The Age of Sex Crime* (1987), Jane Caputi addressed the criminal trend of sexualized serial murders of women that began with Jack the Ripper, and in *Backlash* (1991), Susan Faludi revealed that ‘classic’ serial killer fiction was given its tropes during 1980s’ cultural backlash to feminist progress, which is why so many fictional serial killers pursue, punish, debase, rape, and destroy untamed women. In a genre that shares roots with hardboiled fiction which is known for its masculinist nature, it is no surprise when a psychopathic serial killer presents as an extreme example of toxic masculinity, making the hero’s casual sexism look mild in comparison.

Finding toxic masculinity in Patrick Bateman’s psychology is quick work indeed: he of course claims an “impaired capacity to feel” (Ellis 330), he abuses almost every drug known to man, he is obsessed with one-upping his male colleagues, he ‘punishes’ both unknown women and women who have injured his ego in the smallest of ways, and his homophobia is so crippling that he runs away from homosexuality seven times throughout the novel. Behind his desperation to be the best-looking man with the best possessions and the best opinions lies an ego so fragile that it shatters the moment he is questioned, outperformed, or rejected. Examples will be elaborated on in their respective sections below.

I find that the more interesting question is: If Dexter Morgan is not any of the above, what exactly is Dexter Morgan? How does Jeff Lindsay make his serial killer politically correct and counterhegemonic? Using Patrick Bateman for comparison, I will answer this question in three parts.

Part 1: Power, Control, and Ego

Where female characters are being inspected for their agency, male characters should be inspected for what control they have over their situation, other people, and most importantly, over their own actions and emotions.

Throughout *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman is desperate for all the above-mentioned types of control, and even though his privileged position in the society allows him a generous amount of power, he

still obsesses over the small moments that are out of his control, losing his own self-control in the process, and ultimately lashing out in violent rage because he feels powerless. His remark that if he was pushed by his acquaintances into ordering a meal he did not want, he would have to kill them that night (Ellis 92), is a small example of such spiraling behavior. As the plot progresses, Patrick's self-control slips more and more, building up into a "disintegration" of the self (380) that includes hallucinations, self-destructive eating habits, referring to himself in the third person for a whole scene, and a complete mental breakdown.

In terms of control, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, on the other hand, is a story where the protagonist presents himself as a chained monster tempted by the Tamiami Slasher, a new serial killer in Miami, and also Dexter's forgotten brother whose bloodlust is similar to his own. Yet the foreshadowed unchaining never occurs as Dexter never truly loses control over the bloodlust entity that resides inside him, called the Dark Passenger. The Slasher's crime scenes double as a dark calling and the traditional heroic call to action. After processing the surprise of the first crime scene, Dexter decides to answer the latter and help the police catch the killer. His perfect façade slips a little when he admires the second crime scene, and he starts having dreams from the Slasher's point of view. He observes the ebb and flow of his self-control with commentary such as: "Steady, old boy; no Dexter off the deep end, please. . . . Hello, dear boy. So good to have you back. But where on earth have you been?" (Lindsay 79). Instead of reacting to the loss of control with anger towards the Slasher, Dexter is pleasantly curious, and his only worry is that he might be finally going insane (80 and 121). When he discovers that the killer has invaded his home and left a gift, he sits down, examines his feelings about it, and instead of any big action in response, he makes "the human choice" (124) of doing nothing. The onslaught of new feelings, however, awakens his Dark Passenger. Here, instead of a macabre rampage, we get a scene where Dexter is still mostly in control, carrying out a semi-planned murder of a confirmed child killer with no other casualties. After he shares another moment with the Slasher's mind, he yearns for complete control over his brain again and suspects that the Tamiami Slasher might be him when is in such a state. He admits he has no control over the situation (214), but instead of lashing out to regain some of it, he passes the decision making to his adoptive sister Deborah, suggesting that she turn him in and throwing away the chance she gives him to flee because he "should be locked up" (231). Later, when Deborah is kidnapped and he is caught searching for her by his superior officer, LaGuerta, he does the same, "throwing [him]self on her mercy" (248) and meekly following her orders until he finds his brother with Deborah strapped to a table. The return of repressed childhood memories renders him "weak, woozy, and stupid – like a human being, like a very small and helpless human being" (254), and he yields to his brother's control over the scene while he manages to only stare, admit ignorance, and ask very basic questions. When his brother presents him with his final test, the Dark Passenger demands that he kill Deborah whereas his inner code of honor, known as the Code of Harry, battles for dominance, leaving him half-frozen while the situation is decided by his brother and LaGuerta attacking each other. The scene cuts off before Dexter finally acts, and the following epilogue suggests that Dexter has probably killed LaGuerta to prevent doing the same to Deborah, possibly given first aid to his brother before he let him run away, and then freed Deborah and explained his secret to her. In summary, this is a storyline about a male character who willingly positions himself as a 'beta' submissive man and yet succeeds. Unusually for a male main character, he often takes an entire scene to ruminate before he acts, and he continually monitors his own mental well-being. He has so much control, most of it over himself, that even if he loses the greatest portion of it he has ever lost, he still gives some of it away in order to reach the solutions he deems the most rational. He is indeed one of the genre's most original characters.

