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THE HEROIC TRANSFORMATION OF DEXTER MORGAN, KILLER OF KILLERS

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Serial killers have been viewed as evil by practically every sane person in history. Yet is it possible for a serial killer to be viewed as a hero rather than a villain? The answer, quite surprisingly, is yes. The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines a serial murder as the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender, in separate events (Morton, 2010). A common question arises over the discussion of serial killers: what could possibly cause an individual to kill multiple innocent victims? Several factors, such as childhood upbringing, genetics, and life experiences, can cause a person to transform into a serial killer. Different serial killers exhibit different behaviors as well as motives for their killings. However, there are a few distinct traits that are common among serial murderers, including impulsiveness, a lack of remorse for their actions, sensation seeking tendencies, and a need to be in control (Morton 2010). Serial murder is not a new phenomenon, as serial killers have existed for centuries.

Many even go unnoticed, killing dozens, potentially even hundreds of victims without ever being caught by authorities.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the heroic life and transformation of a prominent television character Dexter Morgan, during seasons one through four of *Dexter*, a serial killer of killers. This chapter first reviews the hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell (1949).

HERO'S JOURNEY OF DEXTER MORGAN

Creation of Dexter and the Summoning of His Journey

The Hero's Journey is the basis of all great stories and consists of three main phases: the call to adventure and departure from the hero's ordinary world, test, and trials in the supernatural world and the return back to the familiar world (Campbell, 1949). Dexter Morgan's heroic transformation began at a very young age. When he was just a toddler, he witnessed the gruesome killing of his own mother. She was murdered by three men in a storage unit, while Dexter and his older brother, Brian, helplessly sat there and watched. The killers left both boys in the storage unit alone with their dead mother, the two young children sitting in their mother's blood for days before they were found by police. Police officer Harry Morgan was the one to carry Dexter out of the dark and gloomy storage unit. The memories of the killing stayed with Dexter for his whole life but remained dormant until he reached adulthood. He carries that memory with him every day of his life, and evidently those horrid memories are responsible for his need to kill, which Dexter refers to as his "dark passenger" (Cerone, 2006).

Harry Morgan saw something in Dexter the day he pulled him from the crime scene. He saw potential in Dexter's youth and believed that Dexter had a good chance of not remembering the terrible things he had witnessed. Harry treated Dexter like his own child and years later adopted him. Growing up, Dexter had a normal life. He had two stepparents and a stepsister, Debra, that loved him unconditionally. However, as Dexter got older he started having certain aggressive tendencies. These urges were eating away at him. He initially dealt with these feelings by killing small animals or rodents. However,

his father Harry caught on to him when their neighbors' dog went missing. He confronted his son, and Dexter tried to justify the killing with the fact that the dog was keeping his sister and mother up all night long, promising he would never do something like that again. However, the dark passenger returned, and when Harry found blood on Dexter's clothes he realized his son was troubled.

Dexter's tendencies only got stronger as he got older, but Harry still loved his son despite his unconventional desires. Soon enough, Dexter's urges escalated. He was no longer satisfying his dark passenger by killing rodents and other animals, he needed to kill people. Harry realized that Dexter would never be able to change the way he feels, so instead of discouraging his impulses, he decided to come up with a rigid code that would help Dexter cope with his issues.

Harry's code was a simple set of guidelines, designed as a framework for survival. The code prevented Dexter from getting into trouble and gave him a way to channel his impulses while simultaneously ridding the world of people who he deemed deserved to die. The first rule of the code, and arguably the most important to Harry, is never get caught. No father wants to see their own son be sent to jail for life, or even potentially be put to death, because of a feeling they cannot control. The second rule of the code, which has greater meaning to Dexter than the first, is never kill an innocent. Dexter is not an immoral human being because of his tendencies. He is always aware that killing innocent human beings is wrong. When Dexter chooses a victim, he devotes however many hours it takes to researching and spying on his victims until he is one hundred percent positive that the victim is a killer, someone who instills pain on innocent people. The remaining rules of the code exist to ensure the first rule and are as follows: never make a scene, fake emotions and normality in order to fit in, never get emotionally involved, don't leave any traces, and never make things personal (Dexter Wiki, 2017).

