Morality and Gender in Jeff Lindsay’s Dexter Novels

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aims and methods

The contemporary American author Jeff Lindsay’s protagonist Dexter Morgan is a curious character. In the four novels where he appears, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter, Dearly Devoted Dexter, Dexter in the Dark* and *Dexter by Design*, the reader faces an obnoxious serial murderer who as a member of the police uses his questionable interests to help them catch other serial killers. Since the novels are all published in the 2000s, this thesis will be one of the first attempts to critically analyze the novels from two different viewpoints. The TV series (based only on the first novel) has perhaps overshadowed Jeff Lindsay’s original works and stirred some academic criticism1, which only focuses on the TV series. Nevertheless, using close reading, ethical criticism and analysis of the genre, this thesis will first look at the moral issues raised by Dexter’s seeming amorality by being both a serial killer and a member of the police. I will argue, however, that Dexter’s moral backbone is after all rather strong and traditional which creates a clear contradiction between the descriptions of the protagonist’s sociopathic personality and his actual behaviour. Furthermore, the second part will study the female characters Jeff Lindsay has created and analyze their roles and actions compared to their male counterparts. The differences between the written and televised Dexter will also be discussed.

1.2. On Jeff Lindsay

Jeff Lindsay is actually an alias for Jeffrey P. Freundlich who is both a crime novelist and a playwright. He was born on July 15, 1952 in Miami, Florida and lives in California with his wife and three daughters. The strong regional influences cannot be avoided in his Dexter novels where the well-described Miami life is blended with Cuban influences. More than once Dexter complains of but simultaneously enjoys the psychotic Miami traffic and thereafter goes out for a medianoche sandwich and a batido de mamé

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1 For example, Teuterberg, J. (2009) *America’s favourite serial killer*. Stockholm University, Master’s thesis.
milkshake with his sister Deborah. The city is filled with Cuban immigrants and Spanish
is heard often, more so in the novels. Moreover, Lindsay has studied literature and
writing at Middlebury College and playwriting and theatre direction at Carnegie-Mellon
University. Besides being a novelist, he has worked as an actor, comic director, teacher,
singer, songwriter, composer, musician, sports caster and detective (Lindsay 2010).

He is best known for the successful Dexter novels that became famous due to the
TV series, but before them he also wrote other fiction. In the 1990s he published four
fictional novels (Tropical Depression: A Novel of Suspense, Dream Land: A Novel of
the UFO Cover up, Time Blender and Dreamchild), as well as the non-fiction novel
Hunting with Hemingway. Some of these feature as a co-writer his wife Hilary
Hemingway, who is the niece of Ernest Hemingway. In addition, Lindsay has authored
15 plays and seven musicals that have been produced, among others, in New York,
London and California. Darkly Dreaming Dexter, the first Dexter novel in 2004, was
originally nominated for the best first novel in the Writers of America’s Edgar Awards,
but was rejected after the judges found out that Jeff Lindsay had already published many
novels in the 1990s under other pen names (Lindsay 2010).

1.3. Genre considerations

1.3.1 Different subgenres in crime fiction

According to Heta Pyrhönen (1998: 17), crime fiction as a genre is generally divided
into three categories, to whodunit, hard-boiled and metaphysical detective fiction, based
on narration, plot structures, characters, settings and the relationship between the author
and reader. The roots of the genre lie in the traditional British whodunit, which is
known as classical detective fiction. Additionally to the general division of the genre
into hard-boiled and whodunit fiction, the traditional side can furthermore be divided
into four. Women writers have dominated the traditionally British variants, and perhaps
therefore they have been somewhat ignored, as Marilyn Stasio (1986: 70) points out.
The whodunit, also known as puzzle mystery, is the most popular and displays an
intellectual approach to crime. However, other variants include the village mystery,
historical mystery and suspense mystery. The village mystery introduces a sensitive
detective who can be either an amateur or a professional. Crime threatens an independent society and the novels have a clear moral code. Therefore they are often judged as boring, but Agatha Christie is considered as the master of this variant. In addition, historical mystery is often mislabelled as romantic literature and usually features social commentary in a historical setting. Finally, suspense mystery is characterized by its extensive characterization and its psychological approach. In the traditional subgenre the story follows the conventions strictly, from the introduction of the crime to the gathering of clues and suspect interrogation finally revealing the criminal’s identity, which shapes the text into a kind of a puzzle. The world of classical detective fiction seen as a harmonious and happy place that the crime disturbs, and it is the detective’s job to restore the order.

On the other hand, the American variant, hard-boiled detective fiction, concentrates strongly on the present situation rather than the past, as the crime itself brings about even more meaningful events, which usually translates as more crimes. The subgenre is very American, not least owing to its roots in stories of the Wild West. Also Ernest Hemingway, American naturalism, realism and romanticism have left their traces in the genre (Pyrhönen 1994: 59). On the other hand, Richard Slotkin (1986: 92) notes that many of the genre’s core elements (like the corrupt society, the detached detective and pessimism) are in clear contradiction with all American optimism, democracy and pride in personal achievement. The plot has similar elements as the whodunit subgenre, but now goes from the introduction of the crime to interrogations that reveal new dimensions of the crime or problem. The investigator is in the spotlight with his or her personal issues and a special interest in the case. Whereas in the British variant the moral code is clear and almost black and white, in hard-boiled crime fiction everything is blurred and ambiguous (Pyrhönen 1998: 17). The quest for the truth is more important than the solution, which makes the endings sometimes quite obvious and unoriginal. Furthermore, the crime itself might be insignificant as it is created only to demonstrate that people’s worst fears about the corrupt society are true (Slotkin 1986: 92).

The American variant includes another subgenre as well, that is the police procedural. It resembles the hard-boiled variant, but it focuses on the group of police
rather than a single detective. The reader often knows who the criminal is, thus the interest lies in how the police are able to solve the crime. The plot shows the police’s actions and the criminal planning and committing the crimes. The urban setting of the procedurals has often traits of crime documentary in it which possibly makes the procedural the most modern of the subgenres in crime fiction. Especially the changes in the American society have affected the genre after the Second World War when new crimes and new anxieties emerged. As Leroy L. Panek (2003: 155) argues, real police and real police work were introduced for the first time revealing the strong influence of the job on their personal lives. The focus shifted to the group of police, since any individual alone cannot solve the cases without routine police work or bureaucracy (Panek 2003: 157). Moreover, the 1960s brought about another significant change, namely women and black police officers.

Early on, most fictional crimes took place in New York or Los Angeles, but nowadays most of the big cities are or have been used as fictional settings. Jeff Lindsay’s Miami serves as an excellent example of this (Panek 2003: 159). In addition as Lee Horsley (2001: 187) notes, American detectives with strong regional identities are nowadays more the rule than the exception in crime fiction. The change was brought about by the new generation of novelists with different backgrounds, homesteads and professions making the form and genre rules less rigid and omnipotent. More importantly however, police procedurals introduce the pessimistic nature of real police work since most crimes are never solved and the criminals are not caught. Lindsay acknowledges this when he through Dexter describes his sister, the police officer Deborah: “She looked hard at me, and I saw the beginnings of the way Harry had looked before he got sick, after so many years as a cop: tired, and getting used to the idea of routine defeat” (Dexter in the Dark 525). Moreover, during the 1970s the nowadays well-known convention to include details of violent deaths and autopsy descriptions in the novels emerged, which shaped the subgenre permanently (Panek 2003: 160).

Panek (2003: 164) points out that whereas hard-boiled detectives are usually detached and lonely, so are the detectives in procedurals as well. They are separated from their personal lives by their professions, cynicism, divorces or alcoholism, and interestingly as most detectives are male, most crimes are also committed by men.
Horsley (2001: 184) notes that the influence of earlier hard-boiled detective and victim characters is still strong in modern ones. Yet in procedurals, vigilante cops can often be portrayed as heroes. The police might even lie to make the arrests possible and thus take the law into their own hands. Dexter does this too (especially in the TV series) where he intentionally falsifies his blood spatter reports to be able to take care of the criminal himself. What is more, it is often little use to capture the criminal since the crime cannot be undone and the peace restored, which is a significant difference compared to the classical detective fiction. Nevertheless, the morals in procedurals are often rather black and white and the detective has to believe strongly in fighting against the evil (Panek 2003: 169). Brotherhood (or sisterhood for female cops) is extremely important for the detectives, since it is their only consolation. The co-workers often become their second, or only, family.

Finally, the third main subgenre, metaphysical or postmodern crime fiction, is less known and less popular. It questions the very conception of crime, and the text in itself is the mystery waiting to be solved (Pyrhönen 1998: 17). As this is clearly not the case with the Dexter novels that employ the conventions of the American subgenres, this thesis will focus on hard-boiled fiction and the police procedural. In addition to the differences outlined, morality is represented fundamentally differently in the British and American subgenres that will be discussed in more detail in the second part of the thesis.

As Pyrhönen (1998: 103) points out, the role of the reader changes when the mystery occurs in the present of the hard-boiled world and not in the past as in classical detective fiction. Most importantly, society in hard-boiled fiction is usually thoroughly corrupted and exploits gullible individuals. The reader, as well as the characters, faces the risk of being constantly deceived in one way or another. This seems to be manifested in the Dexter novels even in the character of the protagonist. Whereas the crime breaks the harmonious whodunit world only for some time, in hard-boiled fiction such murderous monsters as Dexter can live in society and even succeed. Such evil could not exist in the traditional world of crime fiction. Moreover, most of the action in the hard-boiled novel is often spent on trying to find out what is going on and what the crime is about. This is similarly the case in the third Dexter novel, *Dexter in the Dark*, where Dexter loses his killer instinct or the Dark Passenger as he calls it, and spends his time
searching for clues and trying to understand what has happened to him. Furthermore, often in hard-boiled fiction, there is a strong emotional escalation towards the end, as the protagonist’s increasingly violent actions are shown and the capture or death of the criminal takes place. There is not one Dexter novel where the criminal does not die in the culmination of the plot and Dexter is not present. Thus, as Pyrhönen (1998: 176) argues, crime fiction uses a cynical narrative strategy when in the end, the detective’s moral code disappears and the text loses its power to make sense of the world.

Besides these conventions, the criminal usually leaves some clues, so that the detective has even the possibility to solve the crime. Naturally the criminal then tries to manipulate and eliminate the clues so that he or she will not get caught. This forms the basic narrative formula in crime fiction, as Malmgren (2010: 152) points out; someone is looking someone for something. Naturally the detective takes the role of the searcher and the criminal the part of the object. Pyrhönen (1998: 57) claims that the criminal writes texts, authentic and deceiving ones. Authentic is the truthful story of the crime, which is often mixed with the criminal’s false story trying to cover up the crime. Thus, if the criminal’s narrative is never read, a perfect crime has been committed. This convention applies to Dexter as he carefully considers how he kills people and disposes of the evidence and the corpses. He aims for the perfect crime and has succeeded so far, since he has not been caught. Only very few people can read his “authentic text”, including his foster-sister Deborah, and his stepchildren Astor and Cody, who both have Dark Passengers in them. Committing the perfect crime is only possible for Dexter owing to the code his stepfather has taught him.

All in all, there are no clear moral codes in hard-boiled fiction, but as the emphasis is on the individual (that is the protagonist or the detective), it becomes a characteristic that the reader can depend on. Thus, it makes the subgenre even more American, since its culture is based, among others, on individuality (Pyrhönen 1998: 178).
1.3.2 Dexter and genre

The main elements that coincide in the subgenres and the Dexter novels can be seen in the following chart. Naturally, when the focus is both on the individual detective and on the group of police, the text has to include elements from both subgenres. The idea of a murderous protagonist would at first seem quite radical and new, but after all the structure of the novels and their morals are traditional and in line with the genre. Without borrowing elements from these conventions, the novels and the TV series might not have been such a great success.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hard-boiled qualities</th>
<th>Police procedural elements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the protagonist, i.e. the detective (Dexter)</td>
<td>The group of police, Dexter’s sister and their co-workers, play a big role, and the rules of the department must be followed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrupt society, Dexter needed</td>
<td>Dexter the only criminal known to the readers, others are revealed when the police find out about them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the novel spent on finding what is going on</td>
<td>The methods of crime fighting are explained in detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban setting</td>
<td>Urban setting in Miami, a big city where numerous murders happen yearly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional escalation towards the end, where usually someone dies and focus on the present situation</td>
<td>Similar, new murders change the course of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The detective (Dexter) is not exactly a police but not a civilian either as a blood spatter analyst</td>
<td>The cases Dexter helps Deborah with and is most interested in, are serial murders, which gives the novels a strong procedural character (individual detectives cannot solve serial murders alone without the help of others)</td>
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As Pyrhönen (1998: 11) states, both the reader and author make use of the genre’s conventions to solve or complicate the story, and the author would generally try to make it as original as possible. Nevertheless, the Dexter novels borrow quite heavily from the American crime fiction tradition, since it is distinctly part of both hard-boiled and police
procedural subgenres. Moreover, Simpson (2010: 195) defines serial killer fiction, the special subgenre in crime fiction that Dexter naturally represents, as a mixture of police procedural, *psycho thriller* and detective fiction. The subgenre of psycho thriller introduces an extremely exaggerated threat of violence with larger than life criminals who might have supernatural qualities. The plots proceed from one danger to the next and culminate in an ultimate battle between good and evil, and the morals of the fictional psychotic world are also quite defined (Simpson 2010: 188). Thus, Dexter has qualities from this subgenre, which makes it a mixture of hard-boiled crime fiction, police procedural and serial killer fiction.

In addition, the moral code of the novels is quite conventional and never broken, which will be discussed in detail in the second part of the thesis. Naturally the idea of a detective who is simultaneously a sociopathic murderer is rather original, as he does not even get caught during the five novels and as many seasons on TV. Perhaps it is this core idea with Lindsay’s humorous and light writing that has made the series famous. Still, the novels stay strictly in line with the genre conventions and American core values, thus it is not as original as some have claimed. The following chapters will analyze the originality of the novels in depth and compare Lindsay’s plot development to Thomas Harris’ successful pattern of serial killer crime fiction (as introduced in Cassuto 2009: 240).