Of all the things that have some control over Patrick Bateman and Dexter Morgan, their "homicidal compulsion" (Ellis 285) is first and foremost. In *American Psycho*, Patrick's bloodlust is considered incorrigible and described as directly connected to his insanity (268, 332). For the sake of Ellis's social criticism, Patrick believes that rather than being born a monster, he was turned into one by the society, saying: "My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist" (362), and claiming that he is not the only one because "it's impossible in the world we live in to empathize with others" (244). According to Helyer, even his desire to rape, torture and murder

is suggested to be universal in *American Psycho*'s yuppie circles, and Patrick is merely one of those who succumb to those desires (130). Patrick succumbs with enthusiasm and tastelessness, targeting mostly hired prostitutes or women he seduces, but also a homeless man, a male colleague, a child, and a dog.

In contrast to *American Psycho* and other crime literature, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* shows an imaginary best-case scenario for someone who is compelled to kill. After having to spend several days in a room full of blood and his mother's body parts as a three-year-old, Dexter, with the Dark Passenger already inside him, is adopted by kind but firm policeman Harry Morgan. When Harry notices the signs of a burgeoning serial killer, he begins teaching the fourteen-year-old how to "control [what makes him different] and use it constructively" (36) by targeting only confirmed murderers. In Dexter's own words, the Code of Harry "gave a shape to my whole life, my everything, my who and what I am" (41). To control his Dark Passenger, Dexter lets the Code of Harry control his entire life: how he finds his victims, how he kills them and how he hides the evidence afterwards; but also how he lives day by day so that he avoids all suspicion, including how he dresses, and what he keeps in his apartment. Even though one of the rules is to "[a]ct normal, even boring" (120), forcing Dexter to live a dull lifestyle outside of the one night every three months or so² when he kills, he never rebels against Harry's rules because he rationally finds them the best option (41). There is a very short-lived moment of "fantastic betrayal" (266) when Dexter considers breaking the Code to repay Harry for keeping his older brother a secret from him, but he still lets Harry's memory sway him into sparing Deborah's life, and even though the epilogue suggests that he might bend Harry's rules by choosing Sergeant Doakes for his next victim, the second novel in the series has Dexter following the Code down to the letter again.

Controlling his life with the Code of Harry works so well that Dexter never finds out what he is like when he lets the Dark Passenger take over completely. He keeps the entity in check by acknowledging his condition, monitoring the stage of his bloodlust, and preventing fits of murderous urges by carrying out carefully paced and measured kills before said urges build up beyond control. The Code is so ingrained in him that the careful way he kills is the only way that killing satisfies him: "it's not just any killing, of course. It has to be done the right way, at the right time, with the right partner – very complicated, but very necessary" (13). Thanks to these strategies, Dexter finds himself entirely in control during the first murder scene even after five weeks of stalking his prey when his need is "very strong, very much ready now" and yet, he is willing to wait and watch some more (1); he is also mostly in control during the second murder scene, when the Dark Passenger drives him to kill that very night, and yet he takes time to prepare himself and confirm the guilt of his victim, and afterwards he stops himself before he kills an innocent security guard; and finally, he regains control during the final test from his brother, assaulted with the memory of their mother's death while presented with Deborah on a kill table.

The life of Patrick Bateman, in contrast, is filled with instances of lost control, as his homicidal compulsion is not the only thing that has power over him. There are also onslaughts of intense emotions other than anger, such as strong sadness, a flash of self-pity, extreme nervousness, intense nostalgia, and whole eight instances of unreasonable "nameless dread" (110, 132, 137, 238, 253, 257, 321, and 368), suggesting additional mental conditions aside from psychopathy. Then, there is his anxiety to live in the greatest luxury available and to have control over it, exemplified by moments when he panics over dinner reservations, constantly worries about having perfect hair, feels depressed over not having the best business card, and has a crack in the wall ruin his favorite TV show. To compensate for these moments of weakness, Patrick uses "[r]outines and rituals . . . as an attempt to retain control" (Helyer 138): exercising at a gym, shopping, rearranging furniture, counting things around him, and also torture and murder. Committing violence seems to truly help his anxiety: "The aftermath. No fear, no confusion" (Ellis 294). Finally, what makes him lose control is anything that threatens his fragile ego. All he needs is for his

² The novel gradually reveals that Dexter has carried his childhood trauma for 25 years, which would make him 28 years old, and that he started killing people at nineteen. In the nine years of hunting murderers, he has gathered 36 trophies from his kills, averaging 4 kills per year. This time frame matches the pacing described in the opening scene, where Dexter has been tracking his target for five weeks and expects to be satisfied for some time afterwards before he starts looking for another victim.

opinion to be dismissed or questioned, for someone to outshine him or outperform him, or for a woman or a gay man to do practically anything in his vicinity, and Patrick Bateman is filled with rage that boils over sooner or later. He cannot even tolerate a look at the stars because they humble him (253).

