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By

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Brett Andrew Bernard Robinson, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies, has presented a thesis titled, *Dexter in Love*, in an oral examination held on April 16, 2013. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

Showtime’s *Dexter* (2006-) is a television series about a serial killer named Dexter Morgan that has become a cult-hit in the landscape of popular North American television. The series’ narrative follows Dexter’s life as he struggles to manage his identity as a killer with his growing desire to evolve as a human being capable of experiencing love. In this thesis, I will offer an interpretation of *Dexter* that varies from most of what has been written on the series by focusing on the theme of love and its role in shaping Dexter’s developing sense of self. To consider the influence of love in the evolution of Dexter Morgan I will evaluate the significance of the figures of the Mother, the Father, and the Other throughout his life.

Thus, I will be examining *Dexter* to explore the question: What is the significance of love in relation to the self? *Dexter* indicates that love is essential to the evolution of self. However, it also reveals the complex and contradictory nature of love as an experience that people rely on for personal fulfillment. The series has shown that Dexter’s efforts in love are often ill-fated. Yet, in spite of this he continues to be compelled to experience love. Evaluating the influence of Eros (the part of the psyche associated with love) on the self, it can be argued that love shapes the self on a fundamental level. As an element of the psyche, Eros is susceptible to a number of forces that structure it. So if Eros is defined based on one’s capacity for love, then love is a determining factor in regards to one’s psychological construction.

With this in mind, I argue that love can be understood within the framework of psychopathy and, in this respect, a discussion of love is key to understanding how *Dexter* creatively shifts the typical popular representation of the serial killer as the archetype of a
psychopath. My critical analysis in this thesis on the influence of love in the life of Dexter’s serial killer protagonist will illustrate that love is a form of psychopathy necessary for the existence of the self.

Contemporary theories relating to subjectivity, selfhood, and love are critical to understanding and evaluating questions relating to the self. As such, a selection of these theories provided by Judith Butler, Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig, and Jessica Benjamin will be utilized to interpret key scenes and sequences in Dexter that support my claim that the series indicates love is essential to Dexter Morgan’s self-development. Additionally, I will be examining the aesthetic construction of the series, specifically its use of voice-over narration, to interpret how this relates to Dexter’s evolution into a person capable of experiencing love.

This thesis will demonstrate that, in significant ways, Dexter’s sense of self comes to exist through his relationships with other people because they allow him to experience love. With this, ironically, Dexter asks us to recognize that love is a fundamental element in regards to the evolution of self by demonstrating its significance in the self-development of a figure that is not traditionally associated with love: the serial killer.
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DEXTER IN LOVE

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PSYCHOPATHY OF LOVE

Showtime’s *Dexter* (2006-) is a television series about a serial killer named Dexter Morgan based on the 2004 novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* written by Jeff Lindsay. In the series, Dexter is played by Michael C. Hall, who won a Golden Globe in 2010 for his performance of the character. *Dexter* showcases a signature sense of dramatic irony and dark humor in its story of a serial killer who by day poses as a family man and works as a blood-spatter analyst with the Miami Metro Police Department, but by night hunts down criminals who have escaped the law—bringing them to justice in a perverse fashion by strapping them to a table then grotesquely executing and dismembering them. Against this macabre content, the series explores Dexter Morgan’s life and how he balances being a serial killer with his relationships with other people—whether as a boyfriend, a husband, a father, a brother, a friend, a co-worker, or a son. For this reason, in “Spatter Pattern” (2008), J.M. Tyree refers to *Dexter* as a “serial killer soap opera” (82).

By introducing a protagonist who is a serial killer that performs vigilante actions by cleansing the world of murderers, rapists, child molesters, and other dregs of society, *Dexter* has accomplished a unique feat in television programming by enabling its viewers to sympathize with, and even admire, a serial killer as a hero. In “The New American Hero: Dexter, Serial Killer for the Masses” (2012), Ashley M. Donnelly states that “[t]he notion of celebrated vigilantism has long been a part of America’s mythology” (16). Dexter is a contemporary version of the vigilante hero, but his identity as a serial killer...
makes him a morally complex character that challenges viewers to question their understanding of right and wrong.

David Schmid, in “The Devil You Know: *Dexter* and the ‘Goodness’ of American Serial Killing” (2010), suggests that “Dexter Morgan is the quintessential American serial killer of the post-9/11 era in that he is provided with an abundance of characteristics that make him a sympathetic, even identificatory, figure to the audience” (133). Dexter is a white middle-class heterosexual American male and, though a serial killer, he has a black-and-white understanding of good and evil. Here, viewers’ identification with Dexter “comes about not *in spite of* [his] murders, but *because of* them” (Schmid “Devil” 137). In other words, viewers relate to Dexter because of his execution of natural justice in that he kills people who many believe deserve to die because they have committed actions that negate their right to live by murdering innocent people.

With this, Dexter is a character who does not necessarily defy moral standards. Donnelly argues he “actually reinforces conservative ideals of morality, offering a clear differential between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ violence to a culture that is struggling to rationalize key political and social actions that have occurred after September 11, 2001” (16). In *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (2005), Schmid argues that “[s]erial murder is able to both translate the frightening realities of post-9/11 America into comprehensible terms and serve as a perversely positive nostalgic oasis” (254). The serial killer is a familiar, indeed American-made, figure in the face of the new looming threat to the Western world epitomized by the radical Muslim terrorist. *Dexter* serves as a brilliant parodic representation of post-9/11 American culture by dealing with
sophisticated themes in its presentation of the life of a serial killer who blends in with society in the United States of America.

In *Dexter*, the bright and clean setting of Miami where Dexter resides and works has a whitewashed mise-en-scène that is juxtaposed with his bloody pastime. In “Cutting-Edge Camerawork” (2009), Jean Oppenheimer quotes *Dexter’s* cinematographer Romeo Tirone who describes the series’ look as “a graphic-novel style with a Scorsese-Cronenberg-Kubrick influence” (1). Miami’s tropical scenery—including its beautiful palm trees, the ocean, and beaches—serves as the series’ backdrop. As well, the characters that make up Miami’s hot setting are tanned people perpetually covered in sweat, who wear swim shorts and bikinis or casually dress in primary colors and pastels. *Dexter* also acknowledges Miami’s large Cuban community and playfully uses Latin Salsa music in its soundtrack. The aesthetic construction of *Dexter*, the heart of which is Miami, is vital to its success in creating a colorful television series with a darkly playful narrative.

One of the most interesting aesthetic aspects of *Dexter* is the voice-over narration of Dexter Morgan, performed by Hall, representing the character’s psyche, which allows for a glimpse into the mind of a serial killer. Dexter’s narration is at times both philosophical and comical; a testament to the complex themes and dark humor of the series. James Manos Jr., who developed the series, explains its use by stating:

I had to figure out a way to establish, in one hour, a guy that you are going to want to stay with, bring him some humanity, bring him some humor, and allow us into the world that he is in. The way to do that was to have his thoughts, his observations spoken, through voice-over, to try to bring us into his world.
Dexter’s voice-over narration is introduced in the first scene of “Dexter” (101), the pilot episode of the series.

In the opening scene of the series, Dexter is driving at night along a brightly lit street lined with palm trees and restaurants full of people. “Tonight’s the night,” he says in voice-over, “and it’s going to happen again and again.” Dexter is shown in blackened silhouette with none of his facial features visible in the dark interior of his car. “Has to happen.” Dexter goes on as he continues to drive. Towards the end of this sequence, Dexter kills Mike Donovan, a pedophile who has raped and murdered several boys. Immediately after cutting this man’s throat with an electrical saw, Dexter is shown on his boat, “Slice of Life,” smiling and greeting people he passes on the water. In voice-over, he begins, “My name is Dexter” and, with this, the television audience has been introduced to the serial killer protagonist of one of the most popular series in contemporary American television.¹

The voice-over narration in *Dexter* is made especially interesting because the series depicts the daily life of a serial killer. Dexter’s voice-over reaches levels of comical absurdity while presenting his thoughts and feelings as he deals with his family, his job, and with being a killer. Yet, these thoughts and feelings suggest that Dexter deeply and earnestly struggles to understand who he is and if whether or not being a serial killer is his inescapable destiny. The series explores how this conflict consumes him as the relationships he has with other people become more important to his sense of self, leading him to wonder if, in spite of his identity as a cold-blooded serial killer, he can ever experience love.
Thus, *Dexter* is unique in the landscape of serial killer fiction because love is a central theme in the series. Love is not a concept that is usually connected to serial killers as they are often diagnosed as psychopaths. In *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of The Psychopaths Among Us* (1993), Robert D. Hare writes that psychopaths are defined as individuals with a “complete lack of empathy” (6). This explains the disassociation of serial killers from love because empathy is understood as “the prerequisite for love” (Hare 6). Similarly, in *The Emptied Soul: On The Nature of The Psychopath* (2008), Adolph Guggenbuhl-Craig suggests that psychopathy is a result of damage to a part of the psyche known as Eros. In Greek mythology, Eros is the god of love. Love, here, refers to “the entire spectrum of emotional attachment, from sexuality and friendship to involvement with profession, hobbies, and art” (Guggenbuhl-Craig *Emptied Soul* 25). Dexter Morgan is a character who has severe issues with love, stemming from an early experience of trauma that damages his Eros.

When Dexter is three years old, he watches his mother being murdered, cut to pieces by a chainsaw. Dexter understands this as what brought about his compulsion to kill. He calls this compulsion his Dark Passenger. Witnessing his mother’s murder is an intensely traumatic experience for him that fundamentally alters his psyche by damaging his Eros. Guggenbuhl-Craig argues that “the ability to love is one of the deciding characteristics of our humanity” (*Emptied Soul* 108). For this reason, Dexter believes that watching his mother die caused him to be “born free of all that’s human” (“Born Free” 112).

Dexter is rescued from the scene of his mother’s murder by Officer Harry Morgan (James Remar), who later adopts him. Harry notices the severe emotional damage that
was caused to Dexter and believes him to be therefore destined to become a serial killer. Rather than let Dexter fulfill this destiny and be sent to the electric chair, Harry decides to teach him a moral code of killing, referred to as The Code of Harry. This code teaches Dexter how to kill and get away with it, how to fit into society in order not to be identified as a killer, and to only kill those who deserve to die. So, Dexter becomes a killer with a conscience who exclusively slaughters criminals—as per the dictates of Harry’s Code. However, if necessary, Dexter also kills those who threaten him or the people he cares about. While this makes Dexter’s identity as a serial killer more acceptable, and even commendable, to television viewers, it does not alleviate the struggles he has with understanding himself, which are rooted in his damaged Eros. Consequently, in *Dexter*, love and its pathologies are important subjects in relation to selfhood.

In many ways *Dexter*, as a series, has been an exploration of Dexter Morgan’s progressive understanding of love and subsequent evolution of self. Love is one of the most important themes in *Dexter*, yet it is largely absent in the critical writing that has been done on the series despite the vast number of written works it has inspired. Among the key texts on the series is *Dexter: Investigating Cutting Edge Television* (2010), which is comprised of essays by a range of cultural critics on components of the series such as the opening sequence, narrative, design, and genre. Another is *The Psychology of Dexter* (2010) and it offers various analyses by psychologists on the many intriguing psychological elements of the series. *Dexter and Philosophy: Mind Over Splatter* (2011) is comprised of essays that relate the series to a number of philosophical theories including those by Aristotle, Foucault, Kant, and Nietzsche. Indeed, *Dexter* has been
interpreted from a wide array of perspectives and in a broad variety of disciplines. However, most of what has been written on the series seems to focus on Dexter’s identity and actions as a serial killer in order to evaluate the morality of a killer who only executes criminals.

From the philosophical perspective, themes of morality and ethics have been consistently investigated. Essays such as “Sympathy For The Devil: Can a Serial Killer Ever Be Good?” (2010) by Matthew Brophy as well as Simon Riches and Craig French’s “The Ethics of a Serial Killer: Dexter’s Moral Character and the Justification of Murder” (2010) interpret the value of Dexter’s killing. Brophy believes that “Dexter may be a killer, but he is righteous in his dirty deeds” (89). Along these lines, many essays written on the series suggest that Dexter is a contemporary version of a superhero, such as the previously referenced work by Ashley M. Donnelly and “Our Serial Killers, Our Superheroes, and Ourselves: Showtime’s Dexter” (2011) by Victoria L. Smith.

As well, in “Dexter’s Dark World: The Serial Killer as Superhero” (2010), Susan Amper describes Dexter as being comparable to a comic-book superhero. Similarly, in “The Killing Joke” (2011), John Kenneth Muir refers to him as “Miami’s own Dark Knight” (3). Stan Beeler, in “From Silver Bullets to Duct Tape: Dexter versus the Traditional Vigilante Hero” (2010), even suggests that Dexter is “a truly twenty-first century post-modern hero” (222). While these readings of the series are interested in addressing Dexter in connection to the cultural context of post-9/11 America, especially its absurd levels of violence in popular representations in media, they do not address the equally important theme of love in the series and its relation to selfhood.
Some of what has been written on *Dexter* does investigate the concept of selfhood, but from a perspective that does not consider the importance of love and rather evaluates the performative nature of Dexter’s identity. In “Dexter: Villain, Hero or Simply a Man? The Perpetuation of Traditional Masculinity in *Dexter*” (2010), Isabel Santaularia argues that Dexter’s identity is bound to a traditional representation of masculinity as aggressively individualistic. Another work that deals with selfhood in relation to the series is Deborah Mellamphy’s “Dexter Unmasked” (2011). She contends, “[i]t is [the] conflict between what Dexter considers to be his ‘mask’ and his ‘true self’ that constantly leads him to question the ‘truth’ of his own identity” (239). Further works also agree that Dexter’s “true self” is simply that of a serial killer by arguing that it is an unchangeable aspect of his identity.

For example, critical analyses of *Dexter*, such as Daniel Haas’ “Dearly Damaged Dexter” (2011), Nicolas Michaud’s “Can We Blame a Man with No Choice?” (2011), and William E. Deal’s “The Serial Killer was (Cognitively) Framed” (2010), imply that Dexter is not responsible for his actions because his childhood trauma changed something inside of him, over which he has no control, that makes him kill. Michaud writes, “Dexter has a compulsion. There’s a sense in which he must kill. Try as he might, due to the traumatic events of his childhood, Dexter cannot stop himself from indulging his morbid murderous streak” (35). He goes as far as to claim that “Dexter lacks the ability to not be a serial killer” (Michaud 36).

The idea that Dexter is inescapably a serial killer is also presented in work done on Harry’s influence over him. In “Harry Morgan: (Post)Modern Prometheus” (2010), Douglas L. Howard suggests that Harry “forms” Dexter “through his blind devotion to
some abstract ideal informed by personal pain and frustration” (61). Everitt Foster, in “You Hurt Her, You Hurt Me” (2011), goes on to state that “Harry Morgan was not only Dexter’s father, he was his maker” (205).

What most of what has been written on *Dexter* has in common is that it favors the series’ interpretation of Dexter’s identity as a serial killer being inextricably determined by the childhood trauma of witnessing his mother die. Also, in much of this work, it is peculiar that Harry’s influence is not criticized, but rather is typically advocated as it channels Dexter’s uncontrollable urge to kill into a socially beneficial activity. Therefore, it seems that a large amount of the writing done on the series suggests that Dexter’s sense of self as a serial killer is defined by his childhood trauma and the influence of Harry. Clearly, these are central to his sense of self, but what I believe is missing from analyses of the series, and deserves recognition, is the significance of the connection between Dexter’s progressive attempts to repair his damaged Eros through his relationships with other people and his evolution of self.

In this thesis, I will offer an interpretation of *Dexter* that varies from most of what has been written on the series by focusing on the theme of love and its role in shaping Dexter’s developing sense of self throughout his life. The self can be comprehended as the fundamental essence of a person that makes her or him an individual. Guggenbuhl-Craig notes that the self is defined in Jungian analytical psychology as the “divine spark in us” and indicates that it “has to do with the meaning of our existence” (*Emptied Soul* 74). This meaning is realized through individuation, which is “the process of self-realization” (Guggenbuhl-Craig *Emptied Soul* 73).
Interestingly, the serial killer is a prominent symbol in the contemporary discourse surrounding selfhood. In “The Scene of The Crime: Inventing The Serial Killer” (2006), Alexandra Warwick notes, “[t]he figure of the serial killer is being used in ways that go beyond entertainment and police work, having more to do with ways of understanding ourselves and modern society” (553). A reason for this relates to the nature of the serial killer as a human animal whose psychological drives urge it to perform base self-gratifying actions for its personal fulfillment at the expense of other people. This is deeply connected to the condition of Western society resulting from its ideological bedrock in capitalism, creating populations of individuals that value private interests over the public good.