It is interesting to note how closely the plots of all Dexter novels fit the serial killer novel pattern invented by Thomas Harris in his extremely popular novels *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990). Leonard Cassuto (2009: 240) lists the ten plot phases, which usually start with the detective(s) finding the corpse(s) and beginning investigating the crime. Then by using forensic analyses they define the killer’s signature. The detectives, as readers as well, find out how cruel and psychopathic the killer really is. Slowly the story unfolds and it is revealed how the monster was born and how the detective’s own history affects the investigation. Usually the detectives suffer from the combination of a poor personal life and the anxieties of working with serial killers. When more or less bodies have been found, the killer kidnaps a new victim who is almost always a woman. Therefore, the detectives or the police fight time to find the latest victim before the killing starts. Finally, in the
culmination of the plot, the detective finds the killer just in time to save the woman, and the killer almost always dies to avoid facing the consequences or revealing the murderous motives. The detective receives some peace of mind by stopping the harmful murderer, which then becomes the resolution of the entire story.

First of all, in the first novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, a body turns up after Dexter’s murderous inclination has been introduced. The detectives, including Dexter’s foster sister Deborah, her nemesis detective LaGuerta and Dexter’s nemesis Sergeant Doakes are assigned to the case. It takes three headless, bloodless and dissected bodies for them to make a false arrest, but Dexter, due to his insights in serial killing, realizes that the killer must be using a refrigerated truck to deliver and exsanguinate the bodies in such a good and bloodless shape. He is somehow, however, emotionally connected to the killer who leaves messages for him in the fridge. Rita, Dexter’s girlfriend (who helps him maintain the nice guy façade) and her children Astor and Cody are also introduced. Another three carefully arranged bodies are found, and the killer is seen on surveillance footage. Deborah is shocked to see that the killer looks just like her brother, but when she thinks of turning Dexter in, the real killer kidnaps her. Dexter rushes to her rescue, is followed by detective LaGuerta hoping to save her career, and finds Deborah with his biological brother Brian in an ominous storage box in the harbour. This is the place where the police had found Brian and Dexter almost swimming in their mother’s blood after spending many days locked up in there with three other bodies. The brothers, both cold-blooded murderers, were extremely traumatized by the event. Nevertheless, LaGuerta bursts in trying to shoot Brian who then stabs her to death. Brian wants them to kill Deborah together, but Dexter cannot break the code and Brian runs away. He chooses his sister over his biological brother.

The plot follows the pattern carefully almost to the end, the only exception being that Brian escapes and does not die. However, this exception remains rather artificial since he is not mentioned again, neither found nor imprisoned in the later novels. Surely his capture, death or comeback would be worth commenting on. In addition, the ending offers another deviation. Dexter, as the protagonist, does not receive peace of mind by finding Brian, but LaGuerta’s death has the same function. Before the culmination, she threatens Dexter’s survival by suspecting him of being connected to the murders and
perhaps not being what he wants them to believe. Thus, as almost everything returns back to normal, LaGuerta is eliminated and Dexter is able to continue to murder, the original harmony is restored.

The second novel, *Dearly Devoted Dexter*, introduces an anxious Dexter who is on a forced break from murdering due to the intensive surveillance by sergeant Doakes. Then, a surgically mutilated victim turns up who is not exactly dead but every identifiable part has been cut out of him, including hands, feet, tongue, ears and eyelids. Kyle Chutsky appears to help the police in the case since he and Doakes know the killer from before. Deborah is assigned to help him and they find out that the killer, Dr. Danko, is eliminating his old army colleagues one by one out of revenge. Thus, Kyle is kidnapped and Deborah is shocked as they have become lovers. Meanwhile, Dexter gets engaged with Rita. Deborah, with the help of Doakes and Dexter, sets up a trap to the killer, but while chasing him she crashes the car and ends up in the hospital with a broken arm. Dexter and Doakes continue the chase, and decide to use Doakes as bait. The only thing left for the killer to do is to kidnap and start to work on him. Dexter is lucky enough to find Kyle and is more than happy to leave Doakes to the killer, but Deborah forces him to try to find Doakes, and then he is captured by Dr. Danko. When he is still mutilating Doakes, Deborah finds them and shoots the killer.

Thus, the second novel is somewhat different, since the killer is not a normal serial killer, but revenge or a list killer, as Cassuto (2009: 247) points out. They kill out of mad revenge, and therefore do not care about their future, survival or money. This insanely vengeful character has been considered as the bridge between ordinary killer characters and serial murderers. Yet the plot follows Harris’ pattern carefully, making an exception only concerning whom the murderer kidnaps. Since he is eliminating his old army enemies, he cannot kidnap or kill any random female victim. He, nevertheless, dies before confessing to anything, and the harmony in Dexter’s life is restored by the mutilation and silencing of Doakes.

While the first two books are clearly crime fiction with detectives and murderers, the third novel, *Dexter in the Dark*, takes a turn towards fantasy or science fiction. The plot begins by the description of the birth of Moloch, an ancient godlike entity that orders beings to kill each other. Dexter happily continues to murder, but after the kill he
gets the mysterious Watcher after him. Two charred and headless corpses are found and Dexter’s Dark Passenger reacts strangely and finally disappears. Three more bodies appear and it becomes clear that someone is following Dexter and threatening the children. Astor and Cody, who both seem to have Dark Passengers of their own, are kidnapped. Dexter is summoned to the lair of the Moloch worshipping cult that is trying to eliminate Moloch’s bastard children, namely Dark Passengers like that of Dexter. The ritual starts and Dexter is about to be sacrificed when Cody saves the day by stabbing the cult leader. Dexter’s Dark Passenger returns at the altar when he is marrying Rita and feeling the agony of the normal life ahead of him. In sum, the pattern remains to be followed even though the actual murderer is an ancient murderous spirit. The novel, in contrast to the others, discusses the themes of watched versus watcher and passive versus active. As Horsley (2001: 213) points out, both men and women can be cast in the passive role of the watched, and without his Dark Passenger Dexter is extremely weak. In addition, Horsley (2001: 194) claims that voyeurism is an essential part of crime fiction, and that nowadays women are not necessarily the only targets anymore, which is again exemplified by the Watcher watching Dexter.

Finally the fourth novel, *Dexter by Design*, which is heavily thematized by art, introduces Dexter and Rita on their honeymoon in Paris. When they return, three strangely and artistically displayed corpses are found on the same day around Miami. Dexter and Deborah, who has suddenly become highly suspicious of her brother’s hobby, start looking through the list of suspects. Angry with Dexter and without the backup of her partner detective Coulter, Deborah is stabbed at Brandon Weiss’ house. She is rushed to the hospital and Dexter punishes Alex Doncevic, the man suspected of stabbing her. However, it is revealed that the bodies were actually stolen from the morgue and that Doncevic did not stab Deborah, which causes severe moral problems for Dexter (even though he is not supposed to feel anything). Doncevic’s partner Weiss has videotaped Dexter during the kill and posts the videos online, threatening to kill Cody and Astor. Deborah luckily wakes up, does not want to be a cop anymore, and gives Dexter the permission to eliminate her stabber. Weiss tries to kidnap Astor and Cody, but succeeds only in kidnapping Rita. He tries to make her part of an art exhibition and Coulter, who tries to save her again without backup, dies. Rita pushes
Weiss against the table saw he tried to kill her with and he also dies. Peace is restored when Dexter is once again freed from all suspicions of the police, but surprisingly it is revealed that Rita is pregnant. The pattern is, yet again, followed almost to the letter. Nevertheless, it is strange how Dexter is actually the only one who has any clue of the real murderer and his plans all but in the second novel. How could he ever maintain his façade when he already has been involved in so many suspicious murderers and killings?

Furthermore, the list of people that have been suspicious of Dexter and silenced in the in the climactic ending scenes becomes longer and longer. It starts in the first novel with detective LaGuerta who is stabbed and her suspicions die with her; and continues with sergeant Doakes in the second novel who is mutilated and silenced by the fact that his hands, feet and tongue are cut off. Cody finishes the Watcher, who knows who Dexter really is, in the third novel, and both Deborah and detective Coulter join the list in the fourth one. Deborah is stabbed when she starts having moral problems with Dexter’s sociopathic personality and is thinking about turning him in to the police. Coulter then actually sees Dexter killing Doncevic, but is later killed by Weiss. The plots function systematically and repetitively to keep Dexter’s true personality from being revealed to the public. This strategy becomes, nonetheless, rather incredible after so many accidental deaths in the cases of, for example, LaGuerta and Coulter. It would be refreshing for the writer to come up with a method other than continuously eliminating every threatening character which would give the novels a much more original turn. Perhaps the writer’s skills show their limits in the novels repetitive plot strategies, inconsistent characters and obedient plot development according to Thomas Harris’ rules. What seems humorous and original in the first novel is not that amusing anymore when varied only little and repeated numerous times.
1.4. Dexter as a serial killer

Since the Dexter novels are relatively recent, the first one *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* was published in 2004, followed by *Dearly Devoted Dexter* in 2006, *Dexter in the Dark* in 2007, *Dexter by Design* in 2009 and the latest and fifth novel *Dexter is Delicious* published in September 2010, not much if any academic criticism has been written about them. Their novelty might explain the lack of criticism, but from the birth of the genre, crime fiction has had an uneasy relationship with the academic world, as Black (2010: 76) explains. However, Leonard Cassuto’s study *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality* (2009) offers a useful general view of serial killers in American crime fiction. He approaches the serial killer icon from three different perspectives that can also be used in analyzing the Dexter novels and their serial killer characters. Besides the serial killer plot pattern discussed earlier, he has gathered other stereotypes while analyzing the personalities of the killers and readers’ identification with them.

1.4.1 Serial killer stereotypes

Most importantly, the serial killer novels are mainly part of the police procedural subgenre as it would be useless to have a single detective trying to catch a serial murderer (Cassuto 2009: 241). Due to the extremely difficult nature of detecting, the detectives are usually members of the police, FBI or some public institution, which is needed to bring a sense of safety to the story. Cassuto (2009: 243) argues, moreover, that most serious crime fiction novelists at least attempt to write a serial killer novel making some serial killers like Harris’ Hannibal Lecter American cultural icons, but only few write more than one. This could be explained by the plot stereotype where the serial killer has to die in the end to avoid confessions, unless he happens to be the hero or the antihero like Lecter or Dexter. Nevertheless, it becomes increasingly hard to maintain the character’s or protagonist’s sociopathic personality and image while keeping him or her out of prison. Jeff Lindsay and Thomas Harris both face this problem and solve it in similar ways.

Cassuto (2009: 242) also brings up the issue of how serial killer crime fiction is closely connected to reality. Therefore, it becomes almost impossible to distinguish
between actual crimes and fictional ones. Interestingly, however, it is the victims that make the strongest difference between reality and fiction, and possibly bring more terror to the plot. In reality, serial killers’ victims are usually social outcasts and marginal figures like the homeless, prostitutes or sailors, for example. But in fiction, the killers target middle class family members with strong social connections. It is possible that if the victims were the same in fiction as they are in reality, readers could not identify with them so easily and would sympathize with the killer instead. Perhaps the characters would not seem as sympathetic if readers could blame them for their terrible fates. Would this then affect the popularity of the serial killer subgenre?

The same that applies to the victims applies to the mental illnesses of the killers that Cassuto discusses (2009: 262). The fictional and real serial killers are nowadays all regarded as mentally ill. Therefore, the question why they commit murders becomes irrelevant and is replaced by the question how they became who they are. Since one cannot confess to having a mental illness, no confessions are needed from the serial killers who, no matter what, usually die before they even have the chance to do so. The killer’s upbringing might provide some answers for the criminologists, psychiatrists and novelists, since stereotypically most serial killers have been abused in their childhoods. Similarly, Dexter and his brother Brian become what they are after spending numerous days locked in the shipping container with their mother’s body and three others. Still, in reality most mental illnesses have nothing to do with serial murder, which is often and conveniently forgotten in fiction. Serial killers tend to have personality disorders that are essentially considered as incurable, whereas most mental illnesses can be classified as mood disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder or schizophrenia, and be treated effectively with therapy and medication. Thus, making every mental illness associated with serial killing might create more horror in fiction, just as normal people are turned into their victims. In fiction, as Cassuto (2009: 263) notes, serial killers are seen as a threat that has to be eliminated, not as mentally ill people who need treatment.

Moreover, Cassuto (2009: 258) finds a logical explanation to the stereotype that the final victim kidnapped by the killer is almost always a woman. He argues that in crime fiction, the female body is associated with suffering and by saving the final female victim men are allowed to express emotions that would otherwise be socially
unacceptable. It would be interesting to know if the same applies to children as victims whether they are related with suffering or not. On the other hand, the position of women as perfect victims changes if the target is somehow unappealing, mutilated or ugly. Maybe, therefore Jeff Lindsay has only created beautiful women (and men) in his novels, even Astor is described as a charming little girl. On the other hand, the beauty of Lindsay’s characters could also stem from the old convention of highlighting the loveliness of female characters even in crime fiction (Craig 1986: 79).

Nevertheless, it is the personality of the serial killer that is the core of serial killer fiction, and the distinctive feature that separates serial killers from normal ones are their motives for murder. They kill for pleasure and not for money or other concrete goals, as Cassuto (2009: 241) points out. Crime fiction has inherited this character from the early American gothic fiction of Charles Brockden Brown in the 1700s. Moreover, criminologists, as well as the general public, find it easiest to label serial killers as monsters (Cassuto 2009: 243). These monsters are usually shape-shifting predators, in fiction and in reality, that disguise themselves as normal people to fit into society. Their only joy is to prey on the community, which then makes them extremely isolated, since they cannot share their darkest secret with anyone.