The life of Dexter Morgan is also controlled by several factors other than the Dark Passenger. First, there is blood, the trigger to his repressed childhood trauma. Just thinking of it “sets [his] teeth on edge” (21); seeing his victim bleed prematurely upsets him and disturbs his “icy-clean control” for a second (8); and when he looks at his next victim “covered with improvised marks and unnecessary blood”, it makes him momentarily angry (139). Yet at the same time, Dexter works as a blood spatter analyst for Miami’s police department, having made blood his study and his career, and he gets satisfaction from finding out “where all the blood is hiding” (50). This exposure is probably why he handles the moments when he is triggered so well and so quickly. Secondly, Dexter lets himself be controlled by his emotional ties to a surprising degree for a self-proclaimed sociopath. He mentions that if he were capable of love, he would have “loved” (41) his adoptive father Harry and he would have genuine “feelings” (16) for his adoptive sister Deborah. Harry is the only person Dexter’s sardonic narrative voice almost always describes with deference, calling him a “wonderful, all-seeing, all-knowing man” (41) and respecting his memory years after he passed. Because he cares about Deborah “as much as [he] can” (44), he bothers to show support when he talks to her, and when he sees her unhappy in her current profession, he goes out of his way to help her get a promotion. He also pays special attention to his girlfriend’s children because he “like[s]” them (54) and has a friend in his colleague Vince who he claims to like because his social awkwardness suggests that he is also a “guy pretending to be human” (20). Where Patrick Bateman has no genuine relationships, as he loves only himself and is only capable of compassion for fictional characters in song lyrics, Dexter has developed a small network of meaningful relationships that he lets interfere with his independence.

Shockingly, what has little to no sway over Dexter Morgan are his ego, insecurities, or even a desire to be loved. As the smartest person around and a psychopath, Dexter considers himself “interesting and different” (150), and as a serial killer, he describes his modus operandi as a unique blend of “style, talent, and a morbid sense of playfulness” (190-191). This confidence, however, does not extend into illusions of grandeur. He has “very few vanities” (94), namely his intellect, cool-headedness, rationality, and his well-practiced charm. Yet when these assets fail him, he rarely experiences an injury to his ego, and when he does, he never reacts in a toxic way, lashing out or projecting his failure on someone else. To name a few examples, he showers an irritated waitress with charming conversation, never minding her rude responses and not once feeling upset about his charm not working. When he is pushed into an unprecedented semi-improvised kill, ruining his self-image of “an icy tower of pure reason” (252), he blames no one but himself, chastising himself for taking stupid, brainless risks and for gambling with his carefully built life, even if there are no major consequences. On multiple occasions, the Slasher makes him feel unintelligent, which does smart his ego, and yet, Dexter merely turns his sarcasm on himself, marveling at the human experience of feeling “like a total idiot” (85) and calling himself “Dexter derailed” (215) or “[p]oor dog-dumb Dexter” (235).

Dexter sees many positives in being a sociopath. He attests to not feeling burdened by his lack of empathy (54) and to being better off without “astonishingly stupid piece[s] of humania” (126) such as trivial social cues or the ability to have a crush. Yet other times, he feels like he is missing something, “some essential piece of the puzzle that everybody else carrie[s] around with them” (126), and he surmises that because something in him is “broken or missing”, he is ultimately “unlovable” (47). He calls this conclusion “not self-pity but the coldest, clearest self-knowledge” which is why he does not love himself either (Ibid.). Usually, his remarks about not being human come off as self-satisfied, but moments like this, or when he calls himself “a soulless and evil thing” (154), or when he does not want his girlfriend’s traumatized children to grow up to be like him (55), suggest that despite having no “conscience, shame, or guilt” (227), and despite living a mostly happy life, Dexter does feel a certain amount of self-loathing. Memories of conversations with Harry show that Harry never uses such language in front of his adopted son, who he calls “a good kid” that is burdened by an unstoppable urge to kill by no fault of his own (40), but in a flashback to Harry’s last moments, nineteen-year-old Dexter corrects

him that he is not a ‘who’ but a ‘what’ (158), already showing signs of internalized self-loathing rather than an inflated ego.

Dexter’s ego is even less demanding when it comes to interactions with other people and his public image. His truest self, the serial killer, has no interest in articles or news reports about the people he has killed (162). When the Slasher challenges him, leaving secret messages that he is controlling Dexter’s actions and that he is a better killer, Dexter responds with curiosity instead of anger or defensiveness, agreeing with his submissive role in this scenario, going so far as to compare himself to a “high-school girl [being asked out by] the captain of the football team” (184). As a crime lab technician, Dexter Morgan often has good instincts in cases of serial homicide, but he regularly sabotages his track record so that he avoids any suspicion. To improve Deborah’s chances at promotion, he plans one such step, giving Detective LaGuerta a bad criminal profile in full knowledge that she would publicly blame him for it. He shrugs off the disrespect he receives from his department’s policemen and barely responds to Sergeant Doakes’s animosity while secretly admiring him for realizing that Dexter is a predator in disguise. He does not demand respect from anyone, not even from a confused janitor, to whom he introduces himself thusly: “I’m a nerd cop, I just work in the lab” (204). His narration reveals that most of this behavior does not come naturally to Dexter but is premediated. To appear agreeable, passive, and altogether unnoticeable, Dexter turns himself into a ‘beta’ of a man with no injury to his pride, suggesting he has little to no ego whatsoever.