Being given this set of rules at such a young age had quite an impact on Dexter. He began spending more time with his father and learning essential lessons. Harry taught Dexter how to hunt, fight, kill, target, and do everything else he needed to know in order to live his life as a serial killer. It is quite ironic that one of the most respected police officers in Miami was teaching his own son

how to kill and get away with murder; however, Harry was abetting Dexter in “following his bliss” (Campbell, 1949). Dexter spent several years practicing the code and training before he ever made his first human kill. It wasn’t always easy for Dexter; he was forced to conceal his tendencies until Harry was absolutely positive that Dexter was ready to begin his life-long journey.

As Dexter approached adulthood, his beloved father began getting sick and was hospitalized due to a heart attack. Dexter spent all of his free time by his father’s side, going straight from school to the hospital. However, Harry’s treatment was only causing him to get sicker. Dexter and Harry discovered that it was because the nurse was injecting him, along with numerous other patients, with poison rather than real medicine. It was at that instant, when Dexter and his father realized what was really going on, that Harry gave Dexter the command to make his first kill. Dexter Morgan killed the nurse and he was never the same after that. He crossed the first threshold of his heroic transformation when he made his initial kill.

A year later, Harry’s heart gave out and Dexter was alone. No other living human knew about his dark passenger and about what he had done. However, Harry’s influence and code remained with him past his existence.

Dexter’s Departure

A hero’s departure begins in an ordinary world where they are called to an adventure. Initially, the hero refuses to follow that call, but with the help of a mentor they begin their journey of departing the world they have known their whole lives (Campbell, 1949). Since birth, Dexter has been lacking an inner quality. He is unable to develop real human connections. The only person he really connected with was his father because of Harry’s acceptance of the dark passenger. Without Harry, the only family Dexter has left is Debra. The siblings are both employed by the Miami Metro Police Department: Dexter works as a blood splatter analyst, following his passion for forensics, and Debra, following the footsteps of their late father, works as a Detective for the homicide department.

Dexter begins his journey by gaining intelligence, resilience, and strength, only three of the great eight characteristics of a hero (Allison & Goethals, 2013, 2017). Over the years, Dexter has mastered faking human interactions. He brings donuts to work to share with his colleagues, he flashes a smile when someone says hello to him, he is an avid member of the Miami Metro bowling team, and he dates women he's not truly interested in to make it seem like he is living a normal life. Initially Dexter was seemingly soulless, a quality common among serial killers, showing no remorse or concern for the effect of his actions on others. Meanwhile, he murders rapists, torturers, and pedophiles once the sun sets. No one knows what he does and no one can ever know.

Working with the police department, Dexter has a huge advantage in finding his next targets. Criminals who are let go due to mistrials or accomplices of criminals that go unnoticed make the perfect victims for Dexter. He cleans the streets by disposing of bad guys, when the police can't catch them or when the law interferes with police work. Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) differentiate heroic action from general altruism by stating that heroism is a way to unify several courageous actions, involving risk, that are selfless and for the greater good of society. From this definition, we can say with confidence that Dexter is a hero, not simply an altruist.

Dexter's Initiation and Positive Female Influences

Mentors are crucial to a hero's transformation. Other than Harry, Dexter has two influential women in his life that help him obtain additional heroic traits: Debra and Rita show Dexter how to be compassionate, which is a communal characteristic that is commonly associated with women leaders (Hoyt, 2014). Dexter cares very deeply about his sister but has difficulty connecting with her because he conceals his emotions. She is the only living person Dexter loves, initially. However, he cannot be completely honest with her and if she ever found out about his dark passenger, she would never love him again. They are quite bonded by the considerable amount of time they spend together at work and outside of work as well.

Debra was involved in arresting an abusive husband and befriended the wife, Rita, who had dealt with the abuse for years before they put the terrible man behind bars. She introduced Dexter to Rita, and they began dating. Rita is initially very reserved due to her past relationship, which Dexter respects and understands. At first, their relationship contains no real substance because Dexter is using her to help maintain his fake persona. Realizing the relationship is peculiar, Dexter says, "I have to play the game, and after years of trying to look normal I think I met the right woman for me" (Cerone, 2006). However, as their relationship progresses throughout the series, Dexter begins to truly care about Rita and her two children. He is constantly spending time with them, going to the park with them, or making them pancakes before school in the morning; he begins to assume the role of a father figure. For the first time in his life, he cares about people other than Harry and Debra. The new relationships that Dexter engages in contribute to his moral and emotional transformation.

Dexter's Turbulences

During a hero's journey the hero is frequently pushed out of their comfort zone with difficult challenges and obstacles (Campbell, 1949). Dexter's journey is far from smooth; there are several instances where he almost blows his cover. One morning, two scuba divers were swimming at the bottom of the ocean in Bay Harbor, Miami. They noticed a few black trash bags sitting in the sand. They swam over and pulled at them, causing the knot to become undone. Human limbs emerged from the open bag and began rising to the water's surface. Within an hour, detectives, professional scuba divers, and forensics workers, including Dexter himself, arrived at the scene, discovering hundreds of trash bags containing dozens of bodies at the bottom of the ocean. It was the biggest case Miami Metro had ever seen.

Dexter became fearful that the truth would emerge not because he was afraid he would end up in an electric chair, but because he didn't want the people he loved and cared about to know the truth about him. He feared that the truth would alter their lives forever, preventing them from continuing to live normal lives. It would ruin both Debra and Rita if they knew the man who they loved was a serial killer.

For months, both the FBI and Miami Metro Police worked on the case, trying to find the person who killed all of these people. As they started identifying the bodies, they noticed something odd. All of the victims were criminals, specifically killers. The killer received the nickname, “The Bay Harbor Butcher.”

To keep Dexter’s identity a secret, he was forced to trick the police several times. He broke the air conditioning of the room that was refrigerating all of the bodies they found, destroying practically all of the evidence. Dexter came out of the case unscathed because it was pinned on another cop within the same department who was very corrupt and had killed several people himself. Dexter was content with this result because that cop was not an innocent person, and he was able to continue his life. His dark passenger lived on. From this upsetting incident, Dexter came out on top as he discovered his missing inner quality of compassion. He realized what was really important in life: his loved ones.

Introduction to Innocence

Rita and Dexter’s relationship becomes complicated when Rita discovers that she is pregnant. She decides to keep the baby, leaving Dexter’s role in the child’s life completely up to him. Dexter is troubled with this decision, reflecting on his relationship with his father. He fears his son will end up like himself, troubled by a dark passenger. With Debra’s help, Dexter realizes that all he wants is to be a part of his son’s life, and most importantly, to have a family once again. He proposes to Rita, and they are married shortly after. Dexter fell in love with his son, Harrison, at first glance. He was perfect, entirely innocent, something Dexter never thought he would have in his life.

The Ultimate Boon

Dexter makes a pivotal mistake when he becomes too personally involved with one of his targets. The police discover three different type of murders recurring every few years in large cities all over the country. They name the man responsible “The Trinity Killer,” but are unable to find him. Dexter becomes interested and begins hunting for the killer himself, finding him quite easily. Using an alias, Dexter befriends The Trinity Killer, named Arthur, due to their similar

life-styles. Like Dexter, The Trinity Killer lives a perfectly normal life with his wife in kids outside of Miami.

Dexter is finding it difficult to juggle work, family, as well as his dark passenger, so he continues to spend time with Arthur because he believes he could learn how to handle his new life while keeping his dark side a secret from his family. Dexter is troubled when Arthur discovers Dexter's true identity and is forced to make Dexter kill with his cover blown. To keep his family safe, Dexter sends the kids to Disney World with their grandparents and plans a honeymoon weekend with Rita and their baby. With Rita and Harrison leaving for the trip a day early, Dexter has only one night to successfully kill Arthur Mitchell. Within hours of his wife's departure, Dexter has Trinity on his table.

While conversing with Arthur moments before Dexter takes his life, Dexter makes an essential realization about himself. He says to Arthur, "I can't believe there was a time I actually thought I could learn something from you." Almost humored by his remark, Arthur questions back, "you think you're better than I am?" To which Dexter replies, "No, but I want to be." As Dexter stabs Arthur in the chest, Arthur mutters back, "you can't control the demon inside of you anymore than I can control mine" (Cerone, 2006).

Dexter's Altered Life

Relieved that the threat Trinity posed on his family was gone, Dexter returns home, excited to be reunited with his family shortly. He notices Rita's purse sitting on the kitchen table, which she had taken with her earlier that morning when she left for the airport. The faint sound of Harrison's cry sends shivers down Dexter's spine. He walks into his bathroom, following his son's cries, and sees his ten-month old baby sitting in a pool of his own mother's blood. Born in blood, just like Dexter. Dexter looks to his right and sees his wife in the bathtub, dead. Earlier that day, Rita returned home when she realized she had forgotten something, and Trinity was there waiting for her. He killed her exactly like he killed every other victim of his vicious cycle, by slitting her femoral artery and leaving her to bleed and out and die almost instantly.