This does not completely apply to Dexter, while he is forced to confess his true nature to Deborah at the end of the first novel when she meets his brother and almost dies. However, her knowing the truth leads to problems in the fourth novel as she suddenly has issues with her brother’s monstrosities. Much like Dexter is described to be, antisocialism and arrogance are, in addition, typical characteristics of fictional serial killers. They can also be seen as the images of the all-devouring nature of consumerism, as Horsley (2001: 221) claims. Moreover, as serial killers are monsters who have started their lives as normal members of the community and subsequently changed, their special perversions symbolize the extreme extent to which they have become estranged from normal social connections. The killer, who might be into cannibalism, torture or necrophilia, is contrasted with the victims in order to highlight the estrangement (Cassuto 2009: 261). As Horsley (2001: 227) emphasizes, a serial killer is always the product of society, whether he is fact or fiction, and whereas they are the images of their societies, they are satires of it.
All in all, the birth and growth of serial killer novels coincided with the American health care movement from public care to privately funded outpatient care for the mentally ill. This deinstitutionalization of the 1960s and 1970s made mental illness a more visible problem in everyday middle class life (Cassuto 2009: 261). Before this period, fictional maniacs had been the stereotypes of mad scientists, a rather secure kind of insanity since one could predict what they were up to, but later on fictional serial killers were transformed into random paranoid murderers and figures of psychotic horror. When villains become more and more vicious and murderously creative, detectives have to change too. They turn less self-absorbed, nicer, softer and more domestic. Cassuto (2009: 251) argues that both of the characters, the detective and the murderer, focus on sympathy and identification, while this is the quality that distances the murderer from others. They have no emotions, no empathy or sympathy for others. Their extraordinary characteristics, such as the need to kill or eat others, seem not that significant when they are paired with their ultimate self-sufficiency; they do not need anyone for anything except as victims. Thus, they signify the ultimate hard-boiled character as they see others as prey, do not need social connections and are totally solitary.

In addition, Cassuto (2009: 271) points out, they are ultimate anti-family people as they are so anti-domestic, anti-sympathetic and anti-sentimental. He argues that they represent the backlash against the American obsession with relationships to family, neighbours and society where the individual is forced to mingle with family and community. In the course of several books, like the ones Thomas Harris and Jeff Lindsay have published, it becomes exceptionally tricky to maintain the sociopathic and murderous image with heroic or anti-heroic serial killers. Harris is forced to transform his murderous genius Hannibal Lecter from a cold-blooded cannibal to Clarice Sterling’s lover with her love humanizing and transforming him into a family man (Cassuto 2009: 254). The ending of the Hannibal novels resembles more romantic novels than serial killer crime fiction. The reason for the image breakdown is explained by readers’ identification with different characters, which will be discussed next.
1.4.2 Identification with the killer

In order to understand serial killers means one has to make sense of the senseless. As Cassuto (2009: 243) underlines, the detective and reader have to think like a serial killer and to sympathize with them to solve the crime. Dexter uses this to his advantage: when he already is a serial killer, it is extremely easy for him to see the logic behind the killer’s work. However, it becomes complicated if readers start identifying with the killer. Therefore the serial killer subgenre manipulates reader identification in complex ways (Cassuto 2009: 255). Writers usually try to avoid the connection between murderers and readers altogether, since it is necessary to keep the readers emotionally and morally intact. As Cassuto (2009: 257) notes, the most gruesome details are not revealed in order to keep the readers interested and not too disgusted. Lindsay breaks this taboo somewhat in the second novel when he describes meticulously how Dr. Danko has surgically mutilated his victims so that he has cut every piece possible out of them, but still kept them living. The chapters feature numerous police officers and paramedics vomiting out of shock on the crime scenes.

I would never have thought, for instance, of cutting off the lips and eyelids like that, and although I pride myself on my neat work, I could never have done so without damage to the eyes, which in this case were rolling wildly back and forth, unable to close or even blink, always returning to that mirror. Everything on the body had been cut off, absolutely everything. There was nothing left of it but a bare and featureless head attached to an unencumbered body. I could not imagine how it was possible to do this without killing the thing, and it was certainly far beyond me why anyone would want to.  

*Dearly Devoted Dexter* (207)

If the writer, nevertheless, decides to obey the taboo and not reveal the most horrible murder scenes, he or she follows the convention that actual murder scenes are not depicted or shown (Cassuto 2009: 255). If the murder is revealed early on, it closes the final gap between the disgusting killer and the audience. Furthermore, the choice of keeping details of murders secret has also a practical function since it would be difficult to maintain the mysterious and exciting atmosphere crucial to crime fiction if readers saw the entire crime already in the beginning. There would be no interest in the detective’s work when the crime is reconstructed, and there would be no place left for sympathy, Cassuto (2009: 259) points out.
Problematically, even though writers usually try to avoid identifying readers with serial killers, it might be necessary if the killer is represented as the (anti)hero like. It becomes increasingly difficult for readers to imagine the hero actually killing anyone and therefore, as Cassuto (2009: 255) argues, Lecter’s later killings are not cannibalistic anymore, but all committed out of revenge or self-preservation. At first it might seem that nothing similar happens to Dexter, since he is all the time highlighting how he likes to kill, but in fact his killings also diminish significantly book by book. In the first novel where his special talent is introduced, he hunts and kills two other murderers. This continues in the second novel with two paedophiliac serial killers. However, already in the third novel he only has one successful hunt and shoots two others in the ending scene. Finally, the fourth novel breaks the pattern altogether. He hunts and kills only one victim, out of revenge and not satisfying the Harry code. Curiously, in the TV series Dexter kills one or two murderers per episode which makes him much more hungry for murder there than in the novels. Would Dexter seem too boring of a serial killer if his acts of vigilantism were not continuously shown? Perhaps the series needs additional material (which is random murders) to fill up the seasons and have enough episodes in them. Still, readers see simultaneously Dexter turn from a carefree single man into Rita’s husband and the father to her two children. Even though he personally insists that he is the same cold-blooded sociopath as ever, he keeps on having unexplainably warm feelings for the children, Deborah and even Rita. Whereas it is clear for the readers of Dexter, Cassuto notes that in Harris’ novels, the reader is never exposed to Lecter’s worst side, which is the joy he feels when he kills.

Anthony Burgess’ novel and Stanley Kubrick’s film, A Clockwork Orange (1962), is another example that Cassuto (2009: 256) offers about the complicated paths of identification with serial killers. Both in the novel and the film, the audience is tricked to identify with the sadistic antihero by depicting the people around him less human than they actually are. The antihero is a real human while the others are only twisted caricatures. Another approach is taken in Brett Easton Ellis’ American Psycho (1991) in which the audience cannot identify with anyone, neither with the killer nor the victims. Therefore the alienating atmosphere results in numbingly violent murder scenes where the killer and the victims are just as faceless. In sum, Cassuto (2009: 267) argues
that sympathy or the actual lack of it is the reason why most serial killers die in the end of the plot. Since there is no pity, hope or sympathy for them, there are no reasons to keep them alive. Dexter as a protagonist has the reader’s sympathies on his side, as well as the moral backbone of vigilantism to support him, which contribute to his survival from one novel to the next.
2. The Dexter novels and morality

I had been watching him for five weeks now. The Need had been prickling and teasing and prodding at me to find one, find the next, find him. For three weeks I had known he was it, he was next, we belonged to the Dark Passenger, he and I together. And that three weeks I had spent fighting the pressure, the growing Need, rising in me like a great wave that roars up and over the beach and does not recede, only swells more with every tick of the bright night’s clock.

Darkly Dreaming Dexter (5)

In this kind of passage, the reader might usually identify the narrator as a murderer or a criminal of some sort. But when the person feeling the need to kill is also a detective, and so a member of the police force, which is the case in the Dexter novels, the reader’s suspicions start to rise. How can the narrator be trusted, since he likes to play god on a regular basis? How can his actions be accepted and why does he have the right to decide who has the right to live? These are some of the problems Dexter faces. The morality of the Dexter novels will be analyzed from the perspective of their subgenre, since the subgenres in crime fiction have different moral codes, which makes their interpretations diverse. As Pyrhönen (1998: 17) points out, the ideas of detection, morals and crime are all treated differently in each variant. On the basis of the conventions of the genre, the originality of the novels is discussed as they have been praised for their imagination and novelty.2

The reader cannot avoid facing moral issues when reading the Dexter novels. Even the starting point where the protagonist is a monster, a sociopathic serial killer without a conscience, but also a detective in the Miami police department, can be confusing. In addition, he has adopted a code from his stepfather allowing him only to kill other murderers who have escaped justice. The reader immediately faces questions such as why Dexter has the right to kill others as a punishment for their crimes. Otherwise, how could it be acceptable to eliminate the murderers as a vigilante? It has

2 Praise for the Dexter novels on the first page of the latest one, Dexter by Design:
“Fast, furious and darkly funny. Lindsay is one of the most original voices in contemporary fiction” - Sunday Express
“It’s been years since there’s been a thriller debut as original as this one by Lindsay, who takes a tired subgenre and makes it as fresh as dawn. A gripping, deliciously offbeat novel that announces the arrival of a notable new talent” – Publishers Weekly
Additionally been argued that taking a moral interest in the Dexter novels is useless and humourless, since the series is based on irony (Tyree 2008). However, besides the readers’ questions, morality is an essential part of crime fiction. It is the only genre (perhaps in addition to religious literature) that often tries to make a distinction between right and wrong. Pyrhönen (1994: 83) emphasizes crime fiction’s therapeutic effect so that it relieves readers’ sense of guilt having participated in the cruel world of crime. It has the magical function religion used to have, and is said to be the only genre where it is appropriate to question the concepts of truth, justice and evil. Finally Dennis Porter (1986: 13) notes that people then may imitate the clear distinctions between right and wrong in crime fiction. Hopefully this is not the case with the readers of Dexter.

Even though the morals in hard-boiled fiction are far from as clear as in whodunit fiction, they still represent the difficulties in making complex moral decisions in an ethically unstable society (Pyrhönen 1994: 53). Part of the negative attitude towards ethical criticism comes from its previous neglect of literary form and tendency to moralize others, as Martha Nussbaum (1990: 172) argues. This might explain the negativity towards Dexter’s moral implications. Yet, all literature and not only crime fiction is strongly connected with fundamental questions, such as how people should live and whether such morals exist that could be separated from all other practical values, thus making moral interpretations possible in all cases (Nussbaum 1990: 168). Basing the argument on the moral nature of crime fiction, Pyrhönen forms her fundamental formal rule. The two questions that detective novels give rise to, who committed the crime (whodunit) and who is guilty, are inseparable. The detective is the character who combines the two, making him or her the textually embedded moral reader. Thus, the interpretations and reading activities made by the detective are very similar to the reader’s activity. Moreover, the detective has to form a holistic picture of the crime in order to solve it, so guilt and responsibility necessarily step into the picture (Pyrhönen 1998: 1).
2.1. Morality in hard-boiled fiction

Moral ambiguity is embedded in crime fiction from the very first page. There are always more negative events than good in the fictional worlds of hard-boiled fiction (Pyrhönen 1998: 142). Moreover, the detective’s role (as criminal or hero) and attitudes towards crime are extremely important. Even though in hard-boiled fiction the detective is no longer a protector of the weak as in whodunit, but rather might be lured by the evil, the ethical code of the novel still carries significance. Traditionally, as Pyrhönen points out (1994: 54) the ending is very meaningful and regarded as the final judgment, and the world almost collapses if the criminal wins. These conventional rules of the whodunit have often been ironized in hard-boiled fiction, just as the notion of crime as a game with good sportsmanship, classical dilemmas and traditional understandings of moral problems.

In addition, morality is represented fundamentally differently in the subgenres, Pyrhönen (1998: 153) notes. The ethics in whodunit are formed by a blend of immorality and the judgment of the criminal. As the novels themselves are puzzles, it makes the texts resemble a wolf chasing a deer. There are no moral complexities in the hunger of an animal, which then makes the world rather black and white. In hard-boiled fiction, however, the reader is invited to think about the moral issues and their narrative framework as the society and people are all untrustworthy. All things considered, there are no clear-cut ethics in crime fiction, other than that there has to be an ethical code, which leads to the conclusion that different rules cause different outcomes in the various subgenres.

In the traditional conception of hard-boiled morals, immorality is always present. This is exemplified even in Dexter’s existence, which in the harmonious world of whodunit would not be possible. On the other hand, the moral sanctions of the fictional world are invested in the detective who through his actions defines the moral code of the novel (Pyrhönen 1994: 60). The (private) detective is, in addition, between worlds as he or she is neither a police nor a civilian. He or she tries to abide by the law, but might have to break it to succeed. As Dexter is both a member of the police and a murderer, he similarly fluctuates between these worlds when protecting laws and simultaneously breaking them. In a way he protects the city by removing the killers from the streets, but
on the other hand he should also be locked up. Moreover, the detective is no longer necessarily a good hero. If the novel’s protagonist is a private detective, which is often the case in hard-boiled fiction, corruption might come into the picture if there are clients assigning the detective and paying for the job.

Femmes fatales are often included in the hard-boiled society and they represent anything but domestic female figures that are highly sexual, independent and dangerous characters (Horsley 2001: 210). However, even though there are no femmes fatales in the Dexter novels, in the hugely successful televised version such a role has been added to the second season of the series. There Dexter ends up cheating on his girlfriend with the arsonist and femme fatale Lila and almost dies when trying to break up with her. Does this possibly suggest that the TV series are more traditional in the subgenre than the novels? Lila’s character as the femme fatale, but also as the only female serial killer will be discussed further in the third part of the thesis.

According to Pyrhönen (1994: 61), the detective’s moral code becomes significant when the criminal is caught. Traditionally, the role changes from an investigator to a judge who has to use his or her own moral code to make the seemingly right decision. Even though Dexter is a monster and a vigilante, he keeps gathering evidence of the guilt of the ones he is about to eliminate. He is an unofficial judge, but a much more well informed one than the average murderer. Toughness and sensitivity as contradicting values are typical of a hard-boiled detective. This includes maintaining the self-discipline at all times and almost cutting himself of the world and highlighting his individualism and loneliness. Overall, the detective is said to represent a higher moral order and usually to have a series of loveable all-American qualities like independence, individualism, self-reliance and masculinity. He is the society’s only hope in the moral decadence of the time. Ironically, almost all of this applies to Dexter.