Part 2: Gender Dynamics, or Interacting with Men and Women

American Psycho is infamous for its sexualized violence. While it is true that there are several exceptions to Patrick Bateman’s all-female victim profile, Caputi has noted that Ellis gives the scenes with female victims the worst kind of special treatment:

When Bateman murders men, the scenes are relatively short, take place outside, and are asexual. When women are murdered, the sequences are extensive, take place in private, and frequently follow upon several pages of basic sadomasochistic sexual description, clearly aimed at arousing the reader. At this point, Ellis offers scenes of unmatched violence wherein the women are tortured and killed in ornate and sexualized ways. (*Gossips, Gorgons and Crones* 180)

Killing women is very important and very personal for Patrick. His unhealthy desire to dominate and violate women predates his alleged depersonalization at Harvard, since he off-handedly admits that he raped a maid at his house at the age of fourteen (Ellis 329). Where participating in a consumerist lifestyle calms him down and makes him feel better, torture-rape to death is where he truly expresses himself. As Caputi observes in the excerpt above, one of his favorite games is to seduce or pay a woman, then turn consensual sex into sadistic rape, then let the woman realize she is trapped, and begin torturing her. He does not punish her for what she has done to him personally, as she is often a stranger who has been agreeable all night; instead, he seems to punish her collectively for every moment a woman questioned him (323), outmanned him (232), or rejected him (197). His punishment is stomach-churningly cruel, making use of construction tools, mace, acid, glass shards, and even rats to experiment with the female anatomy, dragging out her death over hours or days. The accompanying verbal abuse is a one-sided conversation where Patrick lords the power he has over her, taunting her: “I hope this hurts you” (316), or “Scream, honey, keep screaming. No one cares” (236). Yet at the same time, he tapes his female victims’ torture “in an attempt to understand these girls” (292), and once, he finds himself sobbing “I just want to be loved” (332) while covered in their blood, showing the depth of his obsession and insanity.

Jeff Lindsay makes it clear that the character of Dexter Morgan also could have shared misogynist motivations, were it not for Harry’s intervention. This alternative is shown in Dexter’s older brother who remembers their childhood trauma and the role their promiscuous mother played in it, which is why he chooses to cut prostitutes into pieces. Dexter himself is confronted with the same temptation once his childhood memory returns, momentarily believing that killing Deborah dressed as a prostitute would “pay

back Mommy, would show her what she had done. Because Mommy should have saved us” (Lindsay 269). The belief, however, does not last.

To avoid sexualized violence or violent sexuality in his serial killer narrative, Lindsay made his protagonist asexual, explaining that for Dexter “the idea of sex is no idea at all” and that he finds the act undignified (14). Another marker of asexuality³ is that throughout the storyline, Dexter never experiences physical attraction, which is why he awkwardly grasps for objectivity when describing people’s good looks (e.g. 16-17, 26). Ironically, asexuality makes him an ideal partner (at first) for Rita, the woman he is dating so that his life looks normal. Rita wants to spend time with “a perfect gentleman” (53) while she is slowly healing from her ex-husband’s emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Believing that “all men are beasts” (Ibid.), Dexter believes himself to be a safer option for Rita than a normal man would be. A complication occurs when in a moment of confusion and excitement about a Slasher crime scene, Dexter kisses Rita. She pushes him away and says no, and he immediately retreats, not only because he has no desire to continue, but also because he has no ego to worry about being refused something he might feel entitled to. Rita later decides that she is ready for sex and unwittingly uses Dexter when he is excited about another Slasher crime scene. After the act, Dexter feels somewhat violated, proclaiming: “why had Rita needed to do THAT to me?” (151). He feels similarly disturbed when Detective LaGuerta sexually harasses him in her office, as he forgets his charming act and lets his panic show. Not only is Dexter not a sexual predator; he is a hunter of sexually-motivated murderers (which is what both his in-story victims are), and an asexual man who knows too well what it is like to experience unwanted advances.

It should be noted that in Dexter’s backstory, the sexual awakening storyline is replaced with the awakening of his homicidal urges. The flashback scene where Harry finally asks fourteen-year-old Dexter about his dark urges intentionally resembles father and son having The Talk, with Harry pushing through the awkwardness and Dexter feeling embarrassed “as if Dad has asked me to talk about sex dreams. Which, in a way...” (38). Later, when Dexter is explaining to Deborah the Slasher’s MO, so similar to his own, he again feels “embarrassed” (66) about sharing such intimate details. In another flashback, Harry gives nineteen-year-old Dexter permission to start killing people. The allusions to Dexter’s First Time are loud and clear, with Dexter commenting how Harry knew that it would have to happen one day and that he was preparing Dexter “to do It right” (157) and phrasing his first kill as “Doing It” (157) and “to do the Thing” (160), capitalization included. Unsurprisingly, his first time is with a woman, whose body and death, however, are not eroticized. The killing is left off-page with Dexter vaguely summarizing: “Last Nurse had been First Playmate, and she had opened up so many wonderful doors for me. I had learned so much, found out so many new things” (161). What comes closer to sexualized violence is the issue of Dexter thinking about crime scenes with bloodless body parts (female, but not emphasized as such) when he kisses Rita and when Rita has sex with him. While the first act is described as a moment of confusion rather than arousal, the second act, presented in a short summary, suggests some level of arousal or participation, as Rita never makes a comment about Dexter being noticeably reluctant or passive during the act. The closest Dexter comes to sexualized violence, however, is during his semi-improvised murder of a male victim, when he describes approaching a peak in satisfaction: “I was working on the torso with the knife point and could feel the first real tinglings of response down my spine and through my legs and I didn’t want to stop. . . . I felt on the brink of some wonderful thing” (142). Despite the orgasmic allusions, the victim’s body is yet again not eroticized, and there are only straws to grasp on if the scene were to be interpreted as a suggestion of homosexual desire.

When homicidal desires replace sexual desires this fully in a narrative, a certain level of sexualized violence should be expected; and yet, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* is very tame in this regard. Not only are the bodies and actions not eroticized; the violence itself is not gratuitous. The hours of carnage that Dexter enjoys on his chosen nights occur mostly off-page, with only select few moments shown and the rest summarized in vague language. The most explicit detail comes not from Dexter’s narration, but from a colleague who investigates the body of his male victim, noting that “he was still alive when his leg came

³ I am using the definition spearheaded by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (www.asexuality.org) and adapted by the latest textbooks, such as *Our Sexuality* (Crooks and Baur).

off" (166). Much like the stock character of a gentleman thief, Dexter Morgan is a gentleman serial killer, presenting his crimes in a palatable, politically correct way that allows the audience to sympathize with him and focus on his better qualities.

Let us move on from sexuality to other aspects of gender dynamics. The way Dexter describes women in his sardonic narration is just as disrespectful as the way he approaches male characters, with the partial exception of Harry, his father figure. Dexter's disrespect has little to do with sexism and much to do with his disappointment that none of the people around him are his equal. It also does not stop him from extending a surprising amount of consideration towards these characters, analyzing their failures and oftentimes blaming external causes rather than the person's intellect, character, or gender role. I will show this in the way Dexter discusses three major female characters in the novel: his superior officer LaGuerta, his sister Deborah, and his girlfriend Rita.

Detective LaGuerta is the character who reaps the most disrespect. Each insult is prompted by a non-gender-related action but formulated with an occasional use of sexist language. At the beginning of the novel, Dexter describes LaGuerta as a bad detective who was promoted to the homicide department through playing politics and currying favors. Because she is good-looking, fashionable, ambitious, self-serving, hard, and has a weakness for handsome young men, Dexter calls her very feminine on the outside and extremely masculine on the inside (26). None of this, however, makes Dexter's opinion anything but neutral. When he calls her an idiot in his inner monologue, it is because she shows that she has fallen for his artificial charm (28), and when he does so once again out loud in front of Deborah, it is after finding out that LaGuerta gave her a sexist nickname (68). When she ignores evidence that proves her version of the crime wrong, he upgrades her to a "dumb as a box of bricks" (103) "bonehead" (105); and once she arrests the wrong man and closes the case, she becomes a "brain-dead bitch" (109) who is "the real threat to society" (114). This language is tame in comparison to the misogynist insults she uses about his sister, his girlfriend, and the dead prostitutes. She even hurls a homophobic slur at Dexter after he rejects her. And yet, as if to punish him for his rudeness, she is the one that begins suspecting him and catches him doing something incriminating, making him admit that he has underestimated her (245). Once she sees through him, she treats him like prey, and instead of retaliating, Dexter finds himself "warming to the woman" (249) before she dies.

Deborah Morgan is the character towards whom Dexter extends the most consideration. From a genre perspective, she is the beautiful female sidekick who, working as a vice operative, spends most of the plot including the kill table scene conveniently dressed as a prostitute. In Dexter's voice, however, the issue is presented from her point of view: "she hated anything that overemphasized her femininity and her lush figure. She wanted to be a cop; it was not her fault she looked more like a centerfold" (16-17). Moreover, when the two investigate together, she takes the lead while he assumes the supporting roles of handling the IT jargon, playing the gentle persuader, and using his mysterious sixth sense for serial homicide. Whenever her lack of understanding disappoints him, his inner monologue defends her, calling her naïve and tired (116) instead of a stupid woman, and describing her as "otherwise a very smart person" who "simply inherited all of Harry's earthy directness, his straightforward way of dealing with things, without latching onto any of his accompanying wisdom" (104) instead of an immature girl. He also lets her hit him in annoyance and tolerates it when she takes out her aggression on furniture right in front of him - twice. Instead of an oversexualized sidekick, Deborah is the most important living person in Dexter's life who, despite her many flaws, warrants his best attempts at artificial empathy.