This directly relates to serial killers who fulfill their personal desire to murder in spite of the obvious fatal implications to others’ lives. In “Serial Killing and The Postmodern Self” (2006), Anthony King points out, “[t]he analysis of serial killing may be able to offer some provisional accounts of the self and its mutation in contemporary society. In the sacred and terrible image of the serial killer, a more general account of the self may be discernible” (112). I argue that this is the case with Dexter as its presentation of the self-evolution of a serial killer demonstrates the universal significance of love in relation to selfhood.

Dexter’s self-evolution throughout the series is brought on by his deepening understanding of himself and love’s important function in his life. In “Dexter the Self-Interpreting Animal” (2011), Brian Gregor argues that “self-interpretation brings our selves into being” (55-56). Relatedly, Stephen D. Livingston, in “On Becoming a Real Boy: Emergence and Evolution of Self in Dexter” (2010), points out that the self “is often
defined as the mental apparatus that permits individuals to experience abstract, inwardly directed thoughts and feelings” (96). Dexter’s voice-over essentially narrates his search for identity by presenting his continual struggle to understand himself and whether he can experience love. Livingston elaborates that “[s]elfhood appears to be a key contributing factor in our abilities to form preferences, to evaluate ourselves against internal and external standards, to plan for the future, and to relate to others” (96). The series indicates that Dexter’s continual self-development, despite his murderous compulsion, is reliant on his relationships with others because they afford him the opportunity to experience love, which can repair his damaged Eros and allow him to come to a fulfilling sense of self.

In the series, Dexter is involved in a number of relationships with other people that are core aspects to his sense of self. The most significant of these is his relationship with his adoptive-sister Deb (Jennifer Carpenter). Deb is the one character who has been a consistent part of his life. Similarly, Deb views Dexter as the most important person in her life because he is the one individual who is always there for her. She also works alongside him with the Miami Metro Police, where she has been promoted throughout the series from officer to detective, and finally becomes the Lieutenant of Homicide (which is ironic given her brother’s propensities as a serial killer). The two are for all intents and purposes the closest thing either has to a best friend. Deb offers Dexter unconditional love that, as the series demonstrates, knows no bounds.

Harry is another character who is of primary importance to Dexter’s self-development as Harry trained him to become a serial killer. Dexter has a deeply rooted attachment to Harry. This is illustrated in his initially unwavering devotion to The Code
of Harry and later reliance on imaginary conversations with his deceased father, in which Harry acts as a guardian angel of sorts for Dexter, offering him advice and life lessons. Additionally, throughout the series Dexter has engaged in a number of relationships that have had a profound impact on his self-development. Significant in this respect are his relationships with his girlfriend, and later wife, Rita (Julie Benz) and her children Astor (Christina Robinson) and Cody (Preston Bailey), as well as his own son Harrison. Dexter’s growing comprehension of love, resulting from his relationships with others throughout the series, works in productive conflict with his compulsion to kill and can be argued to be responsible for his evolution of self.

In Season 1, Dexter discovers the roots of his urge to kill and meets “The Ice Truck Killer,” who is later revealed to be Dexter’s biological brother Brian Moser (Christian Camargo). Brian makes Dexter confront the truth of his identity when he offers Dexter the opportunity to be lovingly accepted for his “true self” and become a pure killer without the moral confines of Harry’s Code. Brian urges Dexter to kill Deb, whom Brian had maliciously deceived into believing that he loved, even going so far as to propose to her. However, Dexter cannot kill Deb because, as he puts it, he is “fond” of her and instead kills Brian in order to protect her. This is indicative of Deb’s importance to Dexter and his growing capacity for love.

Then, in Season 2, Dexter begins to question the motivations of Harry in training him to become a serial killer. This leads to him having an identity crisis, in which he confronts his “addiction” to killing with the help of his sponsor-turned-obsessive-lover Lila (Jaime Murray). In this season, as well, some of the bodies of Dexter’s victims are uncovered, leading to an investigation of what the police call “The Bay Harbor Butcher.”
Sergeant James Doakes (Erik King), who has always been suspicious of Miami Metro’s blood-spatter analyst, slowly discovers that Dexter is a serial killer and attempts to arrest him. Though, in a series of lucky events, Doakes is captured by Dexter and subsequently dies in a fire created by Lila at a cabin in the Florida everglades. At the end of this season, Dexter realizes that his identity as a serial killer does not need to define him and that there are other parts of his life that he finds meaningful, specifically his relationships with his girlfriend Rita and her kids Astor and Cody.

Dexter’s growing desire to experience love in fulfilling relationships with others continues in Season 3. On the news that Rita is pregnant with his child, Dexter considers life as a family man and marries her. Also, as a result of his confusion over the role of Harry in his life, he continues to contemplate the benefits of connecting with another person, which leads to him having an ill-fated friendship with Miami Assistant District Attorney Miguel Prado (Jimmy Smits).

Season 4 brings on fatherhood for Dexter as his son Harrison is born. This season highlights Dexter’s desire to be a loving family man while still being a proficient serial killer as he studies “The Trinity Killer” Arthur Mitchell (2010 Golden Globe winner John Lithgow), who has been successfully killing for decades while also maintaining a family life. However, Arthur’s family life is exposed as a fraud and his real character as a serial killer is shown to have destroyed his family. Before Dexter can correct his error of allowing Arthur to live so as to study him, Arthur murders Rita. This leads Dexter to believe that it is his fate to not experience love or fulfilling connections with other people because of his true nature as a serial killer.
In Season 5, Dexter experiences guilt over Rita’s death. To deal with this grief, he begins helping a woman named Lumen (Julia Stiles). Lumen is a victim of a rape club for men, led by the sinister motivational speaker Jordan Chase (Jonny Lee Miller). The crimes of this group of men are being investigated by the Miami Metro Police under the name “The Barrel Girls Case” because the victims’ bodies are stored in barrels filled with formaldehyde. Dexter saves Lumen from being murdered by her captors and subsequently aids her in hunting down and killing each of them. Throughout their time killing together, Dexter develops a deep affection for Lumen. Unfortunately, at the end of the season she leaves him because she no longer has the need to be a killer like him once all of the men responsible for hurting her are dead. This convinces him yet again that he is doomed to be alone.

During Season 6, Dexter becomes curious about religion and enters into a friendship with Brother Sam (Mos), a killer turned Catholic minister. As a result of Brother Sam’s influence, he questions whether or not he can change his ways and give up being a serial killer. Also in this season, during one of Deb’s therapy sessions, it is revealed that her profound affection for Dexter is so intimate that in actuality she is in love with him. Throughout this season, Dexter hunts “The Doomsday Killer” Travis Marshall (Colin Hanks). Travis participates in an imaginary relationship with his former Religious Studies professor, who he killed, Dr. James Gellar (Edward James Olmos) and is attempting to bring about the end of the world by reenacting scenes from the Book of Revelations. At the end of this season, Deb walks in on Dexter as he is killing Travis. This leads Dexter to have to confront his sister with the truth of his identity.
Season 7 goes on to showcase Dexter’s efforts to maintain harmony between his lifestyle and his relationship with Deb now that she knows he is a serial killer. During this season, a new woman enters Dexter’s life named Hannah McKay (Yvonne Strahovski), a cold-blooded killer herself, with whom he begins a passionate relationship, which leads him to feel love for her. This season also sees Dexter encountering Isaak Sirko (Ray Stevenson), a member of the Ukrainian mafia group known as The Koshka Brotherhood. Early in the season, Dexter kills Isaak’s lover Viktor Baskov, who had murdered a member of the Miami Metro Police. This leads to insightful confrontations between Dexter and Isaak in which the meaning of love is discussed. Throughout the season, Deb actively tries to arrest Hannah as she knows her to be a killer and, ironically, does not trust her with Dexter. Consequently, Hannah tries to kill Deb by poisoning her. Dexter is forced to choose between the two women he loves and in the end chooses Deb by helping her arrest Hannah.

In the final moments of Season 7, Captain Maria Laguerta (Lauren Velez) comes to a definitive conclusion, following a secret investigation she conducts, that Dexter is “The Bay Harbor Butcher.” Further, Laguerta has evidence that Deb helped him cover up the murder of Travis Marshall. In a dramatic scene, Dexter decides to go against The Code of Harry and kill the innocent Laguerta to protect himself and his sister. Deb is faced with the decision whether or not to stop Dexter from killing Laguerta. During an emotional sequence, Deb shoots Laguerta to protect Dexter. With the last season of *Dexter* scheduled to be Season 8, Dexter’s relationship with Deb has reached a whole new level now that she has broken all of her beliefs by killing for him. With this, each season of *Dexter* has continued to explore the complex nature of love and the issues that
Dexter has as a serial killer who grows to experience love as an essential part of his being.

The meaningfulness of love in Dexter’s life is attested to most tellingly in his practice of the words “I love you.” While initially in the series Dexter performs his roles in relationships to keep his identity as a serial killer hidden from the world, he will not utter the words “I love you” as a part of this performance. This causes Dexter’s relationships with people who love him to be complicated because whenever someone says “I love you” to him he gives some elusive reply like “Me too.” Love is indicated to be something that Dexter will not be untruthful about by saying “I love you” if he does not mean it. However, throughout the series Dexter grows into a person capable of not only saying the words “I love you,” but actually meaning them. Dexter’s previous refusal to even perform the utterance of the words “I love you” reveals something interesting in regards to his understanding of love as essential to his having a fulfilling sense of self.

Indeed, *Dexter* indicates that love is significant to the evolution of self. However, it also reveals the complex and contradictory nature of love as an experience that people rely on for personal fulfillment. The series has shown that Dexter’s efforts in love are often ill-fated. Yet, in spite of this he continues to be compelled to experience love. Evaluating the influence of Eros over the self, it can be argued that love forms the self on a fundamental level. As an element of the psyche, Eros is susceptible to a number of forces that shape it. So if Eros is defined based on one’s capacity for love, then love is a determining factor in regards to one’s psychological construction. With this in mind, I argue that love can be understood within the framework of psychopathy and, in this
respect, a discussion of love is key to understanding how *Dexter* creatively shifts the

In *The Emptied Soul*, Guggenbuhl-Craig defines psychopathy as a psychological invalidism. He writes, “[t]he term psychopathy comes from the Greek *psyche*, soul, and *pathos*, suffering” (*Emptied Soul* 29). Psyche, here, referring to soul, relates to the self, which has been defined as the divine spark in a person (a definition also attached to the concept of soul in Jungian analytical psychology). When I refer to the psychopathy of love in this thesis I am using the term psychopathy to mean a kind of psychological invalidism, rather than the more negative connotations it has received in popular culture. As Guggenbuhl-Craig states, “[a] psychopath…is one whose suffering is of the soul or who is mentally ill. It is no longer used in this sense, now implying immorality, instability, unreliability, and even criminality” (*Emptied Soul* 29).

We are all in some way psychologically imperfect. “All living things, all human beings, come into this world deficient, lacking in something, whether it be due to heredity, prenatal infection, or birth trauma” (Guggenbuhl-Craig *Emptied Soul* 13). Guggenbuhl-Craig goes so far as to suggest that “everyone suffers from [the] form of psychic invalidism called psychopathy” (*Emptied Soul* 40) because “each of us is missing something or has some aspect that is markedly underdeveloped” (*Emptied Soul* 61). The profound significance of love in relation to the self is attested to by Guggenbuhl-Craig’s assertion that psychopathy is a result of damage to Eros.

My discussion of love’s influence on self-development is connected to the discourse surrounding self-help in that it is implied that experiencing love may solve a person’s issues associated with her or his sense of self. Nevertheless, as my articulation
of the psychopathy of love suggests, love is not necessarily a positive means of self-development. It can, in fact, act in a severely detrimental way in terms of one’s sense of self. The psychopathic nature of love, as depicted in *Dexter*, reveals the conservative discourse surrounding love as a means of self-help to be wrought with deficiency. Love does have the capacity to be a positive means of self-development that is beneficial to self and others, but it also has the potential to be a pathological necessity that can greatly afflict an individual’s sense of self and bring harm to the people around her or him. Therefore, perhaps in order for Dexter to experience positive development in terms of his sense of self he may need to replace one activity based in psychopathy in killing for another in loving.

In this thesis I will critically analyze *Dexter* and its exploration of the psychopathy of love by evaluating love in relation to the influence that the figures of the Mother, the Father, and the Other have had on Dexter Morgan’s sense of self. To do this, the series’ narrative, as well as its aesthetic construction, will be interpreted through critical theories relating to subjectivity, selfhood, and love. To this end, Dexter’s voice-over narration will be examined in its capacity to express the significance that the character places on love. Additionally, the visual aesthetics of *Dexter* will be examined to ascertain how they contribute to the exploration of love’s influence on Dexter’s sense of self throughout the series.

I will utilize works by Judith Butler including *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), and *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006) in terms of their focus on the concept of the subject. Notably, they outline how subjection brings the subject into being. The
work done by Jessica Benjamin in *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and The Problem of Domination* (1988) complements Butler’s theoretical research on the subject as it considers the continual operation of subjection throughout the existence of the self in its examination of the centrality that domination has in the practices of trust and nurturance associated with love. Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig’s previously mentioned *The Emptied Soul: On The Nature of The Psychopath* as well as his book *Marriage is Dead—Long Live Marriage!* (2008) provide theories on the self and love supporting my argument that love is a form of psychopathy, while also being a necessary experience as it allows an individual to have a fulfilling sense of self. With the work of these theorists, key scenes and sequences from *Dexter* will be critically examined that support my claim that love has allowed Dexter Morgan to make progress in his self-development.

In Chapter 1, the significance of the Mother in relation to Dexter’s sense of self will be interpreted by analyzing the death of Dexter’s birth-mother, Laura Moser, and the series’ visceral depiction of this event. While the series credits this as the root of Dexter’s sense of self in that it affected him in such a way that he became a serial killer, I will argue that it was not just this trauma that formed him. As evidence, I will draw on theories of subjection to demonstrate that the subject comes into being in complex ways and, as such, so too does the self. Nonetheless, the loss of Dexter’s mother, as well as the loss of his birth family, is significant to his evolution of self because it damages his Eros, which adversely affects his capacity to experience love. This, I argue, is the root cause of his becoming a serial killer and subsequent issues understanding himself.

In Chapter 2, I will evaluate the character of Harry Morgan as a father to deduce his influence on his son’s comprehension of love and how this relates to Dexter’s sense
of self. To do this I will analyze key flashbacks in the series’ that depict Harry’s practices as a parent who, out of love, trains his son to become a serial killer. As it is revealed throughout the series, Harry’s intentions in training Dexter are suspect. It will be argued that this parenting negatively affected Dexter’s already damaged Eros as it amounts to a perverse form of child abuse in that Harry indoctrinated his son with the belief that he was destined to be a serial killer. While Harry may have resorted to cruel and unusual practices in his psychological rearing of his son, Harry’s Code may have had an effect on Dexter that Harry never imagined. I will argue that The Code of Harry evolves into something that has allowed Dexter to grow into a person capable of experiencing emotional relationships with others as it gives him a set of morals, which operate as a means by which he is able to develop the ability to experience empathy and thus love.

In Chapter 3, I will evaluate the significance of the Other further in relation to Dexter’s experience of love and what impact this has on his self-development by analyzing his relationships with Deb and Rita, as well as with his son and adopted children. Additionally, I will address his season-length relationships with other characters throughout the series who have had an influence on his capacity to love. It will be argued that Dexter’s relationships with others have begun to repair the damage done to his Eros and therefore have allowed him to experience a fulfilling sense of self because of his deepening understanding of love. In addition to this, the role of sex in Dexter’s life will be evaluated. Each of Dexter’s sexual relationships, in different ways, has revealed that sex is a site of self-discovery that has allowed him to make progress in
his self-development. Lastly, Dexter’s consuming desire to be fully known by another person will be examined by analyzing his relationship with Deb.

Ultimately, in this thesis I will critically analyze *Dexter* to explore the question: What is the significance of love in relation to the self? Ironically, *Dexter* asks us to consider that love is a fundamental element in regards to the evolution of self by demonstrating its contradictorily essential role in the self-development of a figure that is not traditionally associated with love: the serial killer. Thus, the series succeeds at holding two discourses not usually connected with each other in a fascinating productive tension that provokes an interesting examination of the human condition. In *Dexter* there is a compelling balance between the series’ dark humor and its philosophically thought-provoking content. The series offers an original narrative by depicting the serial killer as human—struggling to connect to another person and experience love like we all do. Consequently, thinking about love in relation to *Dexter* generates unique insight about humanity that is a testament to the complexity and depth within popular North American television.
2. MOTHER

Born in Blood

Dexter Morgan was “born in blood” as a result of witnessing his birth-mother, Laura Moser, being murdered. The series presents this as Dexter’s “origin story” because the trauma it results in is suggested to be the primary reason for his being a serial killer. In voice-over narration, Dexter states, “I was there. I saw my mother’s death…It climbed inside me that day and it’s been with me ever since: my Dark Passenger” (“Truth Be Told” 111). But does this single event actually account for his becoming a serial killer? In this section I will begin to examine the influence of Dexter’s mother on his capacity to love and how this relates to his self-development by questioning the legitimacy given to the claim that he is a serial killer because of witnessing her murder. While I do not discount these interpretations of Dexter, I will be suggesting that this event did not merely cause something in Dexter’s biology to develop abnormally, but rather it resulted in his Eros being severely damaged. This adversely affected his capacity to experience love and I argue that this is the root cause of his becoming a serial killer and subsequent issues with his sense of self.

Dexter’s traumatic origin is first depicted in Season 1 during an episode titled “Shrink Wrap” (108). Prior to this, Dexter is not aware of the time before he was adopted by the Morgan family. The representation of Dexter’s trauma in “Shrink Wrap” is brief as it comes to him in the form of a sporadic and indecipherable recollection while under hypnosis during a therapy session. It is not until a few episodes later, in “Seeing Red” (110), that the scene of Laura Moser’s murder is depicted in graphic detail, when, in a blood soaked hotel room, Dexter remembers his childhood trauma. Dexter’s brother,
“The Ice Truck Killer” Brian Moser, has orchestrated this setting with chainsaw cast-off patterns in blood he has collected from his prior victims. In Dexter’s recollection, he is a three year old boy sitting in a pool of blood inside of a cargo container at Miami’s shipping docks.

In the flashback, Dexter has blood all over his body. Laura yells, “Don’t hurt my baby!” Then through sobs she tells Dexter to close his eyes. Laura is on her knees covered in blood begging for her life as a man approaches with a chainsaw. Dexter lets out piercing screams. Dismembered bodies are shown strewn about the floor of the cargo container. Laura desperately tells her small son, “Don’t cry. Please don’t cry. It’s going to be okay.” Dexter continues to let out unsettling high-pitched screams as Laura exclaims, “Don’t you dare! Not in front of my baby!” Her face is shown in direct address of the camera, representative of her compassionate final contact with her son, as she says, “Close your eyes Dexter. Don’t look. Close your eyes.” Dexter cries and sobs, “I want momma.” The chainsaw revs as it cuts into Laura and blood splashes on her face. Dexter lets out a final agonizing cry. Throughout this sequence emotional piano music plays that adds to the powerful imagery. Dexter recalls the voice of his mother saying, “Mommy loves you, Dexter.”

In the hotel room so many years later, the memory of this event literally floors Dexter as it causes him to crumple down and lay flat on the ground, staring into the camera with a look of profound emotional shock on his face. In subsequent episodes, Dexter’s trauma is given further detail. The finale of Season 1, “Born Free” (112), explains that Brian was in the cargo container and watched with Dexter as their mother was cut to pieces. In Season 2, in “Waiting To Exhale” (202), Dexter recalls
images of Brian in the cargo container. The two boys are in the fetal position in front of each other with their heads tucked between their knees and are holding hands. These representations, like all other flashbacks or imagined sequences in the series, are meant to depict Dexter’s subjective visual projections. Romeo Tirone describes the series’ flashbacks as “surreal” looking. He states, “[w]e want them to feel like fragments of memory—subjective, with tight close-ups against an indistinct background. You don’t see all the details of the environment” (Oppenheimer 2). The power of the aesthetics of the series’ representation of Dexter’s traumatic origin indicates the significance of this emotional event on his self-development.

To critically assess this scene and how it influences Dexter’s capacity to experience love and, consequently, what impact it has on his sense of self, I will begin by interpreting how the self comes into existence. Being a serial killer is like any other identity in that it is an aspect of the self. So in order to understand why Dexter is a serial killer, it must first be understood where the self comes from. What is the origin of self? I will turn to the theory of subjection elaborated by Judith Butler in order to provide an understanding of how a subject comes into existence through subjection and subsequently achieves the capacity to become a self.

Butler notes, “no intelligible reference to individuals or their becoming can take place without a prior reference to their status as subjects” (Psychic Life 11). This is because the origins of the self occur during subjection. At this time the subject has no agency or conscious knowledge of itself. The process of subjection is significant here in relation to the existence of the self because the potential for the emergence of the self is set into motion through subjection as it is the primary relationship with another. Through
interactions with others the subject experiences recognition, which allows for the subject to gain agency by acquiring conscious knowledge of itself (by means of another’s recognition) and, thus, enter into selfhood.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler defines subjection as “the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (2). She argues, “[w]hether by interpellation, in Althusser’s sense, or by discursive productivity, in Foucault’s, the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power” (Butler *Psychic Life* 2). This primary submission to power, which is a requirement of the emergence of the subject, takes place for most people with their parents or other caregivers during infancy. Proof of this is evident in the practices of parenting in which a primary care-giver cares for an infant in ways that construct the infant’s identity by shaping her or his behavioral patterns. The reason that Laura Moser is important in Dexter’s life is because she, as a single parent, is the most powerful individual in his primary experience of subjection. The figure of the mother is central within the discourse of Eros since it is the mother with whom the child first identifies and, as such, from whom the child learns to love.

The initial experience of love during primary subjection is a means by which an individual is shaped through subordination to another. As such, a person first experiences love that is the product of another’s subjective understanding of what love is and this forms the basis of what love will be in her or his life. In *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin examines the theory of subjection showing that love, from its earliest form between a mother and child to sexual relations between romantic partners, is predicated upon the domination of one person over another and through this domination
evolve processes of nurturance and trust (8). Butler writes, “a subject is not only formed in subordination, but...this subordination provides the subject’s continuing condition of possibility” (Psychic Life 8). Consequently, “[t]o desire the conditions of one’s own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself” (Butler Psychic Life 9). This speaks to the understanding of love as a form of psychopathy necessary for the existence of the self because an individual must consciously be in a position of vulnerability, and therefore harm, in order to exist as her or himself.

A subject must passionately attach, or love, the other to which their emergence as a subject depends upon. It seems, then, that initially love is unconsciously accepted as a necessity of a subject’s existence. In other words, Butler states:

[I]f the child is to persist in a psychic and social sense, there must be dependency and the formation of attachment: there is no possibility of not loving, where love is bound up with the requirement for life. The child does not know to what he/she attaches; yet the infant as well as the child must attach in order to persist in and as itself. No subject can emerge without this attachment, formed in dependency, but no subject, in the course of its formation, can ever afford fully to ‘see’ it.

(Psychic Life 8)

The inability of the subject to afford any conscious understanding of its attachment to another implies that the initial experience of subjection is a core element of the unconscious. It is an impossibility for a subject to consciously recognize the conditions of its emergence because this would require agency on its part that it does not have until it enters into selfhood. As the unconscious acts to continually influence a person’s sense of self, her or his primary experience of love through subjection (which is at the
foundation of the unconscious) will always be a determining factor to her or his self-development.

Now that I have mentioned the origins of the self in the experience of subjection, indicating the significance of Dexter’s mother on his understanding of love, I want to move on to examine the question: How did Dexter evolve in such a way that he became a serial killer? In *How To Make a Serial Killer: The Twisted Development of Innocent Children into the World’s Most Sadistic Murderers* (2008), Christopher Berry-Dee and Steven Morris point out that “there is no one route to becoming a serial killer” (xvii). Still, as referenced, evaluating serial killers as psychopaths reveals that many of them have damaged Eros.

Lisa Firestone, in “Rethinking Dexter” (2010), notes that childhood trauma has a profound “impact on actual brain development: it can cause serious structural abnormalities in the frontal lobe, known as ‘the seat of emotion’” (22). Yet, Robert D. Hare states, “most people who had horrible childhoods do not become psychopaths or callous killers” (6). Taking into consideration the importance of Dexter’s “origin story,” I argue that this event is an instance of subjection because it fundamentally shapes him by severely damaging his Eros. However, Dexter’s childhood trauma is not the only instance of damage done to his Eros, therefore it alone cannot be seen as the single event that shapes his sense of self nor the sole cause of his becoming a serial killer.

Nevertheless, Guggenbuhl-Craig states that “[c]hildren need mothers; without them, humanity would become instinct” (*Marriage* 47). In other words, without mothers, or a nurturing figure, people would not learn to love and, therefore, would not be able to relate to one another outside of impersonal means of fulfilling their primal instincts for
protection and pleasure. This can be argued to be the case with Dexter as the loss of his mother did contribute to his becoming a serial killer.

Having a damaged Eros leaves a void inside of serial killers that makes them incapable of connecting with other people. On this point, Dexter at first understands himself to be “empty inside” (“Dexter” 101). In “Being Dexter Morgan” (2010), Christopher Ryan suggests:

A child like Dexter was, locked in the bloody container with his mother’s body for days, would have no such capacities or existential worldview to help him overcome such an experience. But the developing consciousness demands integration, so Dexter embraced his horrific experience, making the blood, the death, and the resulting numbness core parts of his being. (248)

This accounts for Dexter’s emotional invalidism as a child and, subsequently, his becoming a serial killer. J.S. Piven, in “The Thread of Death, or the Compulsion to Kill” (2010), believes that “serial killers repeat their catastrophic woundedness by inflicting it on others” (215). It can be argued that the inability to connect with other people causes serial killers great distress that translates into a desperate and confused attempt to fulfill this need for connection through murder. By killing someone they experience a kind of emotional intimacy by having control over another’s life.

For Dexter, the significance of his mother can be seen in how she acts as a powerful figure in his primary experiences of subjection: his birth into the world as her child and the birth of his Dark Passenger when he watches her die. These events have in common that they are both instances of him being “born in blood.” Butler states that “[s]ubjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never
chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (*Psychic Life* 2). In voice-over during an episode titled “Truth Be Told” (111), Dexter reflects, “My mother was murdered before my eyes. It makes sense I choose a life where I search for meaning in blood when the sole memory I have of her is being covered in it.” Indeed, blood is Dexter’s life: as a serial killer he causes blood to be spilled when he murders someone (collecting a drop of it from each of his victims on a slide as a souvenir) and in his career as a blood-spatter analyst he studies, analyzes, and categorizes it. While it is questionable that a single event can so radically account for the complexity of selfhood, Dexter’s childhood trauma of being “born in blood” nonetheless shapes his sense of self as it fundamentally damages his Eros and, thus, his capacity to experience love.

**The Trauma of Self**

Clearly what Dexter experiences as a three year old boy in the cargo container in which his mother is murdered is a severe form of trauma. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler contends that subjection, as a form of primary address, is the first experience of trauma. She states, “[t]o be addressed carries with it a trauma” (Butler *Giving Account* 84). Here, trauma should be understood as a value-neutral term in that it is not necessarily negative; rather, it simply is an experience that deeply impacts an individual’s sense of self by shaping her or his psyche. With this being said, the self can only exist through trauma. If this is true does it also mean that the self is formed by being damaged? Is the self the sum of the traumas it has endured? In this section I will critically analyze the trauma that Dexter experiences as a means to ascertain the extent to which it acts to influence his self-development by damaging his Eros. I argue that it is a
necessary influence on him because it is an occurrence that causes his sense of self to take shape.

To understand the essential function of trauma in regards to the self, I will first outline what makes trauma so powerful by drawing from research done in trauma theory by Ruth Leys in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000). Leys defines trauma as “the wounding of the mind brought about by sudden, unexpected, emotional shock” (4). The psychological pain of trauma forms an individual by shaping her or his psyche (Leys 9). Rather than a constructive activity, the means by which trauma shapes the psyche is by damaging it in a fundamental way.

The damage done to the psyche causes memory to become severely injured leading to post-traumatic stress disorder. As Dexter aptly remarks, “trauma can distort the memory” (“Father Knows Best” 109). Leys elaborates this point by stating:

Post-traumatic stress disorder is fundamentally a disorder of memory. The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. (2)

This description fits with the representation of Dexter’s initial recollection of his trauma during “Shrink Wrap” (108) in which he recovers the memory of his childhood trauma during a therapy session while under hypnosis.
In the episode, Dexter is in a session with Dr. Emmett Meridian (who he is actually visiting with future plans to kill as the psychiatrist is responsible for a string of suicides of powerful women). As trauma induces a “shattering of the personality” (Leys 4), Meridian puts Dexter through a deep relaxation form of hypnosis in an effort to restore some continuity to his sense of self. Leys points out that “the aim of hypnotic treatment is to help the patient to recover the memory of the trauma and thereby to restore her to a condition of adaptive wholeness” (80). Meridian dims the lights and gets Dexter to relax on the therapist’s couch. Then he tells Dexter to close his eyes and remember a time when he felt completely powerless. The method works and Dexter falls under hypnosis.

In vivid and jarring flashbacks, he remembers a time in his teens when he was bullied and felt like killing his tormenters, but did not because of Harry’s guidance. These memories are presented in a sporadic fashion. Suddenly, these recollections are interlaced with images of a small boy covered in blood crying and letting out piercing screams, with the sound of roaring chainsaws in the background. The child’s cries get so intense that Dexter wakes out of his hypnosis deeply shaken and flees the therapist’s office. The reason that it is possible for Dexter to recover his traumatic memories and that they have not been completely lost is because they remain in the unconscious as a determining influence on his sense of self.

As a child, Dexter represses this event as it is too overwhelming for him to consciously experience. Trauma “immerse[s] the victim in the traumatic scene so profoundly that it preclude[s] the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what had happened” (Leys 9). Leys writes that trauma is:
[A] situation of dissociation or ‘absence’ from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was likened to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance. Trauma was therefore understood as an experience of hypnotic imitation or identification—what I call mimesis—an experience that, because it appeared to shatter the victim’s cognitive-perceptual capacities, made the traumatic scene unavailable for a certain kind of recollection. (8-9)

Revealingly, Dexter describes his actions as a serial killer by explaining that “for the longest time it was the only way I could feel unbroken” (“Take It!” 508).

The theme of trauma in *Dexter* is another reason why the psyche of Dexter Morgan is so intriguing. In *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* (1998), Mark Seltzer believes that we live in a “wound culture,” which he defines as “the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (1). Seltzer states, “[o]ne of the preconditions of our contemporary wound culture is the emergence of psychology as public culture” (109). This idea of a “wound culture” is not only a possible explanation for *Dexter*’s popularity as a series about a serial killer, but also accounts for the interest in its protagonist’s psyche.

All experiences that have the capacity to significantly influence the self are in some ways instances of trauma. Consequently, as *Dexter* indicates, love is psychologically traumatic in the sense that it is a profound emotional bond capable of deeply affecting the self. Subjection can be interpreted as an experience of love in that the subject coming into being as a self has a profound emotional dependency on another
because of the nurturance offered to it and the trust established in this relationship. Perhaps this means that what we find unspeakable about love as an intense experience is a result of its connection to the trauma associated with subjection; a trauma that is unknowable as a result of our inability to register its occurrence in light of its overwhelming power. Love’s power during subjection is attested to by Dexter’s loss of his primary love object in his mother at a young age, which forms his sense of self through the trauma it induces.

**Blood Relatives**

Before Dexter’s Eros is damaged, he begins his life in a caring environment with his birth-mother who introduces him to love and being a part of a family. Dexter’s memory of his birth family, the Mosers, and his initial experiences of love with his mother are repressed along with the memory of her death as the result of the trauma he endures. Still, Dexter’s experiences of love with his mother as a member of the Moser family are significant as they establish what potential meaning love could have in his life. This is because, as I have mentioned, a child’s initial experience of love is a site of primary subjection. In this section I will be examining the influence of Laura Moser’s nurturance of Dexter through his experiences with his birth family and what effect they had on his ability to love and, therefore, how they continually influence his developing sense of self throughout the series.