The other interpretation of hard-boiled morals stems from the analyses of Dashiell Hammett’s detective fiction (Pyrhönen 1994: 62). In addition to the already dubious morals of the hard-boiled world, it now becomes even more questionable on whose side the detective actually is. In this interpretation, moral complexities and uncertainties increase. The detective must reject all emotions as motivators and, thus, isolate him or herself from the world. Life is seen as a meaningless, arbitrary and
unpredictable series of events, which makes the detective’s attitudes highly cynical. No one can be happy in the world if they know it is evil and corrupt. All of these factors turn the protagonist into a machine. With his emotionless and monstrous self Dexter resembles, in fact, some kind of a machine. Finally, as Pyrhönen (1994: 63) states, even though detective fiction often concentrates on describing and critiquing the detective’s moral code, they very seldom go beyond that. Thus, no new ethical or cultural models are introduced, and this applies to the Dexter novels as well.

2.2. A detective and a murderer - a new variant in crime fiction?

Usually when detectives try to solve murders or other cases, they have not committed them themselves. Naturally there are exceptions that try to surprise the reader and break the genre conventions when the detective is revealed as guilty in the end, but in the Dexter novels this does not occur. The reader knows all the time who Dexter really is, and wants him to catch the real criminals who have killed innocent bystanders. However, he is still a murderer himself, a sociopathic monster who only pretends to be a normal, happy and nice co-worker at the laboratory of Miami police department. Many would see it contradictory to work at the police and then simultaneously eliminate murderers as a monstrous vigilante. In fact, Dexter benefits greatly from these contradictory roles. He feels he has to fulfil his urges and keep killing people, but as a member of the police he has access to databases and information he can use to gather the evidence required by the code. Combining these roles becomes, nevertheless, morally questionable, and this will be analyzed in the following paragraphs.

The detective and criminal have, according to Pyrhönen (1998: 9), a dyadic bond between them in their antagonistic relationship. The main roles of the detective, the criminal and the victim thus form a triangle (or a quadrangle if one of them is doubled). Even though Dexter joins both the groups of detectives and criminals when necessary, he cannot be both simultaneously. Thus, multiple triangles can be drawn based on the novels. Privately, Dexter is of course a monster and a murderer, which is in line with his true nature. His victims include the numerous Miami murderers who have not been incarcerated for some reason. Finally, the detectives in both cases are the same, the
Miami PD detectives who investigate the crimes whether they have been committed by Dexter or some other killer.

But in public, Dexter is a member of a group of detectives. The criminals are the same ones as Dexter’s victims, that is, murderers of all kinds. The roles of the victims are usually quite minor in the Dexter novels. Often the killer chooses random victims or random members of some groups like prostitutes or students. Interestingly, the books always focus on similar sociopathic murderers as Dexter. Other murders, like drunken or accidental killings, might be mentioned in passing, but the assumption is that every serial killer has a similar hunger and an urge to kill as Dexter. In reality, this cannot be the case or otherwise the prisons would be filled with all kinds of sociopathic serial killers. Thus, Dexter can easily identify with these killers and offer Deborah valuable insights into them. This seems to be an essential part of the plot construction because otherwise Dexter’s official job as a blood spatter analyst and the investigations on the murderers would not usually cross. Therefore it would be much harder for him to get caught up in the investigations and almost impossible for Lindsay to have such emotionally escalating endings with everyone’s life on the line.

Moreover, it is also possible for the detective sometimes to resemble the criminal in order to demonstrate the idea that anyone can turn bad or be lured by evil urges. According to Pyrhönen (1998: 171), the detective’s innate goodness and ethical values are meaningless as moral perseverance is only tested in action. This means that in hard-boiled crime fiction actions definitely speak louder than words. Thus, Dexter’s actions compared to his obviously amoral personality are analyzed in the following section. Moreover, the detective often has a double ethical role, which entails opposite characteristics in the protagonist. Such a character and his or her actions might from time to time be both moral or immoral, animal or human, good or bad, emotionless or emotional and so on (Pyrhönen 1998: 172).

Dexter navigates through these characteristics quite freely, which highlights his two contradicting roles as a murderer and a detective. When he acts upon the Harry code, his actions can in some sense be morally acceptable, but nonetheless legally wrong. But without the code, his actions would be completely immoral. He has a kind of animal inside him, which urges him to kill, but then he puts his human face on for other
people to see, know and like. Curiously, Gates (2010: 353) points out that modern fictional serial killers almost always hide behind this mask of normality, which means that they cannot have foreign, feminine or homosexual characteristics, just like Dexter or Hannibal Lecter. Nevertheless, Dexter does not feel emotions, but knows how people usually act when feeling sad, mad or in love, so he can fake such behaviour accordingly. Thus, it could be argued that unless someone is able to read his whole and authentic story only the positive and normal features of his behaviour can be seen, and that is exactly what he is aiming for.

In hard-boiled fiction in general, it can be sometimes difficult to distinguish the police from the criminals as the characters of a corrupt society are accustomed to changing from one role to another, as Pyrhönen notes (1998: 217). Even though Dexter’s actions can be questioned from the first murder on, he still is not as morally corrupt as Pyrhönen’s general definition of hard-boiled detectives might suggest. He has a strong moral code and stern rules for every action that is not accepted in society, and as an intelligent individual, he knows that breaking these rules (and crossing the ultimate limit to utterly forbidden actions) would mean the end for him. Thus, he is highly motivated to act according to his code and will not break it. Does this then make him and his actions altogether more acceptable?

This leads to the question whether Dexter is completely evil or not. Even though he evidently is a cold-blooded murderer, he also tries to use his or the ‘Dark Passenger’s’ evil powers in a good way. He often shares his insights with his sister to help in the investigations correlating strongly with the hard-boiled convention where the detective tries to become one with the criminal. Pyrhönen (1998: 35) calls this the “I am you” approach, since the detective tries to get into the criminal’s head and anticipate his or her behaviour. However, Dexter’s likeable surface as a nice co-worker who likes children and is a seemingly genuinely social is simply deceiving. Readers, who ignore or blindly believe this, miss the layer of embedded deception in the novels.

Moreover, it would be interesting to analyze whether what he has become is Dexter’s fault or not. Having seen his mother’s chainsaw murder at a very young age and having spent days with the decomposing corpse in a shipping container has supposedly created the Dark Passenger in him, thus making him the monster he is. As
morals are socially formed, did Dexter have better morals before the traumatic event? When in the third novel, *Dexter in the Dark*, he loses the Passenger momentarily, he starts to feel some emotions and even tries to kill a murderer without succeeding. Even though he does not have the Passenger commanding him to kill people, he tries to do it and does not question it in any way. Thus, it can be seen that his amorality is not, in fact, completely tied to the Passenger. On the other hand, this does not apply to the televised Dexter since after analyzing his behaviour in therapy, he does not feel the urge to kill anymore but does eliminate his mother’s murderer out of revenge. Nevertheless, the difference might be explained by the lack of the Dark Passenger in the TV series, it is not nearly as important figure for Dexter as in the novels. The series perhaps does not want to take that strong a stand on the mental processes of sociopathic murderers.

Nevertheless, as Dexter’s stepchildren Astor and Cody seem to have Passengers in them and are starting to show signs of their murderous side personalities, they function as prototypes of what Dexter was as a child. Their father abused them, which apparently traumatized them for life. Thus, in the third novel Dexter starts noticing these tendencies and understands that he has to mentor them, that is, teach them the Harry code. Impatient as children often are, they try to kill the neighbour’s cat but get caught. They do not understand that being sorry for having got caught does not qualify as an acceptable excuse in the normal world. If the abuse has turned them into similar amoral monsters, how have they been able to avoid all socialization and ethical upbringing that are normal in society? Still, maybe this is possible in real life since sociopaths and serial killers do actually exist.

According to Pyrhönen (1998: 14), there are two ways of dealing with guilt in crime fiction, breaking the law and breaking the moral code. What is morally wrong might not be that according to the law and vice versa. In addition, the moral code is actually the more fundamental one of the two, as the detective has to come to a conclusion in the end what is morally acceptable. Thus, it is legally wrong for Dexter to eliminate murderers, but perhaps morally acceptable as they would probably only continue killing seemingly innocent people. Would other kind of vigilantism then be accepted also? Curiously, in many American TV series vigilantism is judged by embedding proper explanations for the criminals’ actions or actually proving him or her
innocent. Thus, the vigilante or the avenger is left with a guilty conscience and a prison sentence. However, in the Dexter novels his victims are portrayed quite one-sidedly, since they are only judged by the murders they have committed, but Dexter remains the only one of them to fix the flaws in the system that allows murderers to walk free.

Pyrhönen (1998: 2) additionally addresses the question whether the detective’s perspective and interpretations affect the reader or not. The reader is, nevertheless, invited to analyze the events through the eyes of the narrator. As Dexter is seemingly untrustworthy as a protagonist and a narrator, does he then have a dubious effect on the reader as well? Even though he manages to deceive almost everyone else in the novels, the reader knows all the time who he really is, and that everyone else but murderers are safe from him. Thus, he might not be that untrustworthy after all. Then again, Booth (1988: 142) adds to the debate his ideas of nonce beliefs and fixed values in evaluating the ethical attitudes of an implied author. Fixed values are facts offered by the narrator on the actions, behaviour and conventions of the fictional society. Thus, the narrative is dependent on them to reveal the author’s attitudes towards morality, and vigilantism for example in Dexter’s case. Nonce beliefs are somewhat more hidden values that the reader finds out only when reading the novel. So, the reader might at first be shocked by Dexter’s seeming amorality only to find out that he actually follows a rigorous code when killing people.

2.3. The significance of the Harry code

Harry, my wise foster father, had taught me the careful balance of Need and Knife. He had taken a boy in whom he saw the unstoppable need to kill - no changing that - and Harry had moulded him into a man who only killed the killers; Dexter the no-bloodhound, who hid behind a human-seeming face and tracked down the truly naughty serial killers who killed without a code. And I would have been one of them, if not for the Harry Plan. There are plenty of people, who deserve it, Dexter, my wonderful foster-cop-father had said.

Dearly Devoted Dexter (174)

Among the first things a reader might notice in the Dexter series are the ever-present rules of the Harry code. This exterior ethical code, taught to Dexter by his late
stepfather, enables him only to kill people who deserve to be killed. The reader will soon realize how important it actually is, since it is repeated at the beginning of every novel, thus reminding the reader of the rules elsewhere in the text, possibly needlessly so. However, if Dexter were a real sociopath\(^3\) killing whomever he met, there would not be a need for such a code. Thus, one could ask why Lindsay has felt the need to control his protagonist and make his actions justified as a kind of vigilante or hero. Still, as he has stated in many interviews, it was his intention to make Dexter as likable a protagonist as possible (Showtime 2010). This might be one of the reasons why he has incorporated the code into his novels. Otherwise Dexter might get caught, which would end the plot line in prison. Horsley (2001: 201) highlights the nature of serial killers as fictional players who need good and cunning tactics to succeed in the skilful game of murder. Like Dexter’s survival tactics, the Harry code, the outcome of the plot depends on the bluffing skills of the killer. One of these killer instincts is the skill to recognize the right time and place for the murder. Performance in these situations is the key element for them, and if they happen to choose the wrong arena for the kill, they will end up with serious problems. Dexter tries to kill the janitor Jaworski in the first novel without sufficient planning and preparation, which the code demands, and almost gets caught.

Moreover, without the code the story might not be as believable, but most importantly not as accepted by the readers, which would affect the popularity of the novels. If Dexter killed seemingly innocent bystanders or random Miami residents, he would not seem half as nice. Perhaps readers find it easier to accept his morally questionable actions, since they are supposed to aim at some greater good, a new Miami free from psychopathic killers. Readers do not want Dexter to get caught, since this would end all the joy of him hiding his true nature, simultaneously killing and putting away other criminals. He may have such an insight into their murderous worlds that other detectives simply cannot have, which makes him an essential member of the crime fighting unit of Miami. Philippa Gates (2010: 353) explains that the Western culture mythologizes thief characters like Robin Hood and does not mind them escaping the

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\(^3\) **Sociopath**, a person with a personality disorder manifesting in extreme antisocial behaviour and a lack of conscience. **Psychopath**, a person suffering from chronic mental disorders leading to violent or abnormal social behaviour. (Oxford American Dictionaries)
consequences of their crimes. Even though she claims that this does not apply to serial killers as they usually frighten readers, Dexter breaks this convention. When he kills, it is simultaneously a crime but also an attempt to make the world a better place. Maybe therefore he is able to continue his doings despite numerous obstacles during the four novels.

Nevertheless, ignoring the supposedly noble justifications of Dexter’s code, his nice-guy image, his gathering evidence and eliminating even worse people from this life, who is he to decide who lives and who deserves to die? Like other murderers in fiction, he takes lives, so why would he be any better than them? As Pyrhönen (1998: 177) states, the main function of the protagonist or detective’s moral code is to form a line between the barely accepted and absolutely forbidden actions. Breaking this rule means simultaneously crossing the ultimate moral line, which would then destroy the protagonist’s sense of self. This can be applied to Dexter, since he sticks to the Harry code no matter what happens. Without it he is lost and cannot function properly. Later some incidents from the novels will be discussed, where Dexter is forced to make moral decisions on people’s lives, and always acts according to his Harry code, and when he accidentally happens to break the code, he is (very uncharacteristically for a sociopath) extremely shocked. In sum, it seems that the popularity and acceptance of the books where the protagonist is a sociopathic killer can be explained by Dexter’s somewhat acceptable vigilantism and actions against the evil in the world. The vigilantism serves as what Pyrhönen terms the ultimate moral line in Dexter, which the Harry code protects.

Thus, it could be argued that the American core value of individualism goes hand in hand with the kind of vigilantism of which Dexter is an example. If society does not function properly and imprison criminals, then everyone has the right to protect himself or herself and do what is necessary to protect others. It is also a fact that the death penalty is still used in many states in the United States, thus in some sense making it culturally acceptable to eliminate murderers and other perpetrators. In addition to the vivid descriptions of Miami life and nature, the idealism behind the novels is thoroughly American. For instance, the core American values that are clearly present in the Dexter novels are individualism, personal freedom, efficiency, technology and romantic love,
among others (Hopkins 2010). Individualism and personal freedom are directly tied to Dexter’s possible existence, since he is considered to have the right to be himself, even if that meant murdering numerous people. He is free to do whatever he wants, but of course the societal rules apply to him too. He performs his murderous hobby as cleanly and efficiently as possible and uses technology to help him privately and at work. Curiously, even though he does not have emotions, he has to act as if he felt something. Thus, he takes Rita as his girlfriend and later marries her to help him adapt to the society’s norms and polish his nice-guy image.

If it is compulsory to have a moral code in crime fiction novels, then what happens to the texts that do not have that? Can such crime fiction exist or be popular? It might be that this problem mainly occurs in the subgenre of metaphysical detective fiction, which questions all the basic rules in crime fighting. Pyrhönen (1998: 142) highlights the importance of such a code in the genre, as the whole genre is dependent on laws and norms to succeed. The detective’s roles as a judge or an avenger, in the end of the plot, all stem from this underlying morality. Furthermore, the reader pays close attention to the actions of the detective, which then form the moral code of the investigator. Similarly in Dexter’s world, his actions speak for themselves. Everything he does with the killings is dependent on the laws of his own moral code. If it did not exist, it would change the novels altogether.

Pyrhönen (1998: 166) notes that it is also the reader’s task to evaluate the narrator’s trustworthiness and how their view differs from the other viewpoints or the reality of the narrative. Thus, it could be argued that readers who consider Dexter a reliable enough protagonist and narrator (Dexter is always the first-person narrator when he is present) find the reading experience pleasing and exciting. However, even though there are no clear or general ethical rules in crime fiction, some general values are evident. They include such widely accepted central values such as justice is needed, human life is valuable, bad actions must be punished and truth is important. It might be considered morally suspicious that so many readers want to take part in the world of crime and be seduced by crime fiction (Pyrhönen 1998: 142). All in all, the Dexter novels have a strong enough moral framework to keep readers at ease and make them accept Dexter’s actions. Thus, it remains questionable, how original the novels actually
are as crime fiction when they have only one deviation from the mainstream and rely so heavily on traditional and American morals.

As suggested earlier, the Harry code has been implanted so deeply into Dexter’s mind that he cannot break it in (almost) any case. In the following paragraphs two morally critical situations will be discussed, after which I come to the conclusion that the code equals Dexter’s survival in society and cannot therefore be broken. When in the fourth novel Dexter breaks the code by murdering an innocent man, he happens to get out of the situation and the suspicions of the police only due to pure luck.

At the end of the first novel, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, Dexter faces a hard choice between sparing and saving Deborah’s life, or that of his biological sociopath brother Brian. He has just found out that he even has a brother, but that they are exactly the same - two sociopathic murderers. The situation has escalated to Brian kidnapping Deborah and tying her to a table in the same container where the police found Dexter and Brian with their murdered mother’s corpse when they were only three and four years old. Brian wants to kill Deborah with the help of Dexter, but even without emotions and a conscience he feels hesitant.

‘Yes’, he said, and all the cold happy fury of the Dark Passenger was in his voice now. ‘I knew you’d figure it out. This time we do it together,’ he said.

I shook my head, but not very convincingly. ‘I can’t,’ I said.

‘You have to,’ he said and we were both right.

*Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (161)

His brother has no code to follow and, thus, cannot understand why Dexter is not able to kill his sister. Dexter tries to think the situation through, but continues to return to the question what Harry would say about the situation. Eventually, he chooses Deborah and Brian escapes. He cannot break the code and kill his sister, even though the Passenger in him would like to follow Brian’s order. Thus, it could be argued that Dexter is always in control, or if he is not, the code is always present. This is the main difference between Dexter and Brian, which is only due to Harry having adopted Dexter to his family and educated him in the art and rules of killing, without revealing to Dexter his personal history. Brian, who was separated from Dexter by Harry, has moved from one family to
another finally transforming to his murderous self without any guidance. Thus, their fates are very different. The code enables Dexter to function in some sense as a productive member of the society whereas Brian is plainly immoral.

Moreover, Dexter’s curious adoption process makes Harry’s character extremely questionable since he decides at the crime scene only to save one of the brothers and leave the other one for other foster families. Who would separate two brothers from each other after such a traumatic event and how would that even be legal? This process is discussed and dramatized even further in the TV-series where Harry has actually had an affair with Dexter’s biological mother and even caused her death. Some might even suggest that his code has only enabled Dexter to be the murderous sociopath he wants to be and that he has not in fact done anything to prevent his son from committing murders. Curiously, the fourth novel reveals through Dexter’s flashback that Harry actually regretted his actions and for shaping Dexter into what he is. Dexter reminisces over the day he was allowed to commit his first murder and eliminate the nurse that was trying to poison Harry.

‘No problems I told him’, and blurted out, ‘It was wonderful.’ And seeing the pain on his face and thinking I could help I added, ‘Thank you, Dad.’

Harry closed his eyes again and turned his head away. For six or seven breaths, he stayed like that, and then, so softly I almost couldn’t hear him, he said, ‘What have I done… Oh Jesus, what have I done…’

_Dexter by Design_ (271)

Before this, there has been no sign of Harry being anything other than decisive, encouraging and authoritative when it comes to Dexter. Again, the TV-series takes this twist even further by revealing that Harry committed suicide out of the guilt that he had raised a coldblooded murderer. In the series Dexter is extremely shocked like a normal person and not a sociopath, which leads to him rejecting Harry altogether and only keeping the code. True to his more sociopathic nature in the novels, Dexter talks about this event with Harry like any other fishing trip, for example. The quote, nevertheless, undermines Harry’s credibility yet again, since it can be asked what he thought Dexter’s training would then lead to. If a father were raising a sociopathic son to eliminate murderers who have escaped the justice system, why would he turn out to be any
different? Interestingly, it is revealed already in the second televised season that Harry felt guilty for raising Dexter to be the vigilante killer he is, but this theme is only introduced in the fourth novel. It can then be asked whether it was Lindsay’s original idea to make Harry regret his past or whether he has just borrowed the idea from the TV series.

However, as Dexter seems to have no feelings or attachments of any kind to other people, like a seemingly true sociopath, he has to make a somewhat rational decision on who lives and who dies and is only able to do that based on the code. This represents Pyrhönen’s (1998: 14) idea of the detective deciding in the end what truly is important according to his personal moral code. As Nussbaum (1990: 175) questions the trustworthiness of emotionally unstable narrators, one could ask whether this applies to narrators completely without emotions, like Dexter. Does it make him more or less trustworthy? Can monsters make human decisions? Still, due to the code, Dexter is able to maintain his disguise, keep his job and his sister.

A similar situation with the first one occurs in the end of the second novel, *Dearly Devoted Dexter*. They have been trying to catch doctor Danko, the revenge killer after his old military colleagues. Dexter finds out where he is keeping the kidnapped Doakes and Dexter briefly ponders the situation if he were the first to find Doakes alive.

Once again I found the entire cellar of my brain flooded with ecstatic temptation. Sergeant Doakes, my nemesis, tied up inside, gift-wrapped and delivered to me in the perfect setting. All the tools and supplies I could want, no one around for miles - and when I was done I only had to say, ‘Sorry, I got there too late.’ The idea was intoxicating, and I believe I actually swayed a little as I tasted it. Of course it was just a thought, and I would certainly not do anything of the kind, would I? Certainly not, not me. Why, I was a moral beacon in the spiritual desert of South Florida.

*Dearly Devoted Dexter* (315)

It is almost ironical, how Dexter describes himself as the moral beacon in a spiritual desert mimicking the very ideals behind hard-boiled fiction, where the detective is the society’s only hope in the moral decay (Pyrhönen 1994: 61). As Dexter is a highly questionable hero and only partly fits this mould, the purpose is to ironize the genre conventions, but as Dexter himself states, he could not possibly kill Doakes, since it would greatly violate the code. Nevertheless, it is quite problematic that Dexter over and
over again repeats the rules and the fact that he can never break them, as rather few people have indisputable moral codes that they would never break in any situation. For instance, many might think that they would never be able to take someone else’s life, but if they had to choose between their own or their children’s lives and some stranger’s, who would they really choose or save? Thus, when Dexter is only allowed to kill murderers, would he still be allowed to kill in order to protect his own life? This remains to be seen, since there are no such examples in the novels, which would put his morals to a greater test than in these examples. That is, his morals are quite traditional as they are thoroughly based on the code, and as the Harris mould proved, Dexter is also a quite conventional serial killer.

Finally however, the fourth novel introduces an interesting side plot where Dexter actually breaks the code and regrets immensely for doing that. He hunt and kills Doncevic, the man suspected for Deborah’s stabbing only later to find out that his victim was, in fact, innocent.

This really should not have bothered me. Dexter does what he must and the only reason he does it to the well deserving is because of Harry’s training. For all the Dark Passenger cares, it could just as easily be random. The relief would be just as sweet for us. The way I choose is merely the Harry-imposed icy logic of the knife.

But it was possible that Harry’s voice was in me deeper than I had ever thought, because the idea that Doncevic might be innocent was sending me into a tailspin.

_Dexter by Design_ (141)

This passage reveals numerous problems with Dexter’s character. As he states himself, he does not care whom he kills, but irrationally he is shocked by the idea that the code might be broken. Furthermore, he then feels obliged to catch (and eliminate) Deborah’s actual stabber, Weiss, and even chases the man to Havana and around Miami without success. For Dexter to state that he does not actually care who he kills seems a bit incredible. Those would be the words of a true sociopath, but what kind of a grown-up sociopath would follow someone else’s set of rules in every decision he makes. Dexter spends so much time pondering the code and discussing the allowed solutions that it can be seen here again how the actions and descriptions of Lindsay’s characters are often contradictory. After noticing that it has become more difficult to maintain Dexter’s sociopathic personality and behaviour (as discussed in the introduction), the writer
perhaps tries to fix some of his flaws and describe Dexter as tougher and more amoral than he actually is. Still, the quote is in itself already conflicting when Dexter first says that he does not care who lives or dies but in the next moment he is panicking. In sum, an actual sociopath would not need a code to live by, probably would not obey it, and then would not be shocked when it is broken. Thus, how radical and amoral can Dexter claim to be in the end?

2.4 Dexter’s morals

As discussed earlier, though Dexter seems first like an immoral and obnoxious character, he has a strict moral code guiding all his actions. Thus, the question remains, whether it is problematic or not that Dexter is, after all, a likeable protagonist. The reader identifies with the protagonist serial killer and does not want him to get caught, since that would end all the fun the reader might get from his vigilante trips at night. Has the text then lured the reader into thinking that killing is acceptable if you have the right motivation? Probably adult (and civilized) readers have no trouble finding the encompassing moral code, when it is repeated numerous times in every book, and will be able to take Dexter’s sarcastic voice as it should be understood, maybe mostly as entertainment and an alternative way to look at the American justice system. Since he deals with its worst flaws, the novels could also raise questions in (American) readers how could the justice system be made better.

The novels take no hard-and-fast stands on any moral issues and, as Pyrhönen (1994: 63) has stated, are like most crime fiction novels that describe and criticize the protagonist’s moral code but do not go any further to suggest cultural or ethical models. It would not be rational to consider Dexter as an ethical example, since his way of life could not function as a tenable moral code. If people started to act like Dexter and kill others who they felt did not have the right to live, there would not be many of us left in a few years’ time. Nonetheless, for younger readers and especially TV viewers the radical theme of portraying serial murderers in a somewhat positive light might be too much. For instance, after the school shootings in Jokela, the Dexter TV series was not aired on the Finnish TV. Perhaps the decision was based on the fact that the series’ idolization of serial killers did not suit for an evening of national grief. Still, some parents might not
appreciate it altogether if their children idolized a sociopathic killer, but therefore the novels and the TV series are of course aimed at an older public than children.

However, there is virtually no critical literature available on Jeff Lindsay and Dexter, which has made this chapter (and the thesis) quite difficult to write. Furthermore, when more time passes, the meaning and significance of the novels can be more properly analyzed. Now when the latest and fifth novel came out only this September, it is too early to say whether they will have an effect on the genre, its readers or even the American culture in general, or whether they will be forgotten already in the near future. The quality of the novels unfortunately fluctuates rather much and some the character inconsistencies will be discussed further in the following section of the thesis. The most serious problem, as stated already in the first chapter, is that Lindsay is unable to maintain Dexter’s sociopathic behaviour and keeps it up only in descriptions. Almost like Harris’ Hannibal Lecter, Dexter also turns into a family man whose nocturnal adventures with corpses diminish book by book. It is one thing to create a sociopathic protagonist, but if he is cast in a strict moral code like Dexter and over and over again seems to have warm and protective feelings, everything is not as it is described to be.

In addition, it might be interesting to find out Lindsay’s motivations behind wanting to make his protagonist a likeable sociopathic murderer, but still incorporating a strict moral code controlling his every action. Was it originally his idea, or has he been forced to incorporate it later to make the morals of the novels stronger and Dexter more acceptable? Without the code, would he alienate his readers and be forced to eliminate Dexter for his immorality and dislike? These questions are yet to be answered.
3. Gender considerations in the Dexter novels

A survey of the female characters in the Dexter novels reveals interesting details. At first it feels like Lindsay would be writing from a post-feminist and post-racial viewpoint (as Maureen T. Reddy 2003: 205 defines it), since neither gender nor race is significantly problematized in his works. None of the women seem to have problems with their sex, and the female detectives represent a realistic gender division in the police force. All of them are, in addition, described to be beautiful in somewhat stereotypical ways, even Astor who is a young girl. However, analyzing the representation of the women more carefully, Dexter’s world is not as equal as it at first seems. Therefore I will first take a look at the historical development of female characters and detectives in crime fiction and thereafter analyze individually the female characters in the Dexter novels.

As Reddy (2003: 191) states, even though women have been written out of the history of crime fiction, they have been there as long as men. The first female detectives were introduced in the 19th century with their roots already in the Gothic novels of the late 1700s, as Adrienne E. Gavin (2010: 259) notes. The road from thereon was not easy in the 20th century either, when the famous hard-boiled novelist Raymond Chandler stated that the detective has to be a man for the story to succeed. Furthermore, male writers created eagerly male detectives, as did the first female novelists as well (Reddy 2003: 193). However, before the actual female detectives, crime stories featured many female auxiliaries who were assigned to help their men, brothers or fathers solve mysteries. The characters followed the general change in attitudes towards women and their involvement in the society in the early 20th century, and the beauty of these women was often highlighted in the narrative, which can be seen in Jeff Lindsay’s novels too (Craig 1986: 79). Still, when the hard-boiled subgenre was born, female detectives became even rarer, as Reddy (2003: 193) explains. They were more than often incompetent amateurs, or then plainly insignificant minor characters. Moreover, at the time women could not be cast in the roles of private detectives when there were no women in the police force in reality either. Thus, when the lonely male figures become
the centrepieces for hard-boiled fiction, women are turned into seductive and dangerous criminals or lovable nurturing helpers.

Pyhönen (1994: 89) explains this duality by stating that in fantasy and in the hard-boiled world, the violent rejection of women is possible. Thus, women become a blend of hostility and desire, which represents a central area of anxiety in the hard-boiled world. The birth of hard-boiled fiction coincided with the new status of women, which enabled them to be economic and social competitors with men but also the target of their sexual desires and a symbol of social popularity. Heilbrun (1986: 4) notes that therefore the trend of tough men and man-eating or annoying women was introduced, and Craig (1986: 130) specifies that the novels often featured a compulsory female character (which still applies to much modern crime fiction) whose professionalism was very inconsistent. One moment she would be described as an independent investigator, whereas in the next she would turn into a helpless victim. On the other hand, when different female characters were created, their extreme toughness and aggression would turn the female detectives into caricatures. Others then tried to compensate for their feminine weaknesses or take their independence too far and risk their professional safety by, for example, going to hunt criminals without backup or telling others where they are (Craig 1986: 144).

Panek (2003: 166) recognizes the problem by stating that originally there were fears of female detectives and police officers endangering their male counterparts by being weaker, hence the need to overcompensate their weaknesses. Interestingly, going on missions without back-up is the kiss of death in the Dexter novels where the plot keeps repeating itself with detectives that try to redeem themselves and save their careers end up getting killed by the murderers when they have been too arrogant to call for backup. The fates of detectives LaGuerta and Coulter both are examples of this. Nevertheless, the 1960s brought a change to the cartoonish female detectives, as Reddy (2003: 200) states, but no black women were cast in the detective role until the 1990s (like Alexander McCall Smith’s Precious Ramotswe in Botswana with the No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency from 1998 on). Even nowadays the right to work of the female detectives is questioned in fiction, and most probably in reality as well, and their authority is challenged. Deborah often faces the problem too. Especially in the fourth
novel, she goes to question a shocked witness who refuses to take her seriously due to her sex. Curiously, the witness is also a woman.

3.1. Feminist readings of crime fiction

As Pyrhönen (1994: 109) explains, feminist critics have long accused the detective fiction genre of being fundamentally conservative. They traditionally pay attention to how gender is represented and constructed in the genre. Interestingly, when the protagonist is a female detective, historically her success rate as a crime solver has collapsed significantly. Thus, how could female detectives succeed when the usual detective characteristics are associated with men (Pyrhönen 1994: 110)? One solution to this problem could be, as in Jeff Lindsay’s novels, to make the female detective as seemingly masculine as possible. Even though Deborah is very much a woman and a detective, she has so few feminine qualities that by considering only her behaviour and language, for example, one could imagine her to be a man just as easily. As Cassuto (2009: 188) points out, sometimes the detective’s sex is little discussed or insignificant as with Deborah or Thomas Harris’ Clarice Sterling. Detective LaGuerta, on the other hand, is very feminine and acts and dresses accordingly. Unfortunately, she is completely incompetent in her work and a public joke among her employees. Gender is after all a more significant factor for female hard-boiled detectives, and there have been as many different female detective characters as there have been novelists, who then might or might not resemble the hard-boiled tough guy stereotype (Cassuto 2009: 188).

Incompetence will finally cost LaGuerta her life, but Klein (1988, according to Pyrhönen 1994: 110) acknowledges the problem when she argues that female detectives are often discredited as women, as detectives or as both. By this she means that the detective might be emphasized only as a woman (like detective LaGuerta) or as a detective (like Deborah) so that she will probably fail professionally, emotionally or financially in the end. Even though it would fit the stereotype perfectly, Deborah does not indeed fail emotionally in the novels despite the fact that she is a member of the police. In the second novel she finds love in Kyle Chutsky, a mysterious governmental officer, and they stay together from there on. Still, their relationship is not much discussed, only when either of them is in mortal danger as Kyle in the second novel and
Deborah in the fourth. Pyrhönen (1994: 110) continues to argue that unlike in Deborah’s case, historically the detection plot involving young and single female detectives has been overrun by the conventional marriage plot where the woman returns to the traditional role of a wife even when she would have started as a modern and independent female detective.

Moreover, Reddy (2003: 194) analyzes the problem of uninteresting and one-sided female characters. During the first half of the 20th century the social demand forced women and therefore also female detectives to be marriageable, young and beautiful. This turned the few detecting characters there were to lame and light-headed caricatures. In addition, in hard-boiled fiction women are and were usually considered as “the other” that has to be contained and controlled, which then made the female criminals more dangerous than the men as a direct threat to the patriarchal society. Rowland (2001: 16) states that in detective fiction masculinity has usually been associated with heroic characteristics like reason, objectivity, intelligence, action and judgment. Therefore women are left with opposite qualities such as passivity, subjectivity, foolishness and the need for masculine guidance. Even though in fact genders cannot be distinguished like this, especially not without their cultural contexts, in fiction the feminine is not described as something else, but simply as non-masculine. Rowland goes even as far as naming the feminine the dark side of western masculinity, which is also the birthplace of crime fiction.

Problematically, Reddy (2003: 194) claims that as women are socialized to the same patriarchal society, they identify with the male readership too. When the audience is usually male dominated, the characters and plots are aimed for them, as Reddy states. It could be speculated how true this actually is nowadays, since Pyrhönen (1994: 81) argues that crime fiction is, in fact, the only genre read widely by both men and women. Cassuto (2009: 191) continues the discussion by questioning that the female detectives might promote patriarchy even more by seducing female readers to the masculine genre. He points out that it is not exactly clear whether the genre changes or not when the detective’s sex is switched from male to female. Is the detective considered to be masculine even when she is a woman, or is a new type of a detective born? Curiously, as the televised Dexter’s first two seasons were originally shown on Finnish TV in one of
the major channels (Nelonen), the third season has been moved to a smaller sister channel (namely to JIM) which already in its name suggests that the channel is aimed for a more masculine public. Its other programs include police shows, programs about hunting and martial arts, to name but a few, and feature a strong male voice announcing the programs and repeating the channel’s name every now and then. Is there any research suggesting that the majority of the Finnish Dexter viewers are male so that the move from one channel to another would be worth it? Or is the assumption that female viewers do not mind watching shows from a “masculine” channel, but moving the series to a “female” channel (like Liv, for example) would put off most of the male viewers? Thus, the debate of the intended audience’s gender continues.

However, Pyrhönen (1994: 111) notes that despite of the period when the novels were written, their attitudes usually reflect those of earlier days making their values and social connections rather out of date. This only supports the argument of the genre’s conservatism discussed earlier. In addition, the professionalism of the female detectives in the Dexter novels could be questioned. Even though Deborah is usually described as an excellent police officer, she still needs continuous help from her brother to solve the cases, and when she starts working without backup, she is soon badly stabbed. Moreover, detective LaGuerta cannot make a single wise decision about the cases she is working on and lets Dexter knowingly mislead her. Does this enforce the conception of equally skilled male and female detectives or only highlight the weakness of women in the police force?

Nevertheless, the latter part of the 20th century introduced two new subgenres in crime fiction, the feminist and the lesbian detective novel, as Pyrhönen (1994: 111) states. They try to break the genre conventions, create new value systems and question the nature of authority in general, not just that of the female detective. For the feminist crime novelists, the crime itself is linked with wider social problems, such as the continuing oppression of women. Moreover, in the feminist hard-boiled world, the corruption is gender specific. Thus, if the criminal is a woman, she is not just plain evil but trying to revenge or end her own oppression, but as Reddy (2003: 198) argues, she might also simply be a patriarchal enforcer. Jeff Lindsay’s works do not belong to this subgenre simply because his novels are not that revolutionary or his characters aware of
their possible patriarchal oppression. As Cassuto (2009: 188) has it, feminist critics have usually ignored the works of male novelists, which also applies to Jeff Lindsay. Moreover, the introduction of “tart-noir” and “girls just want to have fun” subgenres in the mid-1990s brought about the idea of an age of post-feminism in crime fiction. The soon popular belief claimed that all feminist goals had been achieved and women should stop being so serious and have fun again, with men too. The idealism gave birth to novels that are both post-feminist and post-race conscious (Reddy 2003: 206). Lindsay supports this idealism in the sense that his novels problematize neither gender nor race.

Even though many novels might be considered post-feminist in that their characters seem equal, Reddy (2003: 199) argues that there remain significant differences between the treatment of female and male detectives. As the lonely male protagonists are the corner stone of hard-boiled fiction, the loneliness of a woman is a different issue. The solitude for a female detective is not an honour, as for men, but an inner flaw. Perhaps this stems from the historical definition of women by their relationships to men. Often female detectives try to cure the loneliness by creating strong personal and professional friendships (Reddy 2003: 198). Deborah suffers from this flaw, since she has difficulties in her professional relationships (especially with LaGuerta), and in finding romantic love. In the TV series that highlights this flaw in her even more Dexter’s sociopathic brother Brian fools Deborah into falling in love with him so that he is able to kidnap her and set a trap for Dexter. When the televised Deborah then asks Brian how he has been able to exploit her so, he just answers that she was looking for love too desperately. However, Cassuto (2009: 193) states that the current trend in crime fiction makes novelists create more androgynous characters making female and male detectives have common characteristics.

Violence is another factor that separates the detectives from one another. Whereas it is acceptable for a man to act violently as a police, it does not suit female detectives. Naturally there are exceptions to this convention, like Sara Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski, Marcia Muller’s Sharon McCone and Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone who all were fictional but influential hard-boiled female detectives of the 1980s. As Gavin (2010: 264) notes, they use guns, are physically active and athletic, kill when they have to and deal with attacks from men. As urban, single and intelligent, these female
detectives have without a doubt had a strong effect on future detectives. Nevertheless aside from these exceptions, Heilbrun (1986: 7) claims that aggressive women frighten everyone, and therefore Reddy (2003: 199) states that for a feminist detective violence is only an alternative. The detective will examine its meaning and ultimately prefer not to use it, if possible. Unlike their male counterparts, they are not interested in guns and recognize violence’s lasting effect. Furthermore, violence is only accepted as a means for protecting on oneself or others. The triumph is not glorified. This less violent trend might be explained by the transformation of feminist hard-boiled crime fiction to “humanistic crime fiction” (Gavin 2010: 267). It focuses more on social and human issues with help from psychology. In fact, when it comes to Deborah, she does not act violently but to protect someone’s life, besides the occasional arm punch on Dexter, but Astor is another story.

Moreover, a common problem modern fictional female detectives face is according to Gavin (2010: 268) the contradiction between their profession and motherhood (or family). Possibly by making Deborah feel uncomfortable around children, Lindsay does not even consider her as a possible mother and saves the readers the trouble as well. This represents yet another clear contradiction between the characters and roles of Deborah (primarily a detective, secondarily a woman) and Rita (primarily a mother figure), which will be discussed next.

3.2. Dexter’s women

After looking more deeply into the representation and significance of Lindsay’s female characters, it cannot be overlooked that there are strikingly few of them that have meaningful functions in the story, even though none of the women seem to have any problems with their femininity. The women in Dexter’s immediate family, namely Deborah, Rita and Astor, are cast in the considerable female roles, and that is almost where the list ends. Detective LaGuerta has a significant, but a short role as Deborah’s commanding officer in the first novel, but besides her, and the at times mentioned “lab rat” Camilla Fig, the novels feature only a handful of other minor female side characters, such as Astor and Cody’s teachers, babysitters, prostitutes and other female victims. It might sound rather demeaning and possessive to label the female characters in the
Dexter novels as Dexter’s women, but all of the significant female characters are, one way or another, under his influence or possession.

Especially the lack of female murderers or serial killers is problematic. All other serial killers are men besides Dexter’s very first victim, the Nurse as she is called. Naturally, there might be other female serial killers among his victims, but they are never mentioned. Astor, however, is another exception to the rule but her characteristic weaknesses are discussed later. In this respect the TV series is more equal, since the simple most heinous character of the second season is the arsonist femme fatale Lila who ends up killing Dexter’s nemesis Doakes. This enables Dexter to eliminate her, as the rules of the code have been satisfied. Besides being completely over-sexualized and an extremely annoying and incomprehensible character, she is the exact copy of the traditional femme fatale, as Abbott (2002: 138) has it. Like Lila, femmes fatales are often added to stories to stimulate human behaviour (in the TV series Lila functions as the reminder for Dexter why he wants to stay and share his life with Rita and the children) and to represent male fantasies and fears (a dangerous and uncontrollable woman who is overtly sexual), but in the end the role might carry more significance than the writers intended it to have. This is in line with the stereotype that characters are usually added to televised or filmed versions of novels that are somehow missing from the original source (Magretta 1979: 278). As Abbott (2002: 138) points out, there is an ongoing debate whether the character, which was first introduced in the hard-boiled world of crime fiction, is in fact a misogynist day dream for male readers or viewers, or actually represents female strength and power. Lila, however, acts too psychopathically to be a serious and strong female character. Her credibility disappears when she tries to make Dexter jealous by staging one of his co-workers for her rape and trying to burn Astor and Cody alive out of irrational desperation.

Moreover, the other new female character introduced in the second season of the TV series, is also insane and not very credible in her own way. This is Esmé Pascal, the new lieutenant for LaGuerta, Deborah, and Dexter’s unit. At first she is described as utterly competent as the new head of the department, but through insane jealousy (caused by LaGuerta), she loses her job and credibility. Perhaps the character functions only as an indicator for LaGuerta’s double nature, since she is the one who actually is
sleeping with Pascal’s boyfriend and then deceivingly defends Pascal to their boss by saying that her erratic behaviour does not seem rational just because she is not a man. Watching the TV series one cannot help noticing that LaGuerta does not indeed die from Brian’s knife, just as in the novels, but continues to run the department and boss Deborah around. As an example of this, Magretta (1979: 282) concludes that for the scriptwriters to make the plot on film or in the TV series coherent, situations might have to have different outcomes than originally. Nevertheless, Pascal’s character is similarly discredited in Klein’s terms, when her professional competence is overshadowed by her lack of judgement when it comes to men. Thus, a character who starts out as a balancing figure for the series’ lack of strong female detectives is discredited and left out only after a few episodes.

To return to the apparent lack of female serial killers in the novels, it can be questioned whether the lack simply supports the statistical stereotype that most serial killers are men, or whether it is even possible for women to have proper Dark Passengers in the novels. In reality there are many women who commit murders and other crimes, but is it more difficult to create violent and erratic fictional female criminals? Or it might be that Reddy (2003: 194) is right when arguing that female villains in fiction are more dangerous than male ones, since they represent a direct threat to the patriarchal society by their gender? It would be interesting to know how the novels would change had Dexter been a woman and Deborah a man, for instance.

In addition, when in the fifth Dexter novel Rita gives birth to their daughter, in the TV series the baby is a boy. Since in the TV series Astor and Cody are normal children who do not even know what Dexter really is, its writers have perhaps felt the need to create a new disciple for Dexter. When in the culmination of the fourth season Rita is brutally murdered and Dexter comes to her rescue too late only to find their son almost swimming in his mother’s blood, a similar monster might be born. After all, Dexter and Brian were traumatized by an identical event. Still, this does not explain why Dexter’s new disciple has to be a male like him. Would it not be more interesting and not as obvious if his imaginative daughter would, after all, become like him? Maybe this just does not fit the stereotypical serial killer image that states that to be the most normal, the killer should be male (Gates 2010: 353). All in all, even the women in
Dexter’s family seem generally insignificant and are much less mentioned than their male counterparts. Additionally, Deborah, Rita and Astor have individual characteristic flaws that make them weaker than their male counterparts Dexter and Cody. Their representation will be compared to the actual events in the novels, which reveals interesting contradictions.

3.2.1 Deborah, the detective

As Dexter’s sister, Deborah is clearly the female protagonist of the novels and a balancing character of justice against Dexter’s vigilantism and crimes. Regardless of the fact, the formation of her character is inconsistent when at times she is supposed to be independent, strong and a great cop, but in the next moment she needs help to succeed in her job, or to be saved from murderers. Similarly, just as Dexter’s character does not follow the original sociopathic role he is cast in, Deborah’s actions are more meaningful than the descriptions of her nature and appearance. Her contradictory features show that she is far from as strong a character she is perhaps meant to be, and has a difficult time trying to claim her place as the female protagonist. Especially, her independence and femininity cause problems.

First, Deborah’s problematic independence has to do with the inconsistencies between her characteristics and the actual events she goes through. To begin with, she is a detective, just like her and Dexter’s revered father was, and it is usually she who is actually working on the serial killer cases when Dexter comes to help her. That is, even though she is described as competent and as good a police as her father, she needs constantly Dexter’s insights to help her. Originally, she needs Dexter to get into the homicide department and later, when she is leading the investigations, she could not solve them without him. It remains questionable how Dexter could be able to maintain his disguise when Deborah is constantly consulting him in serial killer cases. Still, she grows as a detective and a person throughout the novels, starting out as a single rookie cop and ending up as a sergeant with a steady relationship. However, she does not want to be too dependent, professionally or personally, on Kyle, and she also tells him so: “I don’t need your help. I won’t be one of those women who needs help” (Dexter in the Dark 411).
In addition, by comparing her participation in the events of all the novels, it becomes clear that the issues with her independence are deeply embedded in the plots. In the first novel, she works eagerly to catch the ice-truck killer and is kidnapped by him in the end and saved by Dexter. Her actions have little significance since the biggest leads in the case are discovered by Dexter. In the second novel where she meets Kyle and is constantly worried about him, she crashes the car in which she and Dexter are chasing Dr. Danko, and ends up in the hospital with a broken arm. When Dexter continues the search, she is left to console the dismembered Kyle, but together they save Dexter from sharing Kyle’s and Doakes’ faiths. Perhaps Deborah is needed in the final scene only to drive her amputated boyfriend to the scene, or then she is, exceptionally, the genuine heroine who saves the day. The third novel, which in itself is an exception, introduces a completely oblivious Deborah and Dexter as the only one who really knows what the murders are for. Mostly Dexter and Cody solve the case, leaving it for Deborah to pick them up at the cult’s lair. Finally in the fourth novel, where after such a long time Deborah has moral problems with Dexter’s actions, she is stabbed early on and is left in the hospital trying to survive. Uncharacteristically, she does not participate in the action or investigation, and decides that she does not want to be a detective anymore. In sum, even though independence is a crucial characteristic for Deborah, the events in the novels prove that she in fact is not that significant a character or so revolutionary a female detective.

Second, the problems with Deborah’s femininity arise from her clearly effeminized appearance and behaviour. Interestingly, her profession almost defines her personality and since most police officers have been male, she has been influenced by their masculinity too. She always dresses like a detective, swears a lot, punches people in the arm, has a short temper but paradoxically good self-control, is aggressive, does not get along with children and does not have any close friends. On the other hand, she is extremely good-looking which makes her uncomfortable since she wants to be seen as a cop, not as a woman. Returning to Klein’s theories of discrediting detective characters by overemphasizing their beauty or professionalism, I would claim that Deborah has been portrayed so as to deny her femininity. Therefore the starting point for the novels is problematic for her, as in the beginning she is working undercover as a prostitute who
knows many of the ice truck killer’s first victims. Thus, she has to dress accordingly in sexually appealing clothes, and the narrator emphasizes that she has no sense in style. She begs Dexter to help her get out of the assignment, which he does. Even at work detective LaGuerta makes fun of her by joking that if her big breasts were her brains, she would be Einstein, which makes her co-workers call her Officer Einstein. When both her femininity and professionalism have been thoroughly questioned, what is left of her as a character?

Still, all Deborah’s issues with her hardcore image and masculinity might stem from her problematic paternal relationship. She was her father Harry’s only biological daughter, but he had a special relationship with Dexter, which she just could not understand. Naturally, the code and Dexter’s training kept Harry from spending similar quality time with Deborah, but despite of the fact she wanted to become a police, just like him, and is reminded of her father quite often at work. Interestingly, she does not get along that well with Astor and Cody even though stereotypically women should care for all children they might encounter, and that the sociopathic Dexter enjoys their company greatly. Nevertheless, she educates Astor, in passing, about equality: “I didn’t know girls could have a gun and be the boss policeman,’ Astor said. ‘Girls can do anything boys can do,’ Deborah snapped. ‘Usually better’” (Dexter in the Dark 455). The quote raises important questions about the novels’ negative attitudes towards women. How can Astor have been led to believe that the police are almost always men and women cannot be their bosses? Luckily for her, there is Deborah whom she can idolize whether Deborah actually wanted that or not.

With her somewhat androgynous nature, would it make a difference if Deborah were, in fact, a man and Dexter a woman? Perhaps, since it is easier to accept cold-blooded male sociopaths or even male protagonists and therefore Lindsay’s characters are what they are. As Reddy (2003: 194) has stated, it is easier for women to accept the patriarchal ideals in society than for men to accept radical feminist ideologies. On the contrary, Heilbrun (1986: 7) argues that in crime fiction it is more normal for men to have feminine qualities than for women to have masculine characteristics. According to her, they seem sad and unnatural, but are, nevertheless, above sexual stereotypes. It is confusing to note how there have been numerous androgynous men in crime fiction,
starting from Hercule Poirot, but that it would be abnormal to have masculine female characters (Rowland 2001: 19). Deborah obviously breaks this rule, but follows another stereotype that Reddy (2003: 196) was first to note. As other female detectives, Deborah’s professionalism, right to work and authority are also questioned on various occasions. For example in the third novel at a crime scene: “‘This is detective Morgan,’ I told him. ‘She’s in charge here.’ ‘A girl?’ he snorted. ‘No wonder they can’t catch anybody. A girl detective’” (Dexter in the Dark 504). Similarly, in the fourth novel: “‘Police?’ she said with real outrage in her voice. She looked beyond us and then back to Deborah. ‘You’re the police? What, the pin-up police? I need Dirty Harry and they send Legally Blonde’” (Dexter by Design 64). Does Lindsay need these misogynist passages to remind readers that everyone does not like female detectives, or that life and their work should not be too easy for them? Post-feminist society or not, there are many feminist defects in Lindsay’s world.

Finally, an analysis of Deborah’s relationship to Dexter reveals some interesting characteristics. There have only been three significant men in her life, Harry, Dexter and Kyle from the second novel on, where Dexter for a long time is her only constant companion and the only family she has left. Therefore, their relationship as siblings is strong and is enforced even more by the work they share. She has no idea of his true nature until the end of the first novel when she is almost killed by Dexter’s biological brother⁴. Respecting the code, Dexter does not obey Brian and kill her, and curiously she does not seem to have major issues with the truth when they are together at LaGuerta’s funeral. She is worthy of Dexter’s darkest secret, unlike Rita or even their mother. However, after using Dexter’s insights in numerous cases, she starts to have moral problems with his career in the fourth novel. She cannot figure out how to work for the police, but simultaneously to have a murderous sociopathic brother and not turn him in. Thus, be it karma or Lindsay’s easiest strategy for disposing suspicious characters, she is stabbed and does not occur in most of the novel. Does the plot avenge her for not accepting Harry’s and Dexter’s reasoning that there are people who deserve to die on Dexter’s knives? This seems credible, since after waking up she tells Dexter to

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⁴ On the other hand, in the TV series Deborah never finds out who her brother really is. Thus her role as his trusted sidekick thoroughly changes and she, like the other women in Dexter’s life, is not worthy of the truth.
go and finish her stabber and that she now understands their father’s logic. Therefore, her moral backbone has been somewhat broken, her integrity and body has been violated, but Kyle and Dexter still remain in her life to punish the stabber. It will be interesting to see how her character develops in the next novel.

Curiously, Deborah’s mother and Dexter’s foster mother Doris is probably the most neglected character in the novels and even in the TV series. She has passed away from cancer when Deborah and Dexter were both youngsters and never learned the truth why Harry wanted to take Dexter to live with them. The televised mother obviously never found out that Harry was sleeping with Dexter’s biological mother, and when Dexter is asked in the third season whether he has ever lost a loved one, he answers that yes, his father. Even Deborah never talks about their mother and only seems to have looked up to and miss only Harry. Supposedly due to an insignificant relationship to her mother who has died at a young age, Deborah is so masculine and effeminized.

3.2.2 Rita, the trophy wife

Rita, Dexter’s significant other, is Deborah’s opposite when it comes to female characters in the novels. She is the traditional abused single mother in search for romantic love and is much more feminine than Deborah. Her character is focused on motherhood, sexuality, beauty and food, since it is always highlighted how good a cook she is. Surprisingly, her search for a good man and a nice family leaves her with a sociopathic husband and two children wanting to become just like him. Before Dexter, she spent ten years married to a drug addict who continuously beat and raped her. Perhaps, Rita’s character symbolizes the role of the society’s good girl, as Reddy (2003: 199) defines it. As the passive opposite to the independent female detectives, society’s good girls accept their feminine powerlessness and hope that by living according to the rules, they will be treated less cruelly than otherwise. However, it remains questionable whether Rita accepts her feminine powerlessness or not, after all she does eventually stand up against the abuse of her first husband and ends up killing the murderer in the fourth novel. Dexter keeps discussing how oblivious and conformist she is, and she does not have strong opinions that would be contrary to conventional attitudes. Still, she has
something in common with Deborah, namely their luscious looks. She is a blond with blue eyes and an athletic figure, described as petite and spunky.

Nevertheless, how could Dexter find love with Rita when he is supposedly unable to have human emotions? Dexter starts dating her originally to get himself a suitable disguise and states that the best characteristic in her are the children. Thus, Rita ends up switching her drug addict into three sociopaths whose true identities she does not recognize. Nevertheless, it can be speculated how likely it would be that her children would be just the same as Dexter. If they changed after their father beat them once, would not she have noticed something? In addition, it is curious how she accepts Dexter’s act when he in reality constantly puts her down in his inner dialogue especially for her loving him. When Dr. Danko is threatening Dexter’s life and he contemplates dying: “It might very well be that Rita would grieve over me, the idiot.” (Dexter in the Dark 346), or previously when they have been arguing:

Why should I even have to think about Rita at all? I had more important concerns at the moment. Rita was merely my beard, a silly kid’s costume I wore on weekends to hide the fact that I was the kind of person who did the things that this other interesting fellow was doing now and I wasn’t.

_Darkly Dreaming Dexter_ (79)

When the murderer of the fourth novel kidnaps her, he just remains calm and realizes he has to do something only because anything other would seem strange.

He had Rita –and I know very well that I should have leapt up, grabbed my squirrel gun, and charged into the tall pine screaming a war cry – but I felt a curious calmness spread over me, and I simply sat there for a long moment, wondering how he’d taken her and what he would do to her.

_Dexter by Design_ (319)

Moreover, she remains the only member of Dexter’s immediate family who is not worthy to learn the truth of his actual personality. It is interesting how Deborah does not even think of sharing this information with Rita when she threatens to turn him in to the police. Would it not seem more important to warn her sister-in-law about her murderous husband? This option, however, is not even discussed even though Dexter’s lack of feelings towards Rita is well known to Deborah. Moreover, when they happen to
get engaged and thereafter married, Dexter clearly states that he stays for the kids and especially for Cody. The evidence would therefore suggest that Rita is not an appreciated character that would be valuable for Dexter as herself but only through her purpose as a wife, mother and cook. It might be that Rita functions as the proof that Dexter after all is a true sociopath. He likes his children, protects them and kills less and less people, but still cannot love or even be attached to her like somewhat normal people would. Unlike the convention that children cannot be violated (Cassuto 2009: 255), there is no such code protecting women or the murderers’ wives, and therefore Lindsay does not have to make Dexter love Rita too.