As Dexter's girlfriend, Rita is bound to be given a few remarks about her gender performance. Some of Dexter's language dehumanizes Rita, taking the metaphor of a gay man's beard too literally and presenting her as an object, as "merely my beard, a silly kid's costume I wore on weekends" (127), or "a disguise [with] a year and a half of hard maintenance" (61). And yet, this unique kind of objectification does not stop Dexter from analyzing her life with artificial empathy, mixing general disrespect towards her as a human being with attempted sensitivity to her situation:

Rita was almost as badly damaged as I am. . . . He beat her, the brute. Broke furniture, screamed, and threw things and made threats. Then raped her. . . . Rita endured, worked, fought him through

rehab twice. Then he went after the kids one night and Rita finally put her foot down. . . . Somehow, somehow, dear Rita had decided to date again. . . . Poor Rita had married too young and too badly . . . , instead of realizing that all men are beasts, she had come up with this lovely romantic picture of a perfect gentleman who would wait indefinitely for her to open slowly, like a little flower. (52-3)

Notice that aside from his condescending tone, Dexter is clearly on Rita's side in areas that a male character swayed by hegemonic ideals would find controversial – domestic abuse and rape. He approaches Rita's story without a single gender-stereotyping or victim-blaming thought, never defending the violent man or projecting his own insecurities upon the woman, and even affording her strength and agency when the story allows it. He blames her environment and personal experience for her naivety instead of making a personal attack on her character or intelligence. Dexter's thoughts towards Rita are an unloving yet inoffensive mixture of consideration and condescension, respect and disrespect.

As shown above, Dexter does not feel threatened by independent women, or even dominant women. What is more, Dexter is perfectly unbothered by feminism. From his off-handed remark that his sister cares about prostitution "as a sociological issue" (16), it appears that to his indifference or silent approval, Deborah might be a feminist. His own narration brings attention to the trappings of toxic masculinity when he almost borrows Kupers's words to explain the spiraling behavior that led Daryll, the wrong suspect in the Slasher case, from drinking to property damage to domestic abuse (111). Several times, Dexter observes sexism in the humans he peers down upon (such as when he dismisses the rumor that LaGuerta has slept her way up to her position), showing its occurrence as an unequivocal fact but sharing no further commentary. He also never speaks up against those acts of sexism that occur before him, including LaGuerta's open misogyny towards other women, or his colleague's unwanted advances towards Deborah. What silences him is not only adhering to Harry's rule about not doing "anything that might cause comment" (120), but also his detachment from humanity and its problems.

A side of gender dynamics that is not often discussed in literary gender analysis is the dynamics between fellow men. In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman's urgent desire to be the alpha male results in what can only be described as "painful one-up-manship" (Helyer 139). Despite the time and money he invests in being the best, his efforts are constantly met with failure when his business card is not the most admired (Ellis 42), or when Paul Owen has better-looking hair (107), or when his opinion on pizza is crushed by his colleagues' counterarguments (106), or when he is outdone by his brother in every way he finds important (216-219). Where many misogynists seek true friendship among men, Patrick views his fellow male yuppies as competitors that often beat him in battles for the biggest ego in the room. His greatest weakness, however, is crippling homophobia. The novel contains seven instances when Patrick Bateman observes homosexuality with fear and then runs away from it (123; 134; 153; 213; 270; 280-284; and 298). The scenes where he does his best to escape a smitten gay co-worker instead of taking control of the situation or making him his next victim are particularly embarrassing. Once he is at a safe distance from the homosexual threat, he needs to regain a sense of normalcy, so for example after fleeing from the sight of the Gay Pride Parade, he tortures and kills a small dog (134). The only thing Patrick wants from men is their defeat and surrender to his superiority, yet he fails to dominate even the most 'effeminate' of his co-workers.

In *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, the protagonist's interactions with men (and women) are built around his pretense of normalcy. Dexter is willing to debase himself with spineless submission or brainless flattery if it helps him get what he wants while looking inconspicuous. He exchanges friendly banter with the other lab technicians and medical examiners, especially Vince Masuoka, who he jokingly calls 'master' and gets called 'grasshopper' or 'my child' in return. He does not care whether the rest of the department respects him, which shows when he sabotages his good reputation, or when he shrugs off insults from policemen at a case meeting, sarcastically labeling them as "salt of the earth" (71). With vulgar insults and serious threats, Sergeant Doakes is the worst of the offenders, but Dexter still responds with passivity and submission, never rising to the sergeant's challenge, even when it is revealed that Doakes might have a dark passenger of his own, thereby leaving him as a possible antagonist for the

sequel, *Dearly Devoted Dexter*. As for homophobia, Dexter never has a chance to show it in an interaction with a gay character. However, there are also many opportunities to use homophobic jokes or insulting comparisons, which Dexter never does.