Dexter’s first memories of his childhood with Laura Moser and his birth family come in the finale of Season 1, “Born Free” (112). In these recollections, there is a nostalgic element to the mise-en-scène that is representative of 1970s middle-class American suburbia. The Moser home has a white picket fence and the yard is lush with
overgrown green vegetation. Children’s toys, such as a tricycle and a beach ball, are scattered across the front yard indicating that happy kids play in this environment. There is a concrete walkway leading to the front door in a welcoming manner. The one-story house has a colorful look, painted in pastel purple with a yellow trim, giving off a sense of fun. A small Dexter is in the yard playing hide-and-seek with his big brother Brian. The boys look to be three and eight years old respectively. Dexter calls Brian “Biney” because at his young age he has trouble pronouncing Brian. Their mother comes out into the yard with a smile looking for her boys. Laura is in pigtails and wearing a t-shirt of the rock band The Doors. Her fingernails are all painted in different bright colors. Laura gives off the impression of a free spirit with her youthful flower child look. The Mosers seem to be a very happy and loving family as Laura warmly addresses Dexter, while Brian wraps his arms around him in a bear hug.

Dexter’s reminiscence of his time as a Moser is presented in soft lighting, creating a warmly opaque coloration to the scene indicating its subjective nature as a flashback. Furthering this feeling is the audio that is modified to give the characters’ spoken words a comforting surreal echo. Laura Moser is presented as a loving woman and Brian is depicted as an ideal big brother who adores his younger sibling. Even Dexter’s birth-father, Joe Driscoll, who did not appear to be a full-time member of his birth family, seems to have been adored by Dexter. In a flashback during “Father Knows Best” (109), a young Dexter sits in the front seat of a 1970s era convertible and looks at Joe’s spider web tattoo on his elbow. Dexter appears to be content to be sitting beside a man by whom he clearly feels protected. While Joe is an ex-con, it is insinuated that he had the ability to turn his life around, which speaks to his character. Despite these warm
recollections, the love that Laura offers her sons is superseded by their tragic memory of her death as both Dexter and Brian become serial killers.

As indicated, the event of trauma suffered by Dexter and Brian can be understood to have severely damaged their Eros as they lose a mother and a family that they depend on for love. However, unlike Dexter, Brian is old enough to consciously process his trauma, which leads to him having severe emotional issues. At the root of these issues is Brian’s longing for his lost family. The cat-and-mouse game that Brian stages as “The Ice Truck Killer” with Dexter can be interpreted as a means to simulate the lost childhood play that they never had as brothers when they were growing up. An example of this is when Dexter finds a cryptic puzzle in the form of a chopped up Barbie doll from Brian in the pilot of the series (“Dexter” 101). Dexter says, “I think this is a friendly message, kinda like ‘Hey, wanna play?’ And yes, I wanna play. I really, really do.”

Brian desperately wants to connect with Dexter. An instance of this occurs when he kills Dexter’s birth-father as a way to set up a meeting with his brother. Subsequently, Dexter takes Rita to deal with the estate that his birth-father left him in his will (“Father Knows Best” 109). Later, they are joined by Deb, who is accompanied by her boyfriend at the time, Rudy Cooper (which turns out to be an alias Brian is using to hide his identity). Prompted by the conflicting feelings generated by the death of Joe Driscoll, Dexter bonds with Brian. This illustrates Brian’s psychopathic understanding of love and desperate need to connect with Dexter, not hesitating to nonchalantly kill in order to arrange a meeting with him.

In fact, Brian’s entire career as “The Ice Truck Killer” can be understood as a perverse means to restore his lost family and fulfill the part of himself that he feels is
missing by experiencing love. Brian’s cryptic message to Dexter in the form of a chopped up Barbie doll is meant to assist him in remembering his childhood trauma of watching their mother being cut to pieces. Brian has painted the Barbie’s fingernails in different colors to remind Dexter of their mother’s habit of painting her fingernails in the same manner. All of Brian’s kills are staged for Dexter (as a member of the Miami Metro Police investigating team) to find as Brian poses the blood-drained body parts of his victims in contrived arrangements in public settings. As previously noted, this blood Brian collects to orchestrate Dexter’s recollection of his trauma in the blood soaked hotel room in “Seeing Red” (110).

Brian’s longing for a relationship with Dexter signifies the importance of Laura Moser in their emotional bond as members of the Moser family. Their connection as brothers is strengthened because they share the experience of losing their mother and end up becoming serial killers. Though they have very different childhoods (Dexter is adopted by the loving Morgan family and Brian is institutionalized with anti-social personality disorder), they both have similar issues with their understanding of themselves. As Brian explains to Dexter when the two are finally reunited as brothers, they have been living a lie their entire lives. Brian tells him, “I know what you’ve been going through all these years. The isolation, the otherness, the hunger that’s never satisfied. You’re not alone anymore Dexter. You can be yourself with me. Your real genuine self” (“Born Free” 112). Brian offers himself to Dexter as a brother with whom he can completely be himself because the love that Brian has for his little brother is unconditional.
In the end, during an emotional scene, Dexter kills Brian as a means to both protect Deb and set his brother free (“Born Free” 112). A tear rolls down Brian’s cheek as he realizes that he will never have the family he once did. After killing Brian, Dexter falls backwards into the fetal position, overcome by grief. Killing Brian causes a deep conflict in him as he severs his only remaining tie to his mother and his birth family, and thus all of the people who introduced him to love are dead. Still, the power of the love Laura gave Dexter as a member of the Moser family is carried by him all throughout his life. This is affirmed in an episode during Season 6, “The Angel of Death” (605), in which Dexter discusses his mother with Brother Sam, who asks him if he remembers anything about her before she died. Dexter replies, “I don’t know. I remember at night she would wrap me in a quilt and sing songs to me. Sometimes she’d trace her finger along my ear tickling me.” Brother Sam says, “It must have made you feel good.” “It did,” Dexter agrees. Brother Sam states, “She was sharing that light with you. It’s with you now. It’s inside of you.”

Laura Moser gives Dexter the memory of a time before blood became his life and he experienced love with his birth-family. In Season 7, Dexter comes face to face with the man who organized his mother’s murder, Hector Estrada. In “Do You See What I See?” (711), Dexter has Hector on his table and says, “I am Dexter Moser and I’m going to kill you.” This signifies that being a Moser continues to be a deeply rooted part of his sense of self well into adulthood. Before attempting to kill Hector, Dexter wonders, “If I can break this last strand from my past, do I get the future I want?” By killing the man responsible for his mother’s death, Dexter believes that he may be able to stop being a serial killer and move on with his life. This illustrates the profound importance that
Laura Moser has on Dexter’s sense of self. Losing her and his birth family causes Dexter to lose a part of himself, but what is left is his strong desire to regain that missing piece by experiencing love.
3. FATHER

When Harry Met Dexter

At first sight *Dexter* seems to be the story of a father’s unconditional love for his small son. Indeed, Harry goes so far as to train Dexter how to be a serial killer with a moral code in order to protect him from being arrested and sent to his death. However, as it is revealed throughout the series, Harry’s intentions in giving Dexter his unique brand of parenting are questionable to say the least. In this section I will evaluate the implications of that fateful day when Dexter first meets Officer Harry Morgan. On this day, Harry enters a blood soaked cargo container at Miami’s shipping docks and walks out with one small boy to whom he would become a father to and so much more. Harry is not only a prominent influence on Dexter throughout his childhood and adolescence, as he raised him and taught him The Code of Harry, but even after his death he is a significant figure as Dexter engages in imaginary conversations with his deceased father. With this in mind, I will begin to examine perhaps the most prominent question in relation to *Dexter*: What is Harry’s influence on Dexter’s sense of self?

Harry is introduced in the pilot of the series, “Dexter” (101), during Dexter’s first depicted flashback. In this scene, a young Dexter is sitting next to Harry on a fishing boat that is floating in water. “You’re different aren’t you, Dexter,” Harry says as he looks at his son with a concerned expression on his face. Dexter looks up at Harry and asks, “What do you mean, Pop?” Harry collects himself and confronts Dexter with news that a dog named Buddy in their neighborhood has gone missing. Dexter looks down, expressionless, at his feet. There is no background music in this scene, which acts to create a feeling of isolation by highlighting the silence of the environment. “I found the
grave, son” Harry soberly declares. Dexter’s head shoots up with a stoic demeanor as he defends himself by stating, “That dog was a noisy little creep, Dad. He was barking all night and Mom couldn’t sleep. And she’s very, very sick. And that lousy dog was yapping at every leaf that blew down the sidewalk.” Harry continues to listen to his son with sincere compassion. He then tells him, “There were a lot of bones in there, Dexter. And not just Buddy’s.”

The imagery of this scene is soft-toned, which emphasizes its nostalgic feeling. The visual aesthetics depict an innocent boy and a concerned father who loves him deeply. While the flashback most likely occurs during the late 1970s, it is reminiscent of a wholesome presentation of the father and son relationship typical of 1950s era ideals of American masculinity in the way it depicts a weathered and rustic older man attempting to guide a young boy while out on the lake fishing—an all-American pastime. In the scene, Harry towers over Dexter, who is only about eight years old, indicating his status as guardian and mentor to his son. The sequence utilizes framing that relies on the shot-reverse-shot method commonly used in dialogue exchanges between two characters. This accentuates the intimacy of the discussion between Harry and Dexter, revealing the loving nature of their father-son relationship and foreshadowing the influential part that Harry will have in his son’s life.

When Dexter first meets Harry, he rescues Dexter by picking him up out of his mother’s blood and carrying him out of the cargo container in which she died. After the severe emotional trauma that he has just gone through, Harry is immediately identified by him as a savior figure, which gives Harry god-like qualities in Dexter’s eyes. When Harry adopts Dexter, the two become intimately attached to each other. Berry-Dee and
Morris note that “[a]doption and being brought into an entirely different home with different faces at such a tender age can cause immense emotional upheaval to a developing personality” (125). Nonetheless, Dexter’s adoption by the Morgan family introduces him to a new group of people who love him. Yet, as his Eros is damaged, he is unable to incorporate this love the way he could in his birth family; though, this newly found love still deeply acts to shape him in a fundamental way.

In the case of Dexter, the combination of his Eros being damaged and his being a child susceptible to influence allows Harry to form his understanding of love as a boy. Judith Butler argues:

A child’s love is prior to judgment and decision; a child tended and nourished in a ‘good enough’ way will love, and only later stand a chance of discriminating among those he or she loves. This is to say, not that the child loves blindly (since from early on there is discernment and ‘knowingness’ of an important kind), but only that if the child is to persist in a psychic and social sense, there must be dependency and the formation of attachment: there is no possibility of not loving, where love is bound up with the requirements for life. (Psychic Life 8)

Here, it is implied that love is a requirement for life because of a child’s need of another. Dexter’s emotional vulnerability left him with a need to develop a strong attachment to Harry.

Jessica Benjamin suggests that “the desire for recognition by the father wholly overtakes the love of the mother; it becomes another motive for domination” (59). Dexter’s strong attachment to his birth-mother is replaced by his attachment to Harry. “This early love of the father is an ‘ideal love’: the child idealizes the father because the
father is the magical mirror that reflects the self as it wants to be—the ideal in which the child wants to recognize himself” (Benjamin 100). Accordingly, Dexter incorporates The Code of Harry into his sense of self. In the series, Dexter initially believes that he was taught Harry’s Code out of love and as such Harry’s influence becomes a core part of his being, directing every area of his life.

Harry’s relationship with Dexter is a testament to the love a father has for his son. However, as I have noted, the combination of Dexter’s being a child and the fact that he went through a severe trauma left him extremely vulnerable to influence. Harry exerts power over Dexter in a process of subjection, thus shaping his sense of self. While subjection is inherent in the experience of love, the subjection that Harry is responsible for shapes Dexter by teaching him how to be a serial killer. Harry claims to have done this through love, but this is indeed an unusual form of love. So, did Harry rescue Dexter from the crime scene of his mother’s murder and offer him a form of parenting that he desperately needed? Or did he exert a negative influence on Dexter by misunderstanding his emotional and psychological needs and adversely affecting his sense of self and life course by parenting him in the manner that he did? Did Harry make Dexter a serial killer?

**The Sins of The Father**

Harry is not perfect. He is a disgruntled Miami police officer who largely neglects his family for his job. He cheats on his wife with Dexter’s birth-mother, Laura Moser, who was one of his criminal informants. He also arguably causes her death by urging her to work on a case that ultimately leads to her murder. Still, Harry has a number of admirable qualities such as being a dedicated cop who is adamant about
upholding the law and seeing justice served. But is Harry a good father? Is he an admirable man? Is he worthy of the worship and idolization that Dexter places upon him? In this section I will critically analyze Harry Morgan’s character and his abilities as a father in order to evaluate the qualities of the influence that he has on Dexter, arguing that Harry’s influence over his son acts to cause further injury to his already severely damaged Eros. Thus, perhaps Harry does not so much save Dexter from the electric chair by teaching him to be a serial killer with a moral code, but rather offers him a cruel and unusual form of parenting that amounts to child abuse.

To begin assessing the qualities of Harry’s influence as a father I will first examine his character. One event that I believe is very telling of Harry’s character is when he saves Dexter from the scene of Laura Moser’s murder and leaves Brian behind. When Harry grabs Dexter and takes him away, the two boys’ hands are tragically pulled apart as Brian screams for Dexter not to leave him (“Waiting To Exhale” 202). Why didn’t Harry take Brian from the cargo container? How could he save one child and not the other? Surely even in a moment of heightened shock and adrenaline such as what Harry experienced entering the blood soaked scene with dismembered human bodies he must have been aware of the presence of two traumatized children. And even if he was not aware of Brian in the cargo container, would he not have wanted to reunite the two emotionally destroyed boys after he realized they were brothers?

When Dexter asks his brother if he was put up for adoption, Brian replies, “Afraid not. You were three, the little bird with a broken wing. First cop on the scene, Harry Morgan, he wanted to make you all better. But me? You could see it in his eyes. All he saw was a fucked up kid. They all did. So they locked me up.” Dexter, stunned,
helplessly says, “I didn’t even know you existed.” “Of course you didn’t,” Brian acknowledges, “Harry wanted to keep you all to himself. And while you were being raised by the Morgan family, I only had the memory of a family” (“Born Free” 112). Harry may have rescued Dexter on that day, but he took the only thing that Brian had left in the world—his little brother. Perhaps Dexter and Brian did not become serial killers because they were “born in blood,” but because of Harry’s interference in their lives. If the reason why Harry rescues Dexter is because he feels guilty for Laura Moser’s death, he would have rescued both her sons from the cargo container. Therefore, Harry makes a conscious choice when he rescues Dexter and leaves Brian—he literally handpicks a son for himself.

The reason Harry wanted a son not only relates to the common masculine desire for an heir, but is connected to his issues as a disgruntled cop. Dexter admits, “My father had more than his share of pain” (“Crocodile” 102). This pain stems from the experiences he has as a cop in Miami seeing the evil that people are capable of and justice not being served. It seems that Harry deeply wanted someone to carry on his legacy as an enforcer of the law. So Harry turned Dexter’s urge to kill into a proficient method of cleansing Miami’s streets of criminals. Regardless of whether or not Dexter is destined to become a serial killer, it is certain that the lessons that Harry teaches him during his childhood and adolescence in The Code of Harry perpetuate this perceived inevitability.

During a flashback in the pilot of the series, the origins of Harry’s Code are exposed (“Dexter” 101). Unlike most other flashbacks, this scene has an eerie feel, being set at night and one of the rare occasions in the series that a handheld camera is used to
create an unsettling effect. In the flashback, a teenaged Dexter is fixing a skateboard in a dimly lit garage. Harry enters the garage and drops a satchel containing an assortment of bloodied knives on the skateboard. Harry tells Dexter in an accusatory manner, “Whenever you get an urge you come to me. You tell me and we deal with it together.” This scene is extremely underexposed, making Dexter and Harry appear blacked out against a lit background, which creates a chilling image. As well, the characters are shown to be damp with sweat, indicative of the series’ Miami setting (known for its hellish humidity). The combination of the darkened facial features and the glistening sweat on their faces gives a ghoulish look to each of them.

Like a teen boy who has been caught with pornographic magazines, Dexter explains in an almost frantic defense that the blood on the knives belongs to animals he has killed. Forlorn, Harry says, “I thought we had this under control.” Harry asks Dexter if he remembers anything from before he was taken in by the Morgan family. After Dexter replies that he does not, Harry explains, “What happened changed something inside you. It got into you too early. I’m afraid your urge to kill is only going to get stronger.” Dismayed by this, Dexter asks, “You’re saying I’ll be like this forever?” Harry reassures Dexter by telling him he is a good kid. Then, The Code of Harry is born as Harry devises an idea that he believes will save his son’s life.

Harry proclaims, “Okay, so we can’t stop this, but maybe we can do something to channel it. Use it for good.” A confused Dexter asks, “How could it ever be good?” “Son,” Harry begins, “There are people out there who do really bad things. Terrible people. And the police can’t catch them all. Do you understand what I’m saying?” Dexter answers, “You’re saying they deserve it.” Harry agrees, “That’s right. But of
course you have to learn how to spot them. How to cover your tracks. But I can teach you.” Dexter seems to be unsettled by his father’s words. Harry comforts his son, “It’s okay, Dex. You can’t help what happened to you, but you can make the best of it. Remember this forever: you are my son, you are not alone, and you are loved.” As Harry looks into the camera toward the end of the sequence, representing his eye-contact with his son, viewers witness his sincerity as he addresses Dexter. With this, the terrifying nature of the relationship between this father and son is displayed in vivid clarity.

Harry’s teaching of The Code of Harry to his son actively shapes Dexter. As Dexter declares, “Sometimes I’m not sure where Harry’s vision of me ends and the real me starts” (“Let’s Give The Boy A Hand” 104). Harry abuses Dexter’s reliance on him for love by offering childhood lessons that are harmful to his sense of self. In an episode titled “Love American Style” (105), a flashback is shown of a teenaged Dexter mowing the lawn as Harry works with tools on a vehicle. After a girl walks by their house and asks an oblivious Dexter about an upcoming school dance, Harry offers him advice on relationships. Dexter says, “I don’t really care about girls.” This concerns Harry. “I just like being alone” remarks Dexter. Harry replies in a matter-of-fact way, “Most normal people don’t and it’s important that you seem normal.” A resigned Dexter states, “Even though I’m not.” Harry corrects him, “Because you’re not.” Again, this flashback shows the all-American demeanor of the father and son relationship between the two. However, under this wholesome surface of a caring parent offering guidance to his child, Dexter’s sense of self is being deeply affected in a negative way by Harry’s assertion that he is not normal.
Harry’s firm belief that Dexter is going to become a serial killer can be interpreted as a form of psychological abuse. Livingston states, “[t]he definition of self that we choose (or that is chosen for us) sets clear limits on our acceptable range of behaviors” (97). In “Popping Cherry” (103), an episode during Season 1, Harry is revealed to have urged Dexter to commit his first murder. When a nurse who overmedicates patients under her care (causing them to die a slow death) begins to give Harry too much morphine while he is in the hospital, he is insistent that Dexter begins his career as a serial killer. In a flashback, from Harry’s hospital bed, he tells Dexter to “Stop her.” Dexter asks, “What do you mean: stop her? To which Harry responds, “It’s time. Before she hurts anyone else.” In “Dexter’s Mirror” (2011), Piven suggests that “Dexter begins murdering people not only to channel [his] helplessness and rage, but to satisfy Harry” (86)—and to save his life.

In the series’ representation of Dexter’s first kill, a frightened looking twenty year old Dexter clumsily struggles to subdue the nurse in her apartment. The scene is played for laughs, being accompanied by comical music. This is in tune with the series’ dark humor, but the implications of this event clearly indicate that Harry feels justified in training his son to kill. In fact, Harry outright says this in a flashback in Season 2 during “There’s Something About Harry” (210) after learning that a pimp responsible for a number of women’s deaths is going to escape charges. Upon hearing this news, Harry snaps and smashes a beer bottle, consequently ruining a teenaged Deb’s birthday party. Deb complacently gets up and goes to clean the mess. Emotionally overwhelmed, Harry turns to Dexter in a seemingly delusional trance and contends, “I did the right thing in training you. This just proves it. I did the right thing.”
Certainly not just Dexter lives in the wake of Harry’s influence, but so too does Deb, who has a plethora of emotional issues caused by her father. Deb openly admits she became a cop to impress Harry (“Circle of Friends” 107). Deb’s growing disdain for her father, as a result of his emotional and literal absence in her life, can be seen when she counsels Dexter on his upcoming entry into fatherhood. Deb tells him, “What’ll make me happy is you being there for that kid. For homework and plays, and softball games. Don’t you dare be like dad.” To which Dexter replies, “That’s never gonna happen” (“Turning Biminese” 305). In “The Angels on His Shoulder” (2010), Jeremy Clyman believes that Dexter and Deb “both struggle to identify and express their emotions, to trust others, and, most importantly, to view themselves without distortion” (119). Perhaps Harry’s ultimate failures as a father result from his emotional incapacity to properly acknowledge his children.

In the first episode of Season 3 titled “Our Father” (301), Dexter realizes Harry’s shortcomings as a parent and attempts to rid his life of him in what Deb describes as “You gotta kill your father so you can become your own man kind of bullshit.” Still, Harry’s influence is deeply ingrained in Dexter, resulting in Harry appearing to him in imaginary conversations. Marisa Mauro, in “It’s All About Harry: Is The Morgan Family a Narcissistic Family?” (2010), suggests that Harry shows up in imaginary form in an attempt to prevent Dexter’s evolution of self. She states, “[t]hreatening his newfound independence, a critical Harry began to appear in Dexter’s visions, perhaps reflecting Dexter’s unconscious worries about his own emotional growth” (Mauro 173). The first time in the series that Harry appears in imaginary form is in “Finding Freebo” (302).
Dexter is imagining the possibility of having a child and Harry emerges, causing him to remark, “Harry: the last person I’d turn to for advice on fatherhood. Old habits die hard.”

In “Dexter the Busy Bee” (2011), David Ramsay Steele, points out that “while we keep being fed the line that Dexter is a predetermined killer and that Harry gives him the Code which guides and constrains his killing, the facts of the narrative tell us that Harry both gives Dexter the Code and deliberately turns him into a killer” (200). It is clear that Harry feels responsible for Dexter being a serial killer as it is revealed that he kills himself after walking in on Dexter dismembering one of his victims (“There’s Something About Harry” 210). Dexter sums it up as such: “Harry finds me in a pool of blood, turns me into his own personal vendetta machine, and when he sees the monster he created in action he kills himself” (“Our Father” 301).

On this note, maybe it was Harry who had a lack of Eros. Guggenbuhl-Craig writes that “[m]oralists are often not loving, and moral acts often have little to do with Eros” (Emptied Soul 74). Revealingly, when Harry is imagined by Dexter, he is often sitting in the passenger seat of Dexter’s car, which is a possible reference to Harry as his Dark Passenger. The form of love that Harry gives illustrates the psychopathic nature of love as he genuinely believes he is doing the right thing for his son by training him to be a serial killer. Do the sins of the father punish his children? If so, maybe Harry’s sins as a father are the ways in which he perverted his children’s understanding of love.

A Moral Monster?

What Dexter is taught by The Code of Harry gives him a set of rules that he uses to shape his identity and guide him through his life. As referenced, primary among the tenets of Harry’s Code is the instruction to only kill those who deserve to die. Though,
Harry’s Code does not simply make Dexter some sort of hero because it instructs him to only kill criminals; rather, it has profound implications on Dexter’s self-development. In this section I will analyze the influence of The Code of Harry and argue that while it has many controversial elements, it has played an important part in Dexter’s evolution of self by allowing him to develop morality. Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig, in *The Emptied Soul*, contends that morality is potentially what makes a subject capable of being a self. He states that morality can be regarded as “the expression of the divine spark in each of us” (*Guggenbuhl-Craig Emptied Soul* 73). Furthermore, he argues that morality contributes to individuation, which is the process of self-realization (*Guggenbuhl-Craig Emptied Soul* 73). I will be suggesting that Dexter’s ability to develop a sense of morality because of Harry’s Code makes him experience empathy for other people. Consequently, Dexter grows the capacity to love.

To critically analyze the significance of Harry’s Code I will begin by examining the concept of morality. In the introduction of *Serial Killers—Philosophy for Everyone* (2010), titled “Meditations on Murder, or What is so Philosophical about Serial Killers?,” S. Waller and William E. Deal state that “[m]orality lets us function in a society, with other people: if we cannot relate to other people, then we have no method for understanding good and evil” (10). In terms of the psychological constitution of a serial killer, morality is revealed to be the critical missing element. Guggenbuhl-Craig observes that “the lack of morality in psychopaths results from a lack of Eros” (*Emptied Soul* 76). This relates to Dexter because his Eros is severely damaged. “When Eros is absent, the individual wishing to emulate Eros-like behavior has no choice but to attempt to establish a system of values and rules for moral behavior to which one can adhere”
(Guggenbuhl-Craig *Emptied Soul* 75). Harry made sure that Dexter did exactly this by adopting The Code of Harry.

In many ways, Harry’s Code acts as a conscience for Dexter. In describing the concept of the conscience, Robert D. Hare writes:

>Socialization—through parenting, schooling, social experiences, religious training, and so forth—helps to create a system of beliefs, attitudes, and personal standards that determine how we interact with the world around us. Socialization also contributes to the formation of what most people call their conscience, the pesky inner voice that helps us to resist temptation and to feel guilty when we don’t. (75)

Further elaborating on the concept of the conscience, Hare continues, “[c]onscience depends not only on the ability to imagine consequences but on the capacity to mentally ‘talk to oneself’” (77). In this respect, both Dexter’s voice-over narration and his imaginary conversations with Harry are very telling of his nature as a being with a conscience.

There is proof of an existing conscience in Dexter before he was indoctrinated in the tenets of Harry’s Code. An example of this can be seen in a flashback where Harry is talking to a young Dexter about his urge to kill. Harry asks Dexter, “Have you ever wanted to kill anything else? You know, something bigger than a dog?” Dexter answers yes. Harry is persistent in his questioning, “Like a person?” “Yeah,” Dexter responds, “But no one in particular.” Harry asks, “Why didn’t you?” With sincerity, Dexter says, “I thought you and Mom wouldn’t like it” (“Dexter” 101). The fact that Dexter did not kill a person as a result of thinking that his parents would not approve demonstrates that
as a child he did have a sense of morality, otherwise he would not care what anyone thought of his actions.

An instance in which Dexter demonstrates his personal sense of morality that is unassociated from Harry’s Code is in his encounter with a teenaged killer named Jeremy Downs (Mark L. Young) during “Popping Cherry” (103). Dexter feels empathy for Jeremy as he identifies with his predicament of being a youth with a compulsion to kill. This example of Dexter’s morality occurs not only without the prompting of Harry’s Code, but in spite of it because feeling empathy for Jeremy puts Dexter at risk. This is especially true when, in an episode titled “Circle of Friends” (107), Dexter reaches out in an attempt to help Jeremy.

Dexter tells him, “I’m a lot like you, you know.” To which Jeremy skeptically retorts, “Yeah right. You’re a killer?” With a dead serious demeanor, Dexter explains, “I’m empty. But I found a way to make it feel less bottomless.” Jeremy asks, “How?” “Pretend,” says Dexter, “You pretend the feelings are there for the world, for the people around you. Who knows maybe one day they will be.” Pretending to have feelings in order to appear normal is a part of The Code of Harry as it allows Dexter to fit in society. However, Dexter’s belief that his performance of acting normal may make him genuinely feel emotions such as love and experience connection indicates his emerging desire to develop relationships with other people.

In his voice-over narration in “All in the Family” (304), Dexter contemplates, “To be a brother, to have a friend, to have a wife, a family…if you play a role long enough, really commit, does it ever become real? Could I become real?” Working with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, as explicated in *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive*
 Limits of “Sex” (2011), it can be argued that the answer to this question is yes. In her text, Butler suggests that the self is constructed through performance. She states, “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler Bodies xii). Along these lines, in “The Code of Harry: Performing Normativity in Dexter” (2010), William Ryan Force understands that Dexter’s “investment in a performance of a normative person makes him hopelessly human even if the circumstances of his identity play appear unique” (331). While Dexter has maintained in the past that he was acting human to fit in, many of his social relationships have become vital aspects of his sense of self. In this sense, perhaps his performance and experience of being a boyfriend, a husband, a father, a brother, and a friend have made him actually more than he thought he ever could be.

Further proof of Dexter’s status as an individual with morality is demonstrated by his feeling guilt. Psychopaths who kill or harm others do not have feelings of guilt (Guggenbuhl-Craig Emptied Soul 86). In Season 4 during “Slack Tide” (407), Dexter mistakenly kills an innocent man (a mortal offense against The Code of Harry) causing Harry to appear with a look of sincere concern on his face. Knowing that Harry arguably represents Dexter’s conscience, this indicates that he regrets killing an innocent person. This regret possibly stems from his not wanting to disappoint Harry. As he says, he feels “uncomfortable” with killing an innocent. In the following episode, “Road Kill” (408), upon realizing his feelings of guilt over his actions, Dexter states in voice-over, “Maybe only monsters feel no regret. If erring is human then remorse must be too. Wait, does that make me human?”
While Dexter considers himself a monster, he differentiates himself from other monsters by having a sense of morality and only killing criminals. As he explains in the pilot of the series, “I have standards” (“Dexter” 101). For this reason, Dexter’s killings can be argued to be morally justified. This relates to the concept of natural justice in that he is killing people who deserve to die. Butler claims that “[t]he scene of moral judgment, when it is a judgment of persons for being as they are, invariably establishes a clear moral distance between the one who judges and the one who is judged” (Giving Account 45). In Dexter, viewers’ understanding of Dexter Morgan as in anyway just in his actions comes from the fact that his victims are vile and abhorrent individuals who do not exhibit a trace of humanity.

When confronted with “The Barrel Girls Case” during Season 5, Dexter is greatly disturbed. While looking at photographs of the numerous women who were raped and murdered, he reflects in voice-over, “Despite having considered myself a monster for as long as I can remember, it still comes as a shock when I’m confronted with the depth of evil that exists in this world” (“In The Beginning” 510). Dexter is able to value his actions and consequently have a positive understanding of himself because he channels his Dark Passenger and kills only people who cause suffering to others.

In “The Dark…Whatever” (710), an episode in Season 7 that has major implications for the entire series, Harry appears in an imaginary conversation and asks Dexter where his Dark Passenger came from. Dexter states, “I thought I got it from you.” Harry responds, “I gave you The Code. The Dark Passenger was all yours.” “You said it got into me too early in that shipping container, like you thought I was possessed,” Dexter says. Harry corrects him, “I meant you were traumatized, Dexter. Not possessed.
I remember the first time you said it you must have been twelve. I just let it go. I couldn’t let you blame yourself for feelings that were too complicated for a young boy to understand. But you’re not a boy anymore.” Then, Harry concludes, “Maybe the Dark Passenger is just a feeling.” “It can’t be,” replies Dexter. Harry asks, “Why?” Dexter somberly explains, “Because if there’s no Dark Passenger then I’m responsible for everything I’ve done.”

In a moment of revelation for Dexter, Harry declares, “It sure is a whole lot simpler to just pin all the blame on something else, isn’t it, Dexter? It’s much scarier to think that the Dark Passenger is no more real than I am.” With this, Dexter’s imagined projection of Harry disappears. Later in the episode, Dexter is about to kill “The Phantom Arsonist” Joe Jensen, who has been burning people alive in broad daylight around Miami. While on Dexter’s table, Joe makes the delusional excuse that his actions are a result of a childhood experience where he was blamed for a fire that his friend started. Dexter angrily proclaims, “No, you’re the one who’s setting those fires. You’re the one who’s burning people alive. You can’t blame it on something that happened to you when you were a kid. You’re not a kid anymore. It’s time for you to take responsibility.” Realizing the personal implications of this statement, Dexter timidly says, “Fuck.” Here, the series demonstrates Dexter’s self-development as he is becoming accountable for his actions as a serial killer.

Although The Code of Harry is a significant element of Dexter’s sense of self, throughout the series Dexter questions the beliefs Harry instilled in him. He reinterprets what he has learned from Harry and establishes his own set of morals that he wants to live by. In a sense, Dexter models Harry’s Code to create his own. Firestone observes
that “[c]hildren are not born with a sense of right and wrong; however, they arrive in this world with the innate ability to develop the neural circuitry for empathy” (20). Dexter, I argue, developed empathy in spite of his damaged Eros because of his incorporation of Harry’s Code into his sense of self. An important example of this is when Dexter kills Brian because this demonstrates that he chooses not to be a killer without morality.

Clyman claims that “[w]hen Dexter chose Debra, he was not just choosing his little sister over his big brother. He was embracing an aspect of himself and a way of life” (121).

The way of life that Dexter embraces is one based on a moral code that allows him to experience deep and personal relationships with people to whom he grows emotionally connected. His evolving ability to understand love even results in his coming to terms with his father’s influence, forgiving Harry and acknowledging his love for him by stating, “I hope to be half as good a father to my son” (“Do You Take Dexter Morgan?” 312). Interestingly, in Season 6 Brian replaces Harry as Dexter’s imaginary confidant for an episode. Brian first appears after Dexter drowns the man responsible for Brother Sam’s murder (“Just Let Go” 606). In “Nebraska” (607), Brian, dressed in all black, encourages Dexter to embrace his darkness during a road trip. Brian sits in the passenger seat of Dexter’s car during the trip, symbolic of his Dark Passenger. However, by the end of the episode, on his way back to Miami, Dexter abandons Brian and picks up Harry on the side of the road—reinstalling him as his moral compass. The lessons given to Dexter in The Code of Harry provide him with the capacity to develop morality and subsequently to experience empathy, which permits him the ability to fully relate to others. In this way, The Code of Harry has allowed Dexter to experience love.
Loving/Killing

A major conflict in *Dexter* revolves around the ongoing struggles of Dexter Morgan to balance his compulsion to kill with his growing desire to connect with other people and experience love. Dexter’s identity as a serial killer greatly complicates his quest for love, leading him to reflect, “My search for connection always ends in blood” (“Go Your Own Way” 310). Nevertheless, throughout the series Dexter time and time again is consumed by this deep yearning. But is love what will really lead Dexter to have a fulfilling sense of self? Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig states that “without Eros there is no development” (*Emptied Soul* 79). Considering the significance of the Other to the self in its creation and subsequent existence, perhaps love, as the ultimate relationship with an other, is an area where one can experience fulfilling self-development. Indeed, Benjamin claims, “[i]n order to exist for oneself, one has to exist for an other” (53). In this section I will examine Dexter’s relationships with those he is close to and deeply cares for to see what this suggests about the role love plays in relation to his sense of self.

To begin analyzing the role of love in Dexter’s life, I will again turn to the theory of subjection to indicate how it becomes a valuable instrument for interpreting relationships based on love. The concept of subjection highlights the essential place of the Other in the creation of the self. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler states, “we cannot exist without addressing the other and without being addressed by the other” (33). This relationship, established between one person and another, is fundamental throughout life as it offers the self the affirming recognition it needs in order to exist. Benjamin writes that “[r]ecognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the
feelings, intentions, and actions of the self. It allows the self to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way” (12).

As mentioned, Dexter initially participates in relationships with other people to hide his nature as a serial killer. In the pilot, when Dexter first introduces himself to the television audience in voice-over, he says, “People fake a lot of human interactions, but I feel like I fake them all. And I fake them very well” (“Dexter” 101). This can be seen in all areas of his daily life—from the friendly blood-spatter guy who brings donuts to work every day to the loving family man. Love is an incomprehensible concept to Dexter during much of his existence. At one point, Dexter even contemplates, “How do you show someone real love when you don’t even know what it feels like?” (“All in The Family” 304).

Dexter believes that his Dark Passenger is responsible for his inability to understand love. In a Season 2 episode titled “An Inconvenient Lie” (203), Dexter describes this belief by proclaiming, “He’s all I’ve got. Nothing else could love me, not even…especially not me. Or is that just a lie the Dark Passenger tells me?” Considering this, Dexter wonders aloud, “Because lately there are these moments when I feel connected to something else, someone. It’s like the mask is slipping and things, people who never mattered before are suddenly starting to matter. It scares the hell out of me.” This indicates that, as the series has progressed, Dexter’s relationships with those he is close to on a personal level have become increasingly important aspects of his sense of self.

The first relationship Dexter engages in and experiences real emotional growth is with Rita. She is the first partner that he loves and is therefore an extremely important
figure in his evolution of self. Clyman notes that Rita “was the only person in Dexter’s life who offered romantic intimacy and a gateway into the family man lifestyle he never thought possible” (122). Furthermore, he observes that “Rita became [Dexter’s] guide to the unchartered emotional territory of intimacy, showing him that sex and intimacy could be as appealing as blood and death” (Clyman 124). When Rita is first introduced, she is presented in soft lighting that illuminates her in such a way that she looks like an angel (“Dexter” 101); a reflection of Dexter’s psychological projection of her.

In stark contrast to Dexter’s darkness, Rita is the epitome of innocence: the helpless blonde female victim of an abusive drug addict ex-husband. This is perhaps the reason why Dexter is so attracted to her. Describing Rita in voice-over, he states, “I think I met the right woman for me…She’s perfect because Rita is in her own way as damaged as me” (“Dexter” 101). In Rita, Dexter finds a substitute for his lost mother who makes him begin to experience the potential he has by teaching him to love and introducing him to fatherhood and family life, which he finds out are things he deeply wants to experience. Much like Laura Moser’s love of Dexter as a boy acted as his primary subjection, Rita’s recognition instigates his emotional growth and, as such, progression in his evolution of self.

In *Marriage is Dead—Long Live Marriage!*, Guggenbuhl-Craig puts forth a theory in which he suggests that marriage is potentially “a path to salvation.” Salvation, here, “involves the question of life’s meaning” (Guggenbuhl-Craig *Marriage* 23). While this definition is unrelentingly optimistic, I do believe that there is validity to this ideal understanding of marriage as a relationship between two people capable of influencing their personal growth. Thus, Dexter’s marriage to Rita plays an vital role in his sel-
development as “[t]he lifelong struggle to come to terms with one another in the bond between man and woman” can be understood as a special path for finding one’s soul, as a special form of individuation” (Guggenbuhl-Craig *Marriage* 39). In the finale of Season 3, “Do You Take Dexter Morgan?” (312), Dexter and Rita’s marriage takes place at the closing of the episode. Dexter makes a vow that he contends is utterly honest, by telling Rita, “I promise to be the very best husband and father that I can be.” However, Dexter fails on this promise in the Season 4 finale, “The Getaway” (412), as Rita is murdered by “The Trinity Killer” Arthur Mitchell, who Dexter had been delaying to kill, and as such he deals with deep guilt over her death.

In the premiere of Season 5, “My Bad” (501), believing that Rita’s death was a direct consequence of his dealings as a serial killer, Dexter flees Miami on his boat with the belief that his loved ones will be better off without him in their lives. Before he can get too far, he has to stop to purchase fuel. The gas station he stops at is seemingly deserted until a vulgar man, who looks to be a resident of the backwater communities in Florida’s swamplands, enters and makes an obnoxious scene as he locates the establishment’s washroom key. In a menacing trance, Dexter follows the man to the washroom where he confides in the stranger, telling him about Rita’s death. The man, lacking any semblance of social grace or rudimentary level of intelligence, insults Rita. This provokes Dexter and causes him to snap into a fit of rage and kill the man, bashing his head in with a boat anchor.

Harry appears to Dexter, who he is catching his breath after the frenzy he experienced viciously bludgeoning the man. Harry points out, “That’s the first human thing I’ve seen you do since she died, Dexter.” Dexter seems to be on the verge of a
severe emotional meltdown. Harry continues, “It’s okay son to show what you’re feeling.” Dexter begins to shake and falls to his knees, letting out an unsettling cry like a wounded animal. Harry approaches him and counsels, “They’re not better off without you. You’re not better off without them. You need to go back.” With these words of advice, Dexter goes back to Miami so he can take care of his family.

At Rita’s funeral, an emotionally distraught and visibly disheveled Dexter delivers her eulogy. “I wasn’t even human when we first met,” he says, “I never expected that to change, but she reached out and found something I didn’t even know was there” (“My Bad” 501). This scene is where he, in voice-over, states for the first time that he loved Rita. In Precarious Life: The Powers of Violence and Mourning, Judith Butler claims that “maybe when we undergo what we do [in mourning], something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us” (22). For Dexter, his sense of self has been increasingly connected to his relationship with Rita. Only when she is murdered does he realize just how much this is true. Tellingly, in a Season 5 episode titled “Practically Perfect” (503), when Dexter has Boyd Fowler (who is a member of the group responsible for the heinous atrocities committed in “The Barrel Girls Case”) on his table, Boyd pleads for his life and asks Dexter what he wants. Dexter responds “I want my wife back.” In addition to Rita, Dexter’s children with her—Astor, Cody, and Harrison—made him a family man and helped him understand himself as needed by others and in some ways even decent.

Throughout the series, Dexter is depicted as being very fond of kids and, likewise, children are shown to be fond of him. Notably, when Astor and Cody are first
introduced, they look at Dexter with supreme admiration when he brings them ice cream before a date with Rita (“Dexter” 101). Dexter sums up his affinity for children concisely when he reflects, “I lost my innocence at such an early age and it left a very damaging mark. Any shrink could tell you that’s why I’ve always liked children: because they connect me to what I can never get back” (“Hello, Bandit” 502).

Dexter is extremely protective of children. This can be seen right from the beginning of the series as his first victim is a man who rapes and murders little boys (“Dexter” 101). In “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” (303), after noticing a pedophile take a special interest in Astor, Dexter hunts him down and kills him, declaring, “Nobody hurts my children.” In another instance, in an episode titled “Lost Boys” (410), when Arthur Mitchell abducts a young boy, Dexter is sent into a frantic panic to find the child. Harry appears and tells him that he cannot be distracted from his primary goal of killing Arthur. Dexter asks, “What if it was Harrison or Cody?” Harry acknowledges this, “Your priorities have changed.” Dexter agrees, “I’m a father now.” When Brian returns as an imaginary figure in Season 6, he witnesses Dexter’s interactions with Harrison (“Nebraska” 607). Dexter tells Harrison “I love you.” Seeing this, Brian exclaims, “Wow! Love? Really? It’s weird seeing you with a kid.” Nevertheless, in spite of being a killer, Dexter has a genuine affinity for children.

A powerful example of Dexter’s sense of self being positively influenced by his identity as a father comes in Season 5 in “Teenage Wasteland” (509). In this episode, Dexter has a “parent-to-parent” talk with the step-dad of one of Astor’s friends. The man has been physically abusing his step-daughter, so Dexter beats him up and tells him to stay away from her. After this incidence, Harry appears in Dexter’s passenger seat and
tells him that he is proud of him. Harry explains, “You protected Astor, put yourself out there for another person. I had no idea you had that in you. I underestimated you, assumed you were a monster when you were capable of so much more. If only I’d seen that then maybe I wouldn’t have led you down this path.” This shows Dexter’s growingly positive sense of self resulting from being a good father. Indeed, being a father seems to be an identity that he values more than his identity as a serial killer.

Dexter’s children are significant in relation to his experience of love because the first time that he says “I love you” is to them. The very first instance in the series that Dexter says “I love you” is to Harrison over the phone during Season 5 (“Everything Is Illumenated” 506). Although, he did once sarcastically say, “Love you too” to Deb early on in the series (“The Dark Defender” 205). Saying “I love you” to Harrison was shown to come naturally and was not depicted as a pivotal moment of epiphany. The most emotionally charged instance of Dexter declaring his love is when he says “I love you” to Astor in “Teenage Wasteland” (509) after Harry recognizes his son’s capacity to care for another person. Knowing that in this scene Harry is a psychological projection, this illustrates Dexter’s personal development in understanding himself as capable of loving another person.

Dexter’s changing view of himself, stemming from his relationships with his children and his growing ability to love, can be seen in “Dex Takes a Holiday” (404) during a conversation with Zoey Kruger (a policewoman who Dexter is about to kill as she got away with murdering her husband and daughter). Discussing their opinions on family while she is on Dexter’s table, Zoey argues, “You will choose your life over theirs.” Dexter replies, “I won’t. I’d rather risk them knowing the truth than lose them.”
This is a revelation for him as he realizes that he would risk having his loved ones know that he is a serial killer rather than not have them in his life. This is a major moment of self-growth for Dexter because he comes to value his loved ones for reasons beyond their status as implements to hide his identity as a serial killer. At one point, when talking to Dexter about his children, Harry’s tells him, “They’re not only your responsibility, they’re your salvation” (“Hello, Bandit” 502). Here, Harry uses terminology that directly relates to the process of individuation, showing that Astor, Cody, and Harrison are vital to Dexter’s evolution of self.

Aside from Rita and his kids, there are a number of other individuals Dexter connects with who have helped his development into a person capable of love. One instance of note is his relationship with Camilla (Margo Martindale), a mother figure in his life and old friend of the Morgan family. Dexter cares for Camilla so deeply that in “Easy as Pie” (307) he goes against his most valued moral belief and mercy kills her (with a poisoned piece of key lime pie) to release her from the suffering she is experiencing as a result of her terminal cancer. Also there is Miguel Prado, who for a brief moment Dexter considers his first real friend. However, Dexter discovers that he is not the friend he thought him to be and is forced to kill him after Miguel murders an innocent woman named Ellen Wolf, who is a rival defense attorney (“I Had A Dream” 311). Additionally, the members of the Miami Metro Police who Dexter works with each day such as Angel Batista (David Zayas) and Vince Masuka (C.S. Lee) have grown to view him as a close friend. When Dexter comes back to work following a leave of absence after Rita’s death, Masuka remarks, “All together once again. One big happy
family” (“First Blood” 505). Dexter looks around at his co-workers with a smile and agrees.

The significance of Dexter’s relationships with other people is attested to when he declares, “They’re not just disguises anymore. I need them even if they make me vulnerable” (“The British Invasion” 212). Dexter’s desire to continue to grow through love is revealed in a conversation with Harry about “The Trinity Killer” Arthur Mitchell. Dexter states, “I have to be the one to kill him. I have to know he’s gone for my family.” Harry replies, “Exactly. You can’t think clearly because of them. They’ve done this to you.” “No!” Dexter declares, “My Dark Passenger has done this to me. It’s ruining my life.” Harry authoritatively tells Dexter, “It is your life.” Dexter states, “I don’t want it to be. I don’t want it” (“The Getaway” 412).

Later, Dexter contemplates in voice-over narration, “The Dark Passenger’s been fighting against it, trying to keep me all to himself. But it’s my turn now to get what I want. To embrace my family and maybe one day not so long from now I’ll be rid of the Dark Passenger” (“The Getaway 412). However, after Rita dies Dexter realizes that experiencing meaningful relationships with other people is a difficult task. Looking around at all of the people in loving relationships he knows, he thinks, “They make it look so easy, connecting with another human being. It’s like no one told them it’s the hardest thing in the world” (“The Big One” 512). Nonetheless, Dexter has been able to make progress in his evolution of self as a result of his painstaking efforts to connect with other people.

**Sex and The Self**

While Dexter’s Eros is being repaired by the meaningful relationships he has in
his life, previously untapped elements of himself have been revealed to him that are significant in his development; specifically his sexuality, which upon its awakening has led him to profound self-discovery. Sexuality (as an important element of the self) and sex (as an intimate act between people) have powerful implications in regards to an individual’s sense of self. So is sex a natural site for self-development? Guggenbuhl-Craig writes:

The individuation aspect of sexuality reveals itself most compellingly in the loving, intense encounter between man and woman⁵, in the momentary, ecstatic union of the sexual act. This most deeply moving of human experiences should not be grasped merely as biological copulation. This powerful event in which man and woman become one, physically and psychologically, is to be understood as a living symbol of the mysterium coniunctionis, the final destination of the path to individuation. (Marriage 80)

In this section I will analyze the influence of sexuality in Dexter’s life by examining his sexual relationships and will argue that his experience of sexuality is an attempt to express love.

To begin addressing the significance of sex on Dexter’s sense of self I will examine his initial understanding of sex. This will demonstrate how it has evolved into an important experience for him. In “Sex, Psychoanalysis, and Sublimation in Dexter” (2010), Beth Johnson argues that “Dexter desires order and control. As such, sex is dangerous, ‘messy,’ and has the ability to make him anxious” (82). Taking into account Dexter’s damaged Eros, it is understandable that he would be tentative in matters of sex. In voice-over, he states, “Everyone’s having sex. But for me sex never enters into it. I
don’t understand sex” (“Dexter” 101). The reason for this is, as Guggenbuhl-Craig explains, “[s]ince Eros is weak or missing altogether in psychopathy, sexuality is not seen as the ultimate expression of an intense, intimate relationship between two people” (Emptied Soul 84).

In reference to sex, Dexter observes, “Many times in life I feel like I’m missing some essential piece of the human puzzle” (“Popping Cherry” 103). As such, a number of Harry’s lessons revolve around teaching Dexter about relationships with women. One instance can be seen in a flashback in “Love American Style” (105) when a teenaged Dexter arrives home after attending a school dance. Harry tells Dexter that women are different from men, explaining “They have a whole different experience of things. When they’re with someone physically they feel connected and they know when you’re not. They can sense it because you’re very exposed.” Dexter retorts, “Yeah, you’re naked.” Harry corrects him, “I mean emotionally. Son, this is going to be very dangerous for you.” “Well, I can fake it,” Dexter says. Harry responds, “Buddy, you can learn to fake a lot things, but this is a tough one.” Later, Dexter asks Harry, “Dad, do you think that maybe one day I’ll, you know, feel it for real?” To which Harry replies, “I hope so son. I really do.” In spite of the fact that he is a serial killer, Dexter does eventually grow to feel the power of love through sex.

Throughout the series, sex and death are shown to be linked for Dexter. For example in the premiere of Season 2, “It’s Alive!” (201), he undergoes an emotional crisis after killing his brother and becomes impotent, unable to perform sexually or as a killer. Even when he is unaware of the power of his sexual desires, they emerge in relation to death. Discussing the body parts of one of the victims of “The Ice Truck

Victoria L. Smith states, “[c]learly, for Dexter, sex and death are infinitely intertwined, even if he is not fully conscious of the connections” (393). Sex has many associations with Dexter’s actions as a serial killer. Guggenbuhl-Craig notes, “[t]he joy of destroying, annihilating, or torturing is also experienced within sexuality” (Marriage 79). Dexter penetrates his partners’ bodies during sex in a similar manner to the way he penetrates his victims’ bodies when he is killing them. Sex is a life-giving act (penetrating the body to bring it to orgasm as means to feel more alive and/or to create new life) and killing is a life-taking act (penetrating the body to end its existence).

Just as Dexter’s sex partners are naked and vulnerable to the touch and violence of sex, his victims are similarly stripped naked and made vulnerable by being bound in translucent plastic wrap and strapped to a table. Dexter can literally do whatever he wants to his victims, who are in a complete and utter state of vulnerability. The vulnerability involved in sex suggests that it is a site in which one is open to discovery by another. With this in mind, sex for Dexter is something that has allowed him to be known to another person as a means to grow to understand himself.

Dexter’s first powerful sexual relationship is with Rita. Although this relationship is initially a means to hide his nature as a serial killer, once sex is introduced, it becomes much more. At first, Dexter does everything he can to avoid having sex with Rita because he fears that if this happens she will see the emotional emptiness that he has been hiding from her. After kissing her, he concedes in voice-over, “I’ll admit making out with Rita was interesting, but if I don’t keep a lid on this it could be the end for us”
Dexter’s sexual hang-ups are revealed in “Shrink Wrap” (108) during a therapy session with Dr. Emmett Meridian, in which his relationship with Rita is discussed. Dexter asks, “If she means something then why’d I run away from her?” Dr. Meridian responds, “For the same reason you work so hard to shut everyone else out. Because you’re afraid they won’t like what they see.” Dexter realizes the importance of his growing connection with Rita and thinks to himself, “I can’t have sex with Rita. Every time I sleep with a woman she sees me for what I am: empty. And then she’s gone. But I don’t want Rita to go, which means I have to deal with this. I can’t kill Meridian yet, I need another therapy session.” After one more therapy session, Dexter is not only able, but compelled to have sex with her.

The first time Dexter has sex with Rita is an intense experience that showcases the importance of sexuality to his self-development. After recovering the repressed memory of his childhood trauma, Dexter suddenly succumbs to feelings of emotional vulnerability and distress. He kills to deal with the repressed memory of his mother’s murder, which can be argued to be the moment his sense of self was fractured by the damage done to his Eros. Thus, when this memory is recovered the fracture in him begins to repair.

Dexter’s first act after having his sense of self reestablished is to rush over to Rita’s house, rip her clothes off, and throw her against a wall in a passionate fit of lovemaking. What does this mean? Dexter is taken from a state of emotional stupor to one of overwhelming passion after being reconnected with the vulnerability he experienced as a child. This overpowering vulnerability leads him to desire another person’s physical recognition. On the power of this recognition, Benjamin points out:
In recognition, someone who is different and outside shares a similar feeling; different minds and bodies attune. In erotic union this attunement can be so intense that self and other feel as if momentarily ‘inside’ each other, as part of a whole. Receptivity and self-expression, the sense of losing the self in the other and the sense of being truly known for oneself all coalesce. (126)

The most profound form of recognition can occur during sex, which is the reason why Dexter has sex with Rita for the first time.

Another important sex partner who greatly helps Dexter to understand himself is Lila. His whole relationship with Lila is about self-discovery as she gets him to open up to her about himself. Significantly, Lila is the first person Dexter tells that he witnessed his mother’s murder (“The Dark Defender” 205). This makes him grow to view Lila as someone with whom he can be open about himself, leading to his desiring her sexually. With her, Dexter begins to see hope for the possibility of having a relationship based on truth and openness. When he shows her the bodies that “The Bay Harbor Butcher” killed (which are being held in a state-of-the-art morgue by the FBI) Lila is unfazed. Dexter begins, “The person who did this…” Lila cuts him off, “Is a person just like me, like you. We’re all good Dexter and we’re all evil” (“See-Through” 204).

In “Dex, Lies, and Videotape” (206), Lila gets a glimpse of the darkness inside of Dexter when they first have sex. She does not turn away as he lets his dark side come out in an attack of sexual passion where he practically rapes her. Lila eagerly consents to this treatment and a deep bond between the two is established. Lila grows to understand Dexter as her soul-mate. This belief turns into a self-destructive obsession that demonstrates the potential psychopathic aspects of love.
The pathological nature of Lila’s desire is most evident when she kills Sergeant Doakes to protect Dexter (“The British Invasion” 212). This suggests that love can make someone idealize another to the point where even evil actions like murder are deemed acceptable. In the end, Dexter realizes that the emotional dependency that he shares with Lila is not what he wants in his life and returns to Rita, which results in Lila’s attempt to kill him, along with Astor and Cody. She cannot accept that Dexter does not want to be with her so she tries to kill him as a mutated result of her love for him. Consequently, in the Season 2 finale, “The British Invasion” (212), Dexter flies to Paris to kill Lila. Before killing her, he tells her, “You taught me to accept what I am and to trust in the one thing I know with absolute clarity…Thank you.” Dexter’s killing Lila to protect Rita is similar to his killing Brian to protect Deb. In these instances he attempts to shield the two women he is emotionally connected to from the truth of his identity as a serial killer and the dark implications that this would have on their lives.

In Season 5, Dexter has a relationship with a woman named Lumen, who has a meaningful influence on him. Dexter helps Lumen recover from her ordeal of being abducted, tortured, and raped by seeking out revenge on the men responsible for these heinous actions. He notes, “Lumen didn’t witness her mother’s murder, but she was born in blood. Like me. Some experiences are so big they change your DNA” (“Everything Is Illumenated” 506). Indeed, if there is any experience that has the capacity to not only damage Eros, but destroy it completely, it is rape. Taking into consideration the importance of Eros in the psyche, sexual trauma (specifically rape) causes a deep injury to the self. Like Dexter, Lumen’s trauma obliterates her sense of self and leaves her emotionally broken and unable to connect to another person. However, as their
relationship develops, both Dexter and Lumen experience personal growth because of the intimate bond they form with one another.

Dexter’s connection with Lumen leads him to ask himself, “Can anyone live with the truth of what I am? Is Lumen what will make me whole?” (“Take It!” 508). During an episode titled “In The Beginning” (510), Dexter and Lumen have sex after they finish killing one of the men responsible for her rape and torture. Afterwards, Dexter holds Lumen in his arms and, in voice-over, reflects, “Harry tried to mold me into the image of the monster he thought I was. He told me to flee human connection, so that became a way of life for me. But with Lumen I’m someone different. In her eyes, I’m not a monster at all.”

In some ways the bond shared by two people who kill together is morbidly romantic. While discussing “The Barrel Girls Case,” Deb (not knowing that Dexter and Lumen are the vigilante couple that are killing the men responsible for the crimes) suggests, “What they’re doing takes devotion. To kill someone together, that’s some pretty serious shit. He’s risking his life. He’s putting everything on the line to make what happened to her right. As crazy as that sounds what word would you use to describe that, but love” (“Hop A Freighter” 511). Even though Dexter’s relationship with Lumen only spans one season, she helps him to get back what he loses when Rita dies and influences his self-development through love by briefly allowing him to again connect with another person on an intimate level.

Maybe Dexter’s most significant sex partner in the series is a woman introduced in Season 7 named Hannah McKay. In “Do the Wrong Thing” (706), Dexter asks Hannah out on a date with the ulterior motive of killing her because she is guilty of a
number of murders. As Dexter has Hannah wrapped in plastic on his table, she says to him, “Do what you gotta do.” Dexter gets ready to drive his knife into her body, but instead in a fit of passion uses that knife to cut her free from the plastic and the two have uninhibited sex on the very table that he was going to kill her on. In the following episode, “Chemistry” (707), Dexter speculates upon the reasons for his attraction to Hannah. He states, in voice-over narration, “She isn’t drawn to my darkness like Lila or blind to it like Rita and she doesn’t need it like Lumen. She accepts both sides of me: the whole Dexter.” Later on he questions, “Is this what love feels like? Is this how it begins? Am I even capable of this?”

With Hannah, Dexter can be open about his activities as a serial killer. Hannah is also important in Dexter’s self-development because she helps him realize that his Dark Passenger is just a feeling and does not control him in an episode titled “The Dark…Whatever” (710). Dexter and Hannah’s relationship compels them to profess their deep love for each other. However, as mentioned, despite the love that he feels for Hannah, Dexter turns her in to the police in order to protect Deb. Still, Dexter’s relationship with Hannah, as well as all of his sexual relationships, has aided his self-development by introducing him to feelings associated with love. In “You Hurt Her, You Hurt Me,” Everitt Foster suggests, “[t]hroughout Dexter’s story, identity and power are exercised through sex” (206). Importantly, sex is shown to be essential to Dexter’s growing sense of self as it is a site in which his Eros is actively repaired as a consequence of the profound connection that it entails.

“True” Love

While Dexter has a consuming desire to experience love, for much of his life he is
unwilling to engage in an honest relationship where he is completely open with another person because he has to hide his identity as a serial killer. The series demonstrates that he seems to believe that to experience a truly loving relationship he must be known fully by someone. Curiously, in each season Dexter always has a person in his life who knows he is a serial killer. For such an organized and prepared individual, he manages to let this unsavory aspect of his identity be known on a continuous basis. It is as if he wants to let someone in despite the danger to himself. As Marisa Mauro notices, Dexter’s vulnerability appears to be spurred by his “psychological need to be known completely by another person” (176). Brian Gregor suggests that “[i]n order to understand ourselves…we need to be understood” (60). He continues, “[t]his is a recurring theme for Dexter, who describes this need for recognition as a desire to be ‘seen’ for who he really is” (Gregor 60). In this section I will analyze Dexter’s profound desire to participate in a relationship in which he is fully known by examining his relationship with Deb. Now that she knows he is a serial killer, can he experience a form of love that will allow him to achieve a fulfilling sense of self?

In the finale of Season 6, “This is the Way The World Ends” (612), Deb walks in on Dexter as he is killing “The Doomsday Killer” Travis Marshall in the abandoned church that Travis has been using as a hideout. Taking place at night, the interior of the church is very dark. The only light comes from a spotlight set up above the altar that Travis is wrapped in plastic atop. Dexter stands menacingly in front of the altar, the spotlight above making his darkly lit face appear devilish. After a conversation about God and religious beliefs, Dexter asks, “Do you think it’s God’s plan that I’m about to kill you?” He then yells, “God has nothing to do with this! You are wrapped in plastic
because I want to kill you.” From the darkened entrance, Deb enters the shadowy church.

Travis screams, “This is not how it is supposed to be!” “Maybe this is exactly how it’s supposed to be” Dexter calmly responds. Deb approaches the lighted area of the church where Dexter and Travis are. Dexter smiles and says, “Maybe everything is exactly as it should be.” With a look of confusion, Deb sees Dexter standing beside the altar that Travis is strapped to. In an over-the-shoulder shot with Deb in the foreground, Dexter is shown plunging his knife in a quick and precise motion into Travis’ chest. Deb jumps, losing her breath. Dexter looks over to where Deb is standing at the entrance of the church. Deb gasps in horror and breathes unsteadily. Dexter is stunned and quietly says, “Oh God.”

Unlike most scenes in the series depicting Dexter in the act of killing, this one highlights the horrifying nature of his actions through its mise-en-scène, specifically its blatantly frightening environment in an abandoned church. The church connects Dexter’s actions to the imagery of Gothic monstrosity. One would expect to see Dracula, Frankenstein, or even the Devil in this setting, but in this instance one witnesses the contemporary monster, the serial killer, in action. This is noteworthy because in this scene Deb witnesses Dexter kill for the first time. Also the church is a site of confession and Dexter confesses through his actions who he really is to his sister. With this, she confronts the truth of his identity and is left to question whether her brother is a monster.

Season 7’s premiere, “Are You…?” (701), depicts the aftermath of Deb’s witnessing Dexter kill Travis. She initially does not know what to do and points her gun at her brother. Dexter calms her down and tries to manipulate his way out of the situation by saying he snapped and had a temporary moment of insanity. Deb quickly puts things
together and by the end of the episode confronts Dexter in his apartment after uncovering his hidden knife collection and souvenir blood slides. She somberly asks him, “Did you kill all these people?” Dexter, horrified, states, “I did.” Deb asks, “Are you… Are you a serial killer?” There is a tension filled pause as he struggles to figure out how to answer this question. “Yes,” he finally says as he releases a pained breath and closes his eyes.

To be fully known in a loving relationship with another person means to be excruciatingly vulnerable. The intensity with which love is felt damages the psyche through its irrational manifestation leaving an individual extremely susceptible to harm. Butler contends, “We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (Precarious Life 23). To deny oneself this vulnerability to another is unnatural. It would in effect strip an individual of her or his humanity. Butler goes on, “[t]hat we are compelled in love means that we are, in part, unknowing about why we love as we do and why we invariably exercise bad judgment. Very often what we call ‘love’ involves being compelled by our own opacity, our own places of unknowingness, and indeed, our own injury” (Giving Account 103). This relates back to the implications of the trauma gone through during primary subjection, which is the initial experience of love. Taking this into consideration, a person has an inborn desire to experience love as it is through recognition that they achieve selfhood. So this accounts for the compulsion to connect to another person and feel love in spite of the position of vulnerability that such an endeavor puts one in.

Dexter’s biggest fear has always been having Deb find out he is a serial killer. In a revealing flashback in “Are You…?” (701), Harry and a young Dexter have a conversation about Deb after she has to give up a puppy she got. Dexter feels guilty and
attempts to tell his sister it is his fault she had to let the puppy go. Harry asks Dexter, “What were you going to tell her?” “The truth,” Dexter replies. Harry inquires, “What is the truth?” Dexter states, “That you got rid of the dog because you thought I might kill it. But I wouldn’t.” Harry explains, “I couldn’t take that chance. But what’s more important is that you mustn’t ever tell Debra the truth about yourself.” “Why?” Dexter asks. Harry responds, “If you think she’s upset now, that’s nothing compared to how she’d feel if she knew what you are. She’d be terrified.” Dexter innocently responds, “But she loves me.” “Dex,” Harry says, “She loves who she thinks you are. If she ever saw the real you, she’d never get over it. Son, your mother and I aren’t going to be around forever. Someday Debra will be all you have left. You don’t want to lose her do you?” However, when Deb finds out that her brother is a killer, she initially tries to help him stop killing.

In “Sunshine and Frosty Swirl” (702), Deb asks Dexter, “If you can channel your urges, why can’t you control them? What if dad had taught you how to quit instead of teaching you how to live with it? He fucked up.” Dexter argues that he has tried stopping before and failed. Not willing to give up, Deb states, “Well now you have me, someone who loves you more than you will ever fucking know. And in spite of all of this I still believe that there is good in you, maybe more than what’s in most people.” Later in the episode, Deb tells him, “You have to be completely honest with me. That’s the first rule.” In reference to this, in voice-over narration, Dexter proclaims, “My new code.” Indeed, Stephen D. Livingston observes that “[s]elf-disclosure is an important ingredient in psychologically intimate relationships” (106).