In the TV series, however, her character has possibly more significance and Dexter seems quite fond of her. After Rita comes to the conclusion that Dexter has to be a drug addict (since Dexter has staged her ex-husband for drug use and sent him back to prison), he willingly goes to rehab for her. Rita’s character, even the televised one, lacks common sense, since after Dexter has attended a few meetings with the narcotics anonymous, everything returns again to normal in their relationship. After Dexter sleeps with Lila, Rita is far more shocked about that than about his possible drug use. What kind of a woman would tolerate an addict husband after another? Characteristically weak as Rita is even in the TV series (much like Lila and Deborah), she is also over-sexual and innumerable scenes feature her and Dexter in bed. It would be interesting to know whether it is more necessary to show romantic love with luscious and highly sexually active female characters on TV than in novels. Perhaps it would be unbearable to show Rita as the true sheep mother to the pack of wolves in her home.

3.2.3 Astor, the little sociopath

Finally, if Deborah’s problems are her effeminate nature and dependence on Dexter, and Rita’s her insignificance, Astor’s characteristic weaknesses are somewhat different. She is three years older than her younger brother Cody and even though they are seemingly nice little children, they both have Dark Passengers of their own. This raises the first issue with Astor, since the description is really inconsistent with the fact that is it only Cody or them both who have the Passengers. It all starts in the second novel where they have killed the neighbour’s dog and Dexter catches them doing it. After the incident he
plans to teach Cody how to be a proper killer, but in the third novel he agrees to train them both to follow the Harry code. Since he is too slow to do that, however, they try to kill the neighbour’s cat instead. Rita is shocked to catch them, but she does not suspect anything worse in her kids and does not even punish them. In addition, she is more worried about Cody fitting in than about his sister.

In the third novel it varies from one chapter to the next whether it is only Cody or both Cody and Astor who need training. Why does Lindsay have such difficulties in making up his mind, or is it just easier to create a boy with sociopathic tendencies than a similar little girl? Moreover, as Astor describes the situation herself: “‘He’s the boy,’ said Astor. ‘He likes to do that stuff. I just watch. Are you going to tell Mom?’” (Dearly Devoted Dexter 299), she is the passive participant in most of the situations. Why has the abuse of their father made one of them an active and the other a passive sociopath? Still, after the confusions of the third novel, in the fourth novel Astor becomes just as aggressive as her brother. When the murderer tries to kidnap them, Cody stabs him with a pen and Astor kicks him in the groin. Her character, thus, takes a more active turn in the course of the four novels, which is quite significant, since she is the only active female sociopath introduced by the series.

Problematically, Cody seems continuously much more important at least to Dexter in the novels. On the other hand, they are also often treated as a unit and not as individual characters. They are both, after all, minor characters that have been created to demonstrate that Dexter is not completely evil, since he likes to have them around, and to offer him the possibility to pass the Harry code to future generations as well. Interestingly, it is often highlighted how talkative she is when compared to Cody’s extreme silence. She does the talking for the both of them, and even though she is often cast in his shadow, at least according to Dexter’s narrative, they stick tightly together and are not each other’s competition. In addition, when their mother fails to be worthy of Dexter’s darkest secret, the children learn about his true nature early on. The lack of balance between the two little sociopathic characters remains as curious as the complete lack of female serial killers in the novels.

When it comes to the differences between the novels and the TV series, the televised children could not be more unlike their models in the novels. Luckily for them,
in the TV series the children are almost completely two normal school children. Their father has abused them in some way when he and Rita were together, but Cody has no recollection of it and Astor, (even though she was the one to call for help when their father was beating Rita severely) after being a little sulky at first, forgets all negative feelings towards their father. Paul, Rita’s ex-husband, is shown in the series, unlike in the novels in which he is only mentioned in passing. Both of them are talkative (not only Astor), clearly not traumatized, and simply happy and normal children. Cody takes karate lessons and Astor plays the piano, which makes them even more stereotypical in their genders. After their biological father’s death, they are glad to have Dexter to replace him, but even here Cody and Dexter’s relationship is emphasized much more than that of Astor and Dexter. Even though it is undoubtedly not very credible that Dexter would find out that his girlfriend’s children are similar sociopaths as him, the normal televised children still lack all evil characteristics.

3.3 The role of female characters in the Dexter novels

After a careful study of the novels, it is clear that the world Lindsay has created is not post-feminine since all feminist issues have not been solved. The characters themselves do not problematize their genders be it male or female, but this could be seen only as a part of Lindsay’s lack of interest in the subject. Much like the inconsistencies in almost all of his characters, the contradiction between the description and actual roles of the female characters is just as remarkable. If the most important traits that all of his female character share would be named, those would have to be inconsistency and insignificance, Deborah and Astor by their irregularities and Rita by her insignificance. Deborah is meant to be the female protagonist as Dexter’s morally strong detective sister, but her constant contradictory behaviour and elimination from the plots suggest otherwise. Rita, on the other hand, functions as Deborah’s opposite when it comes to her femininity and motherhood, but if possible she is even more ignored and discredited. Her love for Dexter is a joke, since he can never feel the same for her and the idea that she only functions as his disguise is simply sad. Astor at first seems to be the first to become a female serial killer in the novels, but thereafter the writer simply cannot decide whether she can live up to her brother’s standards or not. She lives in his shadow,
at least in Dexter’s eyes, and her role questions whether women can actually be active sociopaths at all (which in reality is just as possible as male serial killers).

Interestingly, as Klein (1988, according to Pyrhönen 1994: 110) argued, Lindsay’s female characters are much like their predecessors, almost all discredited in their own ways. Deborah is extremely effeminate, thus discredited as a normal and strong woman; LaGuerta is wholly incompetent in her work, thus discredited as a detective (like Esmé Pascal in the TV series as well). Rita is perhaps discredited intellectually making her a rather weak character and Astor is forced just to surrender to the sexual stereotypes regarding young girls. As in the novels, many female characters in the TV series are also rather flat, uninteresting, and not very credible. Lila, for example, clearly lacks common sense and sanity that would make her a complete character and not just a misogynist caricature. However, all of this becomes evident only after careful reading, so at first sight the roles of Lindsay’s female characters seem rather equal and the problems might therefore ignored by the average reader. After all, there are female detectives to begin with, but maybe it would be nowadays even more striking if there were not any. Dexter’s character as the male protagonist overshadows all others in the novels (and in the TV series), and Deborah’s role as his female adversary is no match to him. The novels and their main original idea are all based on him which then makes other characters plain ordinary.

Thus, possibly by building stronger and more coherent and many-sided female characters, Lindsay’s novels (and the TV series) would gain more credibility and not cause that much annoyance in the readers and viewers who happen to notice the weaknesses in the characterization of Dexter’s women. If Dexter only had brothers, all the detectives were male, Astor was a boy and Rita had even a smaller role as the mother figure, the novelist’s issues with female characters would be more visible and easier to note. Still, it remains apparent that the Dexter novels are not feminist crime fiction.
4. Conclusion

The analysis into the murderous mind and morality of Lindsay’s Dexter Morgan has revealed a thoroughly American sociopath who leads a life as a murderer but according to a strict moral code. He is described as having this personality disorder, but does not always act accordingly. In addition, as his character is so dominating, all other (and especially female) characters are left in his shadow. Whereas Dexter’s questionable moral background has probably been intended and carefully planned by the author, the flatness of female characters hopefully not. This may represent Lindsay’s lack of interest in his female characters, but is something that a truly resourceful writer would not resort to. Character development, and maintaining the nature of those characters in a logical manner, is the core of a good novel and the part readers easily note if not done properly. Therefore, Lindsay’s novels will likely not become the criminal classics they could be, since readers, in my opinion, would have a hard time trying to read the novels through more than once. It is unfortunate, since Dexter’s character is after all fascinating and his amorality refreshing. Besides, it would have been wiser for Lindsay not to rush into publishing his novels so quickly (2004, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010), but take his time especially in polishing the details, character and plot development to make the novels more coherent, original and readable.

Nevertheless, the problems with morality dealt with in this thesis stem from the original idea of Dexter being both a murderer and a member of the police, and the analysis of the same issues can be applied to the TV series. Since the two do not share almost anything but the characters, it is useful to briefly discuss their differences. The TV series, which has overshadowed the novels in its success and perhaps caused the lack of academic interest in them, reveals interesting facts of the American way to transform novels to film or TV. Since the TV series in Dexter’s case has a life of its own and only shares the plotline of the pilot (and some of that of the first season) with the novels, it becomes difficult for viewers and readers to tell the two plotlines apart. Does this mean that Lindsay’s novels could not be televised as they are, or only that that when the series was aired, Lindsay had not had time to publish more novels than the first, thus forcing the scriptwriters to come up with plots of their own? Possibly showing a
gruesome murderer like Dr. Danko, or even worse his mutilated victims on TV, would be too much to bear for coincidental crime show viewers.

Still, after the plot changes that are evident, the most significant difference between the two Dexters is his personality. In my opinion, he succeeds in maintaining his sociopathic character at least to some degree in the novels, but in the TV series he could often be mistaken for a normal man. He is not as cold especially towards Deborah and Rita and seems to have fun with his co-workers as well. Strikingly, the televised Dexter is much more worried about the stabbing of his co-worker Angel in the first season than the original Dexter is about Deborah getting stabbed in the fourth novel. Even though he appears to be more human on screen, he eliminates many more murderers than in the novels. When one or two murderers meet their ends by Dexter’s knives in the novels, he finishes one to two murderers per episode on TV.

Moreover, as the original Dexter is described to be totally fluent in Spanish, which helps him to interview witnesses and understand the Miami Cubans, on TV Dexter only utters a few expressions in Spanish with a heavy American accent. Perhaps Michael C. Hall, the actor cast in Dexter’s role, just does not speak enough Spanish for the characterization to be accurate. Furthermore, the lack of the Dark Passenger in the TV series is also striking. It is the fundamental reason why Dexter is what he is in the novels, but maybe due to screening difficulties it does not have as meaningful a role on screen. Usual strategies for transforming novels into films include (according to Magretta 1979: 278) using memory for flashbacks and voice-over for inner dialogue. These are much used in the televised Dexter, but maybe creating a second inner voice, that of the Dark Passenger, and adding a second simultaneous voice-over would be impossible and confusing for viewers to look at.

Nevertheless, after a few episodes it becomes evident that Dexter and Rita like to spend time in bed, much like Deborah with her different boyfriends. Despite the fact that Nick Moody (2003: 242) claims that the unshakable belief continues to reign that audiences are more susceptible to what they see (film crime) than to what they read (written crime), it is contradictory that the TV series feature innumerable sex scenes and murders when the novels have rather few of them. Watching the series becomes at times extremely annoying when every other scene introduces someone naked in bed, since
such scenes are highly irrelevant if the plot lines are considered. Furthermore, in the second season many of the women, and especially the voluptuous Lila, are constantly shown in suggestive clothing while the men are at all times decently dressed. This might suggest even further that the series, unlike the novels I suppose, are aimed for a male audience that simply enjoys seeing irrelevant sex scenes many times per episode.

When Deborah and Dexter’s sociopathic brother Brian have their love affair it too is based and concentrated on sex. In the novels and in the beginning of the TV series Dexter talks about how hard it is for him to enjoy sex, since women expect him to have certain feelings during the act that he cannot fake. This has ended many of his previous relationships, he reveals. Still, Brian and Deborah are constantly shown in bed with Brian seeming to enjoy it as much as she does. Why would it be any easier for him to fake the enjoyment if it has been so difficult for Dexter? Nevertheless, the scriptwriters seem to forget about this in Dexter’s case, since with Rita he supposedly feels right sexually for the first time ever. Again if he were a true sociopath, would he even be able to fall in love or act accordingly? Moody (2003: 242) mentions the effect of ratings on films and crime series on TV and states that there is no other media that would be so dependent on those. Possibly therefore the Dexter series are so over-sexual to please the viewers even if they did not happen to enjoy the plot.

The larger issues rising from Dexter’s double natured morals and irony were their relationship with younger, immature or ignorant audiences and readers. Can they see the tough moral code that keeps Dexter from being a radical sociopath and take Dexter’s ironic character as the entertainment he is supposed to be? One conclusion that can be drawn from this dilemma is that Dexter already himself proves that his way of life is not meant for everyone. As the only disciple of his moral code, even he cannot keep up with that way of life. He builds increasingly better control of his urges to kill novel by novel and also adapts to normal life to the extent that he is almost like any other American family man. Perhaps therefore the novels (or the TV series) should not be banned from every under-aged teenager, since the novels would encourage them to discuss Dexter’s moral code and the difficult questions his existence raises. Who has the power to decide over someone else’s life? Are vigilantism and death penalty acceptable? Or, can people such as Dexter even exist in reality? I do not see why the novels could not be used to
discuss ethics at school, for example. Still, introducing a morally unstable character might be harmful for some students who could have sociopathic tendencies and idolize Dexter in an unhealthy way. The question remains as open as Dexter’s moral ambiguity.

Furthermore, if a writer creates a sociopathic serial killer character, the character should remain that way (just as in reality most personal disorders are considered to be incurable). This is one of Lindsay’s major issues in his novels and in this he unfortunately shares the fate of Thomas Harris’ Hannibal Lecter. Almost all of the significant characters, like Dexter, Deborah, Rita and Astor, suffer from their own inconsistencies that gnaw away the credibility of their characters. It might be that the novels would be more original than they now are if Dexter were able to continue his life as the carefree single sociopath he is in the beginning and not be forced into the fatherly mould. In addition, if Lindsay created stronger female characters that also had their say in the events (and not make Dexter the only one to know what is actually going on), it would bring the novels to another level and make them more modern. Besides being claimed to be original and to spice up the old subgenre, the novels borrow their main elements from Thomas Harris’ serial killer fiction pattern, hard-boiled crime fiction, police procedural and American morals. Thus, the novels are not as original as they might seem at first.

This thesis has analyzed Jeff Lindsay’s Dexter novels on the basis of critical literature on crime fiction in general, since no specific sources on Dexter are available as yet. Thus, for future research, it would be useful to be able to utilize some critical academic literature too. Possible topics could include an analysis of Dexter’s transformation from text to television and the reasons behind these changes, and also comparing Dexter to other (vigilante) serial killers and analyzing his character even further. Perhaps as more time passes other critics take up the interesting questions that the novels raise and it seems that they will have much to write about if the novels keep being published as often as they have been so far. Time will tell what Dexter will turn out to be, whether Rita’s love will cure him, or whether he will be eliminated by his own disciples, for instance.
Bibliography