Part 3: Sympathy and Admiration for the Devil

Patrick Bateman is a human caricature from a transgressive experimental novel that satirizes Wall Street capitalism. He is a bad psychopath who is a slave to his frail nerves, who lies compulsively but also very badly, and who never shows the ‘boy next door’ charisma he is said to possess. He is a bad serial killer who leaves clues wherever he goes, keeps piles of evidence as trophies, and whose desire to have his crimes acknowledged makes him reveal his true nature in front of someone 29 times throughout the novel. According to his own standards, the standards of hegemonic masculinity, he is a pathetic failure of a man. He is not only impossible to identify with, but also impossible to respect, which is probably the most redeeming quality of the novel. Unlike for example *Fight Club* (1996) whose satirical portrayal of masculinity was too subtle to be detected by mainstream audiences, with the film adaptation (1999) inciting many boys and men to want to be just like Tyler Durden, *American Psycho* does not give its male readers the desire to emulate Patrick Bateman, not even after the polished film adaptation with Christian Bale in the leading role (2000).

Playing on the archetype of a serial killer übermensch, Dexter should be rather difficult to identify with as well. However, that is not the case, as Dexter’s voice resonates with specific groups of readers as well as an entire generation of culture consumers.

The first demographic *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* appeals to with its more grounded portrayal of a psychopath are readers with alleged psychopathic tendencies, which is apparently not a minuscule part of the population. A study cited in a British television documentary claims that 0.5% of the British population and 1% of the American population score high on the Psychopathy Checklist (*Psychopath*). In the future, psychopathy might be redefined as a type of social impairment, or even as “an exaggerated extension of the normal personality” (Fields 264) – perhaps as a more pronounced ENTJ⁴ personality type, which itself amounts to under two percent of the total population (David Keirse, qtd. in “Rational Portrait”). When Dexter presents shallow emotionality and shows the struggle of having to feign emotional reactions and empathy in every social encounter, readers from this demographic can easily sympathize. They are not the only ones to feel kinship with Dexter; other such minorities include asexual people and people with certain mental or physical handicaps. Dexter’s confessions about the benefits and drawbacks of his condition, i.e. how he usually does not mind being different, but sometimes he feels damaged and other times superior, echo the confessions of people with hearing loss or people on the autistic spectrum. While some asexual readers might identify with these statements as well, the most resonating sentiment for them must be Dexter’s frustration with people’s constant preoccupation with sexual attraction and pleasure, leading him to exclaim: “What is it with humans? Is this all any of them ever think about?” (178). Readers who emotionally isolate themselves, feeling “alone in the world” (47) either by their own will, or the actions of others, or perhaps due to depression, may find themselves partially reflected in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*’s protagonist as well.

Dexter’s voice is also tailored to appeal to the feelings of mainstream audiences. Observe the way he explains his more outlandish psychology: “I’m quite sure most people fake an awful lot of everyday human contact. I just fake all of it” (14). Through comparisons such as this, the reader simply imagines having to navigate an emotional moment with their sibling the same way they need to navigate a job interview. Dexter’s dark humor and sardonic remarks about the nature of humanity are served at just the

⁴ Known as ENTJ is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or as the Fieldmarshal in the Keirse Temperament Sorter, this personality is revered as a natural-born leader and described as charismatic, self-centered, and cold-hearted. ENTJ traits are not dissimilar to those of a ‘corporate psychopath’, a popularized concept intended to reveal how “society is moving in the direction of permitting, reinforcing, and in some instances actually valuing some of the traits listed in the Psychopathy Checklist” (Hare 177).

right level of intensity to attract the approval and sympathy of the more cynical crime literature readers. In his world, few people carry Dark Passengers, but many more are capable of horrible violence. Dexter reports on the darker sides of humanity such as spousal homicide, road rage, the demand for blood in the news, or people ignoring their neighbors being murdered, with cheer and wit, excited that “the unpleasant species” (153) called humanity is not that far from his evil. The way he sees through euphemisms, social conventions⁵ and rhetorical manipulation⁶ resonates not only with the critical thought of detective genre fans, but also with the disillusion and cynicism of the latest generation of readers. According to scholars such as Donnelly, the first *Dexter* novel came out just in time for the post-9/11 rise in the popularity of morally gray protagonists as opposed to morally superior protagonists whose firm beliefs in their righteousness are supported by the dominant narratives of their country or community. By challenging what has culturally been agreed upon as ‘moral’ and ‘normal’, as well as ‘superior’ and ‘manly’, the *Dexter* series became part of the deconstructive zeitgeist that uses old popular tropes (such as serial killer narratives) without stooping to the old evils (such as sexism and homophobia) that are traditionally associated with them.

My argument is that Dexter is more than a respectable protagonist; more even than a mouthpiece for the emotionally distant, the socially isolated, and the world-weary. As a highly functioning psychopath who is in full control of a borderline supernatural inner monster, the Dark Passenger; as a serial killer of vile murderers who carries out near-perfect crimes, which allows him to benefit the society again and again while maintaining a safe and content lifestyle; and as a man who taught himself to find purpose and happiness in both his work and everyday life, Dexter Morgan can serve as a role model to readers who want to get their life together, so to speak. His performance of masculinity is not based on domination, but rather on self-awareness and self-control. The way he prevents fits of uncontrollable behavior by preventively fulfilling his needs in a controlled manner can serve as an example to readers with stress-related, anger-related, or other mental-health issues whose buildup can be regulated. Countering yet another feature of toxic masculinity, Dexter mentions twice that he would appreciate the help of a psychiatrist (50 and 80) if only he could get it without arousing suspicion. This makes Dexter a positive example in cultures where men’s concerns about expressing emotions and weaknesses leave them unwilling to seek professional psychological assistance (Good et al.).