The series has illustrated the importance that Dexter and Deb have in each other’s
lives. When Dexter first describes her for the television audience in voice-over, he states, “My foul-mouth foster-sister Debra, she has a big heart, but won’t let anyone see it. She’s the only person in the world who loves me. I think that’s nice. I don’t have feelings about anything, but if I could have feelings at all, I’d have them for Deb” (“Dexter” 101). This admission indicates just how important Deb is to him. Also, as discussed, when Dexter is urged to kill Deb by Brian he declares, “I can’t. Not Deb. I’m very fond of her” (“Born Free” 112). This “fondness” is the first sign of his growing capacity to love another person. The value that Deb has in Dexter’s life can be further seen by the fact that he even makes her the best man at his wedding. He tells her, “I trust you more than anyone” (“I Had A Dream” 311). Deb similarly views him as the most important person in her life. She explains to him, “If you hadn’t been in my life I wouldn’t be who I am. You’ve given me confidence and the support. You’ve been the one constant, the one constantly good thing in my life” (“The Getaway” 412).

Deb’s love for Dexter is an interesting example of the psychopathy of love. What could possess a sister to so deeply desire her brother that she is in love with him? Deb’s feelings for Dexter come out in one of her therapy sessions during “Talk to the Hand” (611). Her therapist acknowledges, “Your brother holds a very important place in your life.” Deb agrees, “He’s really all I have. You think I’m crazy now? I can’t even imagine what a fucking mess my life would be without him.” During the session, the therapist suggests that perhaps Deb is in love with Dexter by stating, “It would be understandable given the past traumas the two of you have shared for you to develop complex feelings for him.” Deb vehemently denies this suggestion, but eventually comes to understand its validity.
While Deb’s recognition that she is in love with Dexter comes about in an oversimplified way, I believe that its occurrence fits naturally in the series because it evolves as a result of her self-development as an individual with a deeply damaged Eros. So while it seems to have been a startlingly unexpected plot development in *Dexter’s* narrative, it keeps with the series’ exploration of the psychopathy of love. In “This is the Way the World Ends” (612), Dexter tells Deb he loves her for the first time. She is jubilant, “I don’t think you’ve ever said it before.” After acknowledging to her therapist, in the same episode, that she is in love with Dexter, Deb says, “It makes my whole life, every man I’ve ever loved make sense. It’s like I’ve always been looking for someone like Dexter. Or someone who’s the opposite of Dexter as a way to avoid the fact that I’m in love with him. It’s just clear to me now. And I want it to be clear to him. I want him to understand.”

The entirety of Deb’s love-life can be argued to have many psychopathic elements. Most notably, of course, is her engagement to “The Ice Truck Killer,” a man she is tricked into believing loves her because as he puts it, she is “so desperate to fall in love” (“Truth Be Told” 111). Another one of Deb’s strange relationships is with FBI Special Agent Frank Lundy (Keith Carradine), who is almost twice her age and she views as a father figure. I suggest that Deb’s strong desire for Dexter is a result of her issues with her father. Harry devotes so much time to Dexter as a child that he often ignores Deb. This leads to Deb becoming a police officer like her father to try to gain his affection, as well as her relationship problems with men. Perhaps by having Dexter as her partner she will finally feel like she is worthy to her father because she will be with the person that he appeared to love more than anyone else.
At the end of “Chemistry” (707), Deb asks Dexter to kill Hannah after being unable to lay any murder charges against her. This sets up a major conflict as he is put in a position of choosing between the two women whom he loves. In the following episode, “Argentina” (708), Deb finds out about Dexter’s relationship with Hannah. Disgusted, she tells him, “Every time I think I know exactly who you are, you tell me something worse.” Dexter inquires, “Being with Hannah is worse than being a killer?” The emotional distress Deb finds herself in as a result of finding out about Dexter’s relationship with Hannah causes her to tell her brother about her feelings for him.

She asks him, “So you don’t care what it does to me?” Dexter responds, “I don’t want to hurt you.” “Well guess what you did,” Deb says, “You picked the one way that you could hurt me worse than you could ever fucking understand.” He states, “You told me you accepted me being a killer. I feel like if you love me, you’ll accept this.” She exclaims, “If I love you?! If I love you? I went to the church that night that you killed Travis Marshall to tell you that I’m in love with you!” Confused, Dexter asks, “What do you mean that you’re in love with me?” Deb replies, “I didn’t mean to say that. I know it’s weird and it’s gross and it’s fucked up. And I know you don’t feel the same. I don’t even know if I feel the same. I mean it’s one thing to be in love with your brother, but it’s a whole other level to be in love with your brother who’s a goddamn fucking serial killer. You’re a serial killer and I’m more fucked up than you are!”

This scene is extremely affective thanks to the surprisingly powerful performance of Jennifer Carpenter (in real-life, Carpenter had been married to Michael C. Hall, leading one to speculate upon the implications of her performing emotionally heightened material of this caliber with a man who she was once presumably in love with). After the
revelation that Deb is in love with Dexter, Harry appears and offers some clarification on the situation. Dexter argues, “She’s not in love with me. That’s insane.” Harry observes, “You have to admit it explains a lot: why she didn’t arrest you, why she keeps believing all your lies, why she’s willing to give up everything she believes in for you.”

Regardless of how Dexter feels, Deb will not give up on trying to get Hannah out of his life, telling her, “It’s because I love Dexter that I’m willing to do whatever it takes to protect him from you. I’m not going to give up until your murdering ass is behind bars for good” (“Do You See What I See?” 711). As discussed, in the end Dexter helps Deb arrest Hannah. In the Season 7 finale, “Surprise, Motherfucker!” (712), Dexter visits Hannah in jail. While there, Hannah says, “You said that you loved me.” Dexter replies, “I do.” “Then why am I here?” Hannah asks. Dexter explains, “You poisoned Debra.” “Because she was trying to keep us apart,” Hannah retorts. Later Dexter says, “You left me no a choice.” Hannah notes, “You had a choice. You were supposed to choose me.” Dexter frustratingly proclaims, “She’s my sister!” Hannah exasperatedly says, “Jesus, I never stood a chance.” Hannah finds out, just as viewers of the series have long known, that Dexter and Deb have an unbreakable bond.

Dexter’s desire to be fully known by another person is not uncommon, but it does illustrate the psychopathy of love. Smith believes, “[w]e all want to feel connected and understood for who we are” (395). Yet, in (Per)Versions of Love and Hate, Renata Salecl writes, “[t]he expectation that the other will love you for yourself is some kind of a psychotic position: in this case, the loved one takes him- or herself as the subject without lack. The truth about love is that the other has to love you for something that is in you more than yourself” (29). This is because, as mentioned, everyone has psychological
imperfections, so to expect that another will love you for yourself is an unrealistic belief as there are inherently aspects of oneself that are unlovable. So this idea of true love being based in a relationship of complete knowledge of another is an ideal that is in itself psychotic because in order to love another unconditionally a person must willingly accept those aspects of another that are not worthy of love. To love another because of these aspects would be a lie. To love another in spite of these aspects is to put oneself in the psychopathic position of intentionally deceiving and, therefore, potentially harming oneself.

As the closing of the Season 7 finale demonstrates, Deb kills Laguerta to protect her brother. In the scene, Deb enters the cargo container in which Dexter has killed Hecter Estrada and plans to murder Laguerta, making it look like she shot Estrada and he shot her. Dexter is stunned as Deb points her gun at him. Taking a page out of Hannah’s book, he says, “Do what you gotta do.” Laguerta yells, “Put him down!” Sobbing and conflicted, Deb shoots Laguerta. She screams out in terror at what she has done and rushes over to Laguerta’s body and hugs her while crying out in devastation. Dexter, horrified, falls against the wall of the container and goes into the fetal position. Earlier in the season, Deb tells Hannah, “Maybe you can be fine with being responsible for someone’s death, but I can’t. That’s not who I am” (“Helter Skelter” 709). This is revealing in that by killing an innocent person Deb has sacrificed her own sense of self for the love of her brother.

Season 7 ends with Deb holding onto Dexter’s arm as they walk through a crowd at a New Year’s Eve party. The two have just come from the scene of Laguerta’s murder. In voice-over narration, Dexter states, “We all make rules for ourselves. It’s
these rules that help define who we are. So when we break those rules we risk losing ourselves and becoming something unknown. Who is Deb now? Who am I? Is this a new beginning? Or the beginning of the end?” (“Surprise, Motherfucker!” 712). Dexter has come to experience what he believes to be true love by having Deb fully know him, but this has come at a great cost, indicating the psychopathic nature of love.
5. CONCLUSION: LOVE, DEATH, AND BEING

In spite of the fact that Dexter Morgan is a serial killer the series has shown that he struggles with many of the same questions in life that all people do. In the introduction of *Dexter: Investigating Cutting Edge Television*, titled “Killing Time with Showtime’s *Dexter*” (2010), Douglas L. Howard writes that the series “is not so much an ad for serial killing as it is a show that, in the end, does what television does do in its finest hours: it refers to some unusual commonalities, reflects some general truths about the human condition, and makes us rethink our own sacred codes we have held so dear” (“Introduction” xxi). In the series, Dexter speaks to viewers through his philosophical voice-over narration and breaks the fourth-wall, directly acknowledging his television audience. These forms of direct address create a familiarity between the character and viewers. Dexter’s voice-over, and its masterful delivery by Michael C. Hall, has a characteristic sincerity and dry humor that has made viewers sympathize with the character because of his moral code and wry take on the world around him.

Jason Mittell, in “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television” (2006), suggests that complex narratives have become prevalent within television programming in the United States. He argues that “[a]udiences tend to embrace complex programs in much more passionate and committed terms than most conventional television” (Mittell 32). This is the case with *Dexter* and I argue complex television series like it offer a viewer means by which to further understand her or his own sense of self by engaging with the profound themes that these programs explore.

In *Dexter*, viewers are offered a fascinating exploration of love’s role in the life of a serial killer. Dexter’s genuine desire to experience love is something that all people can
relate to as love is an essential part of life. With this, *Dexter* offers a thought-provoking examination of the latent humanity of a serial killer and, in relation to this, the psychopathy of love. This comes into full view in Season 7 of the series in the form of Dexter’s philosophical conversations with Isaak Sirko on the meaning of love and Deb’s self-destructive action of throwing away everything she stood for by killing for Dexter. Indeed, on the power of love, Isaak Sirko suggests, “It’s the one thing that gives meaning in this life” (“Sunshine and Frosty Swirl” 702).

In “Argentina” (708), Dexter and Isaak have a discussion regarding love. Isaak observes, “It’s a powerful weapon. It can work for us or against us, can’t it?” Dexter replies, “I don’t understand much about love.” “That’s because you’re a scientist. Love defies reason,” Isaak responds. Dexter argues, “Nothing defies reason.” Isaak states, “Logically, Viktor and I shouldn’t have been together. I mean aside from the obvious social stigma, Viktor was impulsive, foolhardy even. He always had to prove something. I suppose the heart knows something that we just don’t know.” “Or maybe the heart is just wrong,” Dexter offers. Isaak responds, “Oh I doubt that. Love can be inconvenient, perhaps inappropriate. It can be dangerous; make us do things we wouldn’t dream of doing. But wrong? That just depends on where we end up doesn’t it?”

Love is a pathological necessity in life because of its roots in subjection and the significant, but delicate, nature of Eros. Guggenbuhl-Craig believes that “[m]uch of life’s tragedy and comedy, sadness and joy, despair and jubilation arise out of the conflicts and confusion that Eros evokes. To be in love with someone or something leads to suffering, conflict, problems, and frustrations, but also to joy and satisfaction” (*Emptied Soul* 27). In love, someone else becomes an integral part of an individual’s
sense of self. Therefore, Dexter’s longing for love relates to his deep desire to connect with another person in hopes of growing to further understand himself. Deborah Mellamphy notes, “[j]ust like Dexter, we all also want to know ‘who we are’” (239).

In “For The Love of Dexter” (2010), the introduction to The Psychology of Dexter, Bella DePaulo writes, “Watching [Dexter], we realize—maybe in a way we never have before—what makes us human” (2). Dexter offers an extremely intriguing exploration of selfhood in its presentation of the self-evolution of a serial killer. This has made the series very interesting to television viewers. On this point, Guggenbuhl-Craig contends:

Certainly our fascination for the phenomenon lies in the fact that when we study psychopathy, we learn about our own psychopathic natures, realize our invalidism and our limits. It forces us to consider why we are not amoral in spite of the fact that we have tendencies to amorality within us. We consider our feelings, asking ourselves about the nature of ethics and love. Psychopathy is a tool with which we can better understand ourselves. (Emptied Soul 43)

This explains perhaps why the serial killer has become such a prominent symbol in the discourse of selfhood in contemporary media.

In conclusion, Dexter has become a cult-hit and its protagonist, Dexter Morgan, has become one of the most popular characters in the landscape of North American television. Love has been a powerful force in Dexter’s life as it has shaped him as a result of the influences of his mother and father and allows him to evolve through his relationships with other people. Discussing the complex nature of Eros, Guggenbuhl-Craig writes, “[d]espite the easy-going charm of many people who have a lack of Eros,
their lives have a tragic quality, a background sadness characterizes them because they feel they lack something that, although it complicates life, also gives meaning to it. As a result they yearn for redemption; to be rescued from their own emptiness” (Emptied Soul 7). Throughout the series Dexter has worked to progressively fill this emptiness and repair his Eros by connecting with other people through love.

During Season 1 in “Love American Style” (105), Dexter and Rita have a conversation about their goals, revealing what he really wants out of life. He acknowledges, “I want to someday be content just to feel comfortable like everyone else. I want…” Rita finishes his sentence, “A normal life.” He agrees, “Yeah, a normal life.” Considering how diligently Dexter has worked on himself to experience love, it is clear that he is capable of having a fulfilling sense of self. Livingston states, “whether he withdraws inwardly, embracing the Dark Passenger, or expands outwardly, finding solace in those who love him, Dexter’s self will continue to grow and change. For all of us, creating and maintaining a cohesive sense of self is a work in progress” (110). Piven concludes, “Dexter’s genius is in depicting the story of us, the inner void and dread that makes us lash out and want to kill, and the vulnerability that makes us yearn so deeply for love, that we will kill to attain it” (“Mirror” 88). Keeping with its ironic description as a “serial killer soap opera,” Dexter illustrates love is a form of psychopathy that is essential to a fulfilling sense of self.
NOTES

1 *Dexter* has consistently been one of the most critically acclaimed and highest rated shows on television and has set ratings records for the Showtime television network. Most recently, the Season 7 finale became the network’s most-watched original series episode ever with 2.8 million viewers on its first airing and a total of 3.4 million viewers on the night. The entire season averaged 6.1 million viewers across all platforms (See Hibberd Dec. 17 2012). As well, *Dexter* holds the distinction of being the most pirated series of 2012. This indicates its popularity in the landscape of contemporary television programming as in the 21st century television viewing practices have changed, resulting in a high number of viewers watching shows via the Internet (See Hibberd Dec. 27 2012).

2 See the later mentioned works that discuss the moral virtue of Dexter’s actions as a vigilante serial killer and how these actions benefit society such as: (Amper 2010); (Beeler 2010); (Brophy 2010); (Riches and French 2010); (Muir 2011); (Smith 2011); and (Donnelly 2012).

3 Butler’s work on subjection draws from a number of prominent theorists. Notable among her influences is psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Her reading of subjection is connected to Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage. The mirror stage represents the means by which subjection acts as a perpetual condition of the existence of the self. Simply put, when a child sees itself in a mirror it becomes self-aware. This awareness allows a child to enter into selfhood. However, Lacan argues that a child’s recognition of itself during the mirror stage is actually a misrecognition. The reason for this is because the child is
viewing itself in the mirror as an object and, thus, witnesses itself as the Other witnesses it. In this way, the Other’s recognition is indicated to be the requirement of selfhood. The child misrecognizes its mirror image as its true self and consequently spends its life trying to achieve this unattainable ideal of itself, which is actually other to it. The fact that a person enters into selfhood through misrecognition indicates the impossibility of ever fully realizing the self. As such, an individual’s desire to connect with another person is explained by the belief that by attaining the recognition of another it will legitimize the self.

While this is a heteronormative understanding of the relationship that marriage is predicated upon (indicative of the time that Guggenbuhl-Craig wrote the work from which this quote is drawn), I argue that the idea that marriage itself, as a relationship between any two individuals, has the capacity to be an important site of self-development is relevant to discussions of all forms of marriage throughout history as it speaks to the power of love in regards to selfhood.

Again Guggenbuhl-Craig unfortunately relies on heteronormative ideas, this time in relation to sexuality, but I believe that the sentiment of his argument is deeply interesting in terms of the potential significance that sex, as an act between individuals, has as a site of self-exploration and personal growth.
WORKS CITED