Dexter's Return and Refusal

Dexter initially has a very difficult time coping with his beloved wife's death. He loses his temper on several occasions which results in him bludgeoning a man to death in a public restroom. He becomes careless, disregarding the code he had been following for decades. However, the grief he feels never interferes with the relationship he has with his son. After Rita's death, Astor and Cody, Dexter's stepchildren, go to live with their grandparents in Orlando, but they frequently come back to Miami to visit Dexter and their brother. The sense of family is still present in Dexter's life, yet he is left feeling hollow from Rita's demise and tremendously guilty because his dark passenger was responsible for her murder. A redeemed hero begins as a neutral or positive character, then descends into villainy and ultimately returns to a protagonist in the end (Allison, 2015; Allison & Goethals, 2017; Allison & Smith, 2015). Dexter is well aware that he is responsible for his wife's death, and he even mutters "it was me" when the police officer asked him what had happened when first arriving at the scene of the crime (Cerone, 2006). Guilt is an emotion Dexter has never encountered before, and thus he is unable to handle himself.

MASTER OF THE TWO WORLDS

Joseph Campbell describes the road back as the first step in a hero's return to his original world. The opposite of the call to adventure, the road back is where the hero must return home with their reward (Campbell, 1949). With Rita's passing and the departure of Astor and Cody, Dexter is left alone with his son. Dexter and Harrison's bond only gets stronger; Dexter would do anything to protect his son. Harrison is Dexter's light during a time of grief and sorrow. Although Dexter will never forgive himself for Rita's death, because of Harrison he transforms into a more responsible, compassionate, and careful man. When his dark passenger emerges again, Dexter executes every step of the kill flawlessly. He no longer makes careless mistakes; in order to be a good father he has to be an even better serial killer. Dexter can never break the first rule of the Code because that would result in Harrison growing up parentless. Through all of Dexter's trials and losses, he is able to return home with the biggest prize of all, his son.

Dexter's return from his journey is unique in the sense that he arrives home to an unfamiliar world. He began his journey as an introvert, caring about only one other human in the world. Through the relationship he develops with Rita, Dexter learns the importance of genuine human interactions. He sees that a life with loved ones is far better than living life alone. Although Dexter never had a fairy tale ending with his whole family, Dexter carried the lessons he learned from Rita with him for the rest of his life. Dexter identified the sacred value of his life through his son: family. Harrison became the most important part of Dexter's life, replacing his dark passenger. However, he masters balancing his two separate lives. Dexter is able to satisfy his dark passenger without it interfering with his relationships and work. In a way, Dexter was given a fresh start. With his past behind him, Dexter was given freedom to live. Through the completion of his journey and transformation, Dexter acquired additional heroic traits. At the beginning of the series Dexter only carried intelligence, resilience, and strength; however, throughout his transformation, he acquired compassion, selflessness, charisma, and reliability.

CONCLUSION

It is hard to imagine a serial killer as anything other than wicked, but through Dexter's transformation as a hero, it is shown that a murderer can actually be an asset to society and can do good rather than evil. He underwent a transformation of self as well as a transformation of society (Allison, 2015; Allison & Goethals, 2017). He began his journey not out of the desire to better society, but rather the need to kill. Throughout his evolution, this seems to change. His transformation advances society by ridding the world of the monsters that exist. Although his need to kill remains present, his reasons for doing so come from a need to protect his family, no longer from his need to take lives. Dexter himself changes from being one of the monsters he usually sought out to kill, into a hero, serving society in the only way he knows how.

Although "Dexter" is a fictional TV series, the story of a serial killer who kills killers may not be that unique. Miranda Barbour was 19 years old when she received the nickname the "Craigslister Killer." She has confessed to killing at least 22 people (Smith, 2010). Her cause for her killings dates back to her childhood when she was repeatedly sexually assaulted by her uncle. All of

her confirmed victims seemed to follow a similar pattern: they were rapists (Lysiak, 2016). One of her closest friends said, "I think she has been through a lot of painful things, and while I would never say that justifies taking lives, it's important to understand what might be motivating her" (Smith, 2010). It is difficult to justify the act of murder, but in the case of Dexter, and possibly Miranda as well, killing was not out of cruelty but rather with an intention to better the world and with the hope that with the end of a life a greater world will be born.

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