Perhaps most importantly, Dexter Morgan is a role model because while he willingly gives up some of his control, what he remains in control of is his own happiness. Despite indulging his greatest passion only four times a year on average and living an otherwise boring lifestyle, Dexter describes his existence as a “happy little life” (2) that is worth protecting. To reach happiness, he does not depend on a wife, or children, or status; instead, he makes himself happy not only by killing and hiding it so well that he can kill again, but also by finding little things about life that please him and amuse him. Having acknowledged his obsession about blood, he devotes most of his life – in and out of work – to making “order out of chaos” (50-1) and making the world “a neater, happier place” (11) by cleaning up his own and investigating other people’s crime scenes. This allows him to find purpose and satisfaction in the routine of diligent lab work (49-50). He claims to love Miami because the sun makes crime scenes look cleaner and neater (23). The second reason must be its dangerous traffic, as there are five instances in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* alone when the protagonist finds a sense of belonging, relaxation, cheer and happiness in observing Miami drivers and boaters make attempts at each other’s lives with their vehicles and guns (33-4, 36, 125, 165, and 228). The third reason is the cuisine that has Dexter gleefully praising local pastries and Cuban sandwiches. Things that should seem insignificant to a psychopathic serial killer, such as having a small office for himself or getting Rita’s daughter to respond to his joke, fill him with “a tiny glow of accomplishment” (56) and contribute to his “happy little life” because he chooses to focus on them in a positive manner.

⁵ For example, this is how he interprets the doctors’ decision to move his father from a hospital to a hospice: “That meant the doctors were saying that Harry was ready to die, and suggesting that he cooperate” (Lindsay 153).

⁶ On multiple occasions, Dexter analyzes and evaluates the people-handling skills of Detective LaGuerta and Captain Matthews pointing out how they influence those around them (27, 29, and 74).

Not Quite a New Model of Masculinity

How does one write a politically correct, counterhegemonic serial killer? Lindsay's key was combining the protagonist's high intelligence with shallow emotions and a benevolent father figure. The father figure set the serial killer on a path of rules and regulations, bringing him up in self-awareness and emotional support instead of breeding insecurities or entitlement. The shallow affect makes the man's ego more difficult to injure, and when that occurs, the response is never an overreaction. Combined with high cognitive ability, it creates a protagonist with a highly analytical and critical mind who sets aside his subjectivity to reach the most objective, rational conclusions based on the values learned from his father figure. Aware of his own cleverness and lacking insecurities, Dexter is confident enough to only need to control himself and whatever is necessary for the Code of Harry to be upheld. Since he does not need to overcompensate for a perceived lack of control, Dexter does not bother with trying to dominate anyone around him – except for four times per year, when a murderer of his choosing becomes his for the night. Then, he turns their crimes against them, using his power over them to remind them how their victims felt: “Yes, beg me. That's good. . . . Did they beg?” (9).

Another character feature that helps him avoid the trappings of hegemonic masculinity is, curiously, the fact that he excludes himself from the human race (e.g. 20, 63, or 72). At this point, you have read several excerpts where Dexter speaks of humans as an other. This helps him escape much of the socio-cultural pressures of his assigned gender role – why should he care whether he is manly enough when he already knows he is not quite human? Where Patrick Bateman's “virtual absence of humanity” (Ellis 315) turns him into the worst extreme of hegemonic masculinity, Dexter Morgan escapes the very same pressures by calling himself inhuman, hollow (14 and 29), soulless (106), dead inside (13 and 52), and a monster (11, 42, 81 and 92). Dexter sees most human behaviors as sets of socio-cultural rules that do not come naturally to him, so it should come as no surprise that gender is one of those sets.

Inspiring as Dexter's counterhegemony might be, I am not claiming that it is a solution that can replace what is problematic about real-life hegemonic masculinity. The factors I have just mentioned cannot be repeated in real cis-men who have identified as human and male from early childhood and who have a full range of emotions and often struggle whether to repress them or express them and how. As such, the portrayal of Dexter Morgan remains an exercise in genre conventions that turn the tropes of crime literature on their head rather than a proposed comprehensive alternative to the way real men live their lives, which the novel never claimed to strive for in the first place.

Lindsay's work thus proves to be another postmodern example that popular tropes can be executed without perpetuating their old core ideals of sexism, homophobia, or hegemonic masculinity in general. In 21st century literature, the protagonist can be a strong and successful man without dominating others and isolating himself; he can be a morally gray character whose corruption is not expressed through sexist or homophobic behavior; he can even be a dark, violent, haunted figure such as a serial killer without sexualizing the humiliation, domination, and torment of women. The success of the *Dexter* franchise proves that leaving these ‘classic’ tropes behind is not a recipe for bad writing or for a commercial failure.

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