

Title of Dissertation: The Television Anti-Hero

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Award: M.A

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Submitted to Mary Immaculate College, September 2013

Abstract

This thesis tests the hypothesis that there has been a sustained depiction of the anti-hero on US cable television since the late 1990s. It also addresses a number of closely related research sub-questions. In summary, why has the anti-hero enjoyed such sustained popularity on American cable television at this juncture? In order to test the hypothesis and answer the research sub-questions, three case studies were chosen for analysis. These case studies, *Dexter*, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*, are all produced and broadcast by different cable networks, thus illustrating that the phenomenon of the anti-hero is not confined to one outlet. Each of the three shows was examined using close textual analysis, with the focus being placed on one central anti-heroic character in each case. In order to answer the associated why's, it was necessary to also analyse industrial and socio-cultural factors that may have contributed to the increasing popularity of the anti-hero. For example, the shift in the American psyche which occurred as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, a shift which, it is argued, created an uncertainty and ambiguity about justice, criminality and governance. An increase in individual alienation and a decreasing sense of community were also identified as contributing factors. Such shifts allow for a single-minded individualist character, even one who commits murderous acts with some rationale, to be a point of identification within an increasingly fractured society. Finally, another key contributing factor was the commentary that each show offers on twenty-first century masculinity and sexuality.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and my partner for their continued support as I completed this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Marcus Free and Dr. Rosemary Day for their guidance, time and efforts throughout the process.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Questions

The subject matter of this thesis arose from a central hypothesis – that there has been a sustained depiction of the anti-hero in US cable television drama since the late 1990s. In order to test this central hypothesis, it was necessary to undertake a detailed analysis of a number of shows. To this end, three competing cable networks, to the fore in the production of highly successful, original television drama, were identified. These networks are HBO, Showtime and AMC. One show was chosen from each network as a case study: *Dexter* (2006-present), *The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-present). While the analysis of *Dexter* forms the backbone of this project, for reasons that will be discussed later, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* are used as supplementary case studies to strengthen the argument that the depiction of the anti-hero is widespread and not merely confined to one cable network. The anti-heroic characters that were chosen for examination are Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall), a serial killer with a conscience, Omar Little (Michael K. Williams), a homosexual gangster operating with a personal moral code and Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a chemistry teacher-turned producer of Class A drugs. While it is difficult to provide definitive evidence of a widespread trend through the qualitative analysis of just three case studies, this thesis does suggest that there are indications of this trend.

In addition to suggesting that there is, indeed, a phenomenon relating to the rise of the television anti-hero, it was also deemed necessary to consider the question, why? Thus, the thesis also addresses the following closely related sub questions:

- Why the anti-hero?
- Why now?
- Why in America?
- Why cable television?

In order to adequately answer the above questions, it was necessary to look at the socio-cultural and industrial factors that may have contributed to the rise of the anti-hero in American television drama, at this juncture. To that end, this thesis also examines the cable television landscape and outlines the comparative advantages of cable television over the broadcast networks. For instance, significant differences between cable and network are identifiable in terms of production budgets for original drama, the creative freedom afforded to the writers and the leeway that the cable networks enjoy in relation to explicit content. There is also a focus on factors that may have impacted on the American psyche; the terrorist attacks of 2001, the growing alienation of the

individual and the confusion surrounding twenty-first century masculinity, all of which were identified as possible contributing factors in the growing prominence of the anti-hero.

1.2 The extreme anti-hero

Before detailing how this research was conducted and how each of the key questions was addressed, it is first necessary to clarify and define what is understood by the terms 'anti-hero' and, specifically, in the context of this thesis, the 'extreme anti-hero'. To that end, it is instructive to begin by identifying the characteristics of the traditional hero. The hero was a character who existed within narratives that followed a "Platonic moral framework". Plato argued that "for the sake of social order, storytellers needed to identify their heroes unequivocally with the highest moral ideals" (McMillan, 2009:50). The traditional hero, therefore, exhibited moral strength and generally speaking, had the law on his side. Traditional hero stories include *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Star Wars*. The roots of the anti-hero will be discussed at length in the literature review, but in cinema, the anti-hero was often evident in the Western genre. This Western anti-hero was initially represented as a flawed hero, or a righteous vigilante, acting out of necessity in a lawless frontier. The breed of anti-hero that will be examined here, however, is far more extreme than previous cinematic incarnations. This 'extreme anti-hero' is a character who exists in a moral grey area, committing heinous, criminal acts which directly, or indirectly, lead to bloodshed. These characters wholly blur the lines between good and evil. Many of these extreme anti-heroes are either hard-core criminals or characters that are leading double-lives; initially appearing to be upstanding citizens but, actually, engaging in highly illegal and immoral activity. Extreme anti-heroes cannot and will not integrate into 'normal' society. They act outside the law, following their own moral code, or they simply disregard the law altogether in favour of unashamed individualism and the opportunity for self-promotion or monetary gain. Generally speaking, the extreme anti-hero will have some sort of skewed rationale for their crimes believing that they have no choice or that they are somehow working on behalf of the greater good.

Arguably, the extreme anti-hero, made its first appearance on US cable television with prison drama *Oz* (1997-2003). Since then, there has been a steady stream of 'quality' cable television drama series featuring an anti-hero in a central role. While *Oz* and *The Wire* feature ensemble casts in which almost every character has anti-heroic tendencies, numerous other cable dramas feature identifiable anti-heroic protagonists. Dramas such as *The Shield* (2002-2008), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Dexter*, *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-present) and *Breaking Bad* feature gangsters, corrupt politicians or law

enforcement officials, serial killers and drug dealers. In fact, with the exception of supernatural shows such as *True Blood* (2008-Present) and *The Walking Dead* (2010-Present), it is difficult to identify any substantial list of US cable dramas that do not feature a prominent anti-hero, each extending the boundaries of, what is dramatically acceptability, a little further. Even comedies broadcast on cable television such as *Nurse Jackie* (2009-present), *Weeds* (2005-2012) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present) follow characters whose actions are morally dubious at best. Thus, it would seem that the anti-heroic character is now the rule, rather than the exception, when it comes to quality, cable television drama. As the research here will comprise of an analysis of each of the shows, *The Wire*, *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad*, a brief outline of the narrative premise of each series will first be undertaken.

1.3 The Wire

The Wire, a show that is retrospectively considered to be amongst the greatest American television shows of all time, aired on subscription, cable channel HBO from 2002-2008. Created by former Baltimore journalist, David Simon, alongside former Baltimore cop-turned-teacher, Ed Burns, the show examines the inequality that pervades American society and the decline of the American city. Debunking numerous myths about America, the show complicates the notion of America as 'land of the free' and mocks the notion of the American Dream; the idea that success and monetary wealth come to those who work hard and persevere. Produced and set in Baltimore; the show strives, over five seasons, to examine numerous aspects of the city from the education system to the local press, all of which are represented as irretrievably dysfunctional. Featuring a large, predominately black, ensemble cast, *The Wire* follows public servants working on behalf of the state and a criminal underclass, privileging neither. This is a show that is filled with anti-heroic characters, all of whom are deeply flawed and unable to make any sort of substantial impact on the city of Baltimore.

The Wire can be loosely termed a 'police show'. In fact, it was this generic categorisation that made HBO initially reluctant to fund the show. They feared that, as it was at least on the surface, a cop show, that it was "part of the commercial TV Universe the alternative network was designed to oppose" (Rose, 2008:83). However, it soon became clear that *The Wire* was unlike any previous incarnation of the cop show on television. In fact, Rose claims that "*The Wire* was a direct assault against {...} the cop show, with the goal quite literally to explode the creaky, hidebound world of prime-time crime and law enforcement from within" (2008:82). Many of the generic conventions of the police show genre can be traced back to *Dragnet* which first aired on NBC in 1951. This was a show that created the benchmark, by which all police shows to follow, would be judged.

“Generically, the show established most of the formal precedents for the police drama...” (Mittell, 2004:119). The typical police show genre centres on cops who are single minded in their quest to stamp out criminality and who always prevail, no matter how complex or violent the case. There is almost always a sense of closure which occurs within the television hour, with order being restored before the credits roll. Generally speaking, the police show genre provides a relatively simplistic picture of law and order and of criminality. Indeed, the legal system is portrayed as a “well-oiled machine in the service of justice” (McMillan, 2009:52). There is little space for moral ambiguity in the archetypal cop show; they rely on binaries such as good versus evil and law & order versus crime. *The Wire* not only defied but turned all of these generic conventions on their head. Rose maintains that writers David Simon and Ed Burns “were eager to throw out the moribund certainties of the cop genre and inject not just a measure of reality, but a potent and potentially combustible mix of urban sociology, fiercely argued politics, and [...] macroeconomics” (2008: 80). Far from the well-oiled justice system that has been depicted time and time again on the small screen, the cops, attorneys and politicians in *The Wire* are repeatedly compared and contrasted with the criminals, often unfavourably.

With *The Wire*, a predominantly white, middle-class and relatively affluent audience who subscribe to HBO were drawn into a “sympathetic consideration of characters who live the sort of lives many viewers will not ever have examined with careful, concerned, critical awareness” (Marshall & Potter, 2009:9). *The Wire* is, without a doubt, a political program. Ethridge claims that “Simon’s project is to make a moral appeal to his viewers showing the lives of many in Baltimore as tragically bound up by the institutions in their lives” (2008:152). The present day projects/ghettos are likened to a war zone with the corner boys often referring to themselves as “soldiers”. Survival by any means is all that matters here. “Mere Survival becomes a legitimate measure of success” (Marshall & Potter, 2009:4). However, survival is a near impossible feat as is illustrated by the relatively small numbers of older black men involved in ‘the game’. This is a young man's game and few make it to middle age. Instead, their involvement in the drugs trade leads to lengthy prison sentences or premature death. This reflects the reality of inner city Baltimore residents. In 2005, 52% of Baltimore’s African American men in their 20s were either in prison or under criminal justice supervision (Davis, 2005). In *The Wire*, there is also an examination of the disintegration of community in the black ghettos of Baltimore. It is implied that although poverty was always present, the areas now known as ‘the projects’ were once marked by a greater degree of solidarity, a sense of community and hope for the future. There was also less casual violence a generation before and some sense of honour, even amongst criminals. The code that once existed, even amongst those operating outside of the law,

has eroded over time. Weaver also comments on the sense of hope that existed in the black communities of the past. The generation who moved into homes in inner city East Baltimore in the 1950s “painted porches [and] planted vegetable gardens in the backyard [...] There were high hopes for the children of this generation” (2009:16).

It is made apparent in *The Wire* that individual action is close to futile. Individuals, whether they are low level corner boys or police officers, are incapable of making any mark on a system that is so fundamentally broken. Instead, *The Wire* illustrates how both politics and crime follow cyclical patterns with little hope for sustained change. A new mayor will inevitably come up against the same obstacles as his predecessor and a new drug lord will continue to murder and maim until he himself is killed or incarcerated. If one character had to be picked out as a protagonist, it is Jimmy McNulty, an Irish-American detective who doesn't always play by the rules but has a keen instinct which makes him "good police". Whilst there will undoubtedly be references to McNulty in this thesis, the character who will form the primary focus is, in fact, Omar Little. A black, homosexual, street savvy criminal, Little is yet another example of a new breed of extreme anti-hero evident in American television drama; a character whose actions, though illegal, could not be considered wholly immoral. Omar, lives by his own code of ethics; a code which insists that he does not hurt the innocent, the 'citizens' of Baltimore who are not involved in 'the game'. Omar will only target criminals who he believes are legitimate targets. He is one of the most interesting, original and unique characters ever seen on American television; a character that, it will be argued, transcends many stereotypes about race and sexuality.

1.4 Breaking Bad

While *The Wire* is a dark and gritty show that exposes the social inequality and injustice that pervades American society, *Breaking Bad*, is arguably darker than any drama that has previously been aired on US television. This show, which premiered in 2008, would, more than likely, not have been made if AMC had not entered the arena and been actively searching for quality, original programming to rival HBO and Showtime's offerings. Indeed, the creator of *Breaking Bad*, Vince Gilligan, had been turned down by numerous cable channels. Networks that usually pride themselves on their risqué content deemed *Breaking Bad* far too edgy and morally dubious to appeal to the average American television viewer. However, the show has been a cult success story. Lowry (2008) claims that the show has been extremely successful in attracting a particularly difficult-to-reach, young male, audience; the very audience prized by advertisers. Furthermore, the show has enjoyed astounding critical success. Bryan Cranston was awarded an Emmy for 'Outstanding Lead

Actor in a Drama Series' for three years running. Aaron Paul, who plays Jesse Pinkman, also won 'Best Supporting Actor' for two years running. Furthermore, though the results are pending, the show has been nominated for 13 Emmy awards in 2013.

Breaking Bad's first season introduces us to Walter White – a middle class, high school chemistry teacher living in suburban New Mexico. Walt lives with his wife, Skyler who is approaching 40 and has a “surprise baby” (BB, S0202) on the way and his disabled teenage son, Walt Jr. who has mild cerebral palsy. White is initially portrayed as a tragic figure. He supplements his meagre income by taking shifts at a local car wash, but even at this, the family are struggling to make ends meet. Against this backdrop, White, a non-smoker, is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. With no money to pay for specialist treatment, it appears that White, a victim of circumstance and capitalist America, is destined to endure an undignified, hopeless death. However, Walt spends little time on self-pity. In fact, far from zapping Walt of ambition, his bleak diagnosis seems to act as a catalyst, a call to action. Mounting health care bills and the inescapable fear that his family will be left in financial ruin when he dies lead him to take extraordinary measures. Walt, in an unusual partnership with Jesse Pinkman, a former tearaway student and drug user, begins to manufacture and distribute methamphetamines; commonly known as crystal meth. However, this crystal meth is unlike anything currently available; the drugs cooked by Walter White are exceptional, due to his in depth knowledge of chemical compounds. A fledgling business is therefore formed, a business that lifts Walt's life out of the mundane.

Walt's apparent misfortune in life affords him the sympathy of the viewer initially and provides some rationale for his actions. This is a man who is told that he is months away from death. He is tormented by the knowledge that his family will be left not only without an income but with huge hospital bills. However, as will be discussed in later chapters, as the series progresses, it becomes apparent that Walt is not simply drawn to this endeavour for financial gain. His actions become more sinister and his motivations less clear. His family's welfare is no longer a primary concern and it becomes clear that anyone who stands in his way is in grave danger. White becomes a completely different monster than any of the anti-heroes mentioned or examined in this thesis. There is no longer any justification for his actions nor is there any sense that he is guided by anything other than the desire for power and control. Indeed, as the show progresses, it is Jesse and not Walt who grapples with the violence and bloodshed associated with the narcotics industry. Thus, while remaining intriguing and compelling; Walt, arguably, becomes less of a point of identification for the viewer over time.

1.5 Dexter

Dexter, the primary case study in this thesis, first aired on Showtime in 2006. The show was adapted from a series of books by Jeff Lindsay. This was a unique programme centring on a charismatic and endearing serial killer. *Dexter* was a risky and radical departure for prime-time television and a show such as this, with its morally dubious protagonist could not have been broadcast on US television even ten years previously. Set in sun-drenched Miami, *Dexter's* glossy setting looks more appropriate for a sun lotion commercial than a dark and edgy drama. Dexter initially comments that "there is something strange and disarming about looking at a homicide in the daylight of Miami. It makes the most grotesque of killings look staged – like you are in a new and daring section of Disneyland" (D, S01E01). Unlike, *CSI Miami*, another major show centring on crime scene analysis and forensics in Miami, *Dexter* does not rely on a narrative in which the criminals are almost always apprehended by those working on behalf of the justice system. Neither does *Dexter* conform to the grand narrative in which good prevails over evil as is typical in much broadcast network drama. Rather, *Dexter* centres on a ritualistic serial killer who works within the Miami Metro Police department as a blood spatter analyst, but who uses his specialist training and the police criminal database to conduct his own investigations and to 'exact' justice according to his judgment of each case, even if his victims have escaped formal conviction following trial for their crimes.

While it was a new departure for a murderer to feature as a protagonist, Dexter Morgan was not painted as the villainous, serial killer we were used to being presented with on film and television. The fact that the audience is privy to Dexter's interior monologue is key in keeping them onside. Dexter's voiceover allows him to repeatedly justify his actions and 'sell' his motives to the viewer. This intimate knowledge of his innermost feelings makes it difficult for the audience to condemn him. This voiceover, which offers "Dexter's real opinion on the events taking place around him, an opinion which is always at odds with his outward comments and demeanour" is, according to Peirse, (2010:195), one of many "noirish tropes" apparent in the early seasons of *Dexter*. Although the audience is aware of Dexter's amusement, and occasional disdain, for many societal norms as delivered in his sarcastic voiceover, outwardly he appears to be a 'normal' middle-class suburbanite. It is this uneasy juxtaposition of normalcy and brutality which contributes to a constant uncertainty about Dexter's true nature or identity. Right from the opening credits, Dexter's morning routine of cooking bacon and eggs appears sinister and violent; the bacon can be likened to human flesh and the eggs, whose yolks Dexter pierces with a sharp knife, are, arguably, somewhat reminiscent of the

lives he takes. Yet, side by side these obvious associations with violence, there are also images associated with fragility, as Karpovich points out: "Dexter himself provides the first fleeting moment of fragility, asleep and vulnerable to the mosquito's bite" (2010:36). This violence and simultaneous vulnerability persists throughout the five seasons of the show and makes it difficult to identify Dexter Morgan as either reprehensible or sympathetic. Even after five seasons, Dexter still somewhat eludes our capacity to decode him, as a character. Is he really a monster? Or is he best understood as indefinable, unknowable, morally ambiguous and yet strangely attractive and compelling? He does, after all, only kill the guilty; enforcing justice in a city where the "solve rate for murders is at about 20%" (D, S01E01).

The show also provides the viewer with a back story which provides some explanation for Dexter's desire for violence and vengeance. Through various flashbacks in Season One we learn that Dexter witnessed the brutal and bloody murder of his mother when he was a very young child. He was subsequently adopted by one of the police officers who discovered him at the crime scene. This police officer, Harry Morgan, came to recognise a violent streak in Dexter and instilled in him a kind of moral code that Dexter refers to as 'Harry's code'. This code, which Dexter lives his life by, insists that Dexter target only the guilty and that he evade capture at all costs. Thus, Dexter's victims, primarily male, are the perpetrators of violent crimes who have avoided conviction or have been released, despite the threat they pose to society, by a flawed criminal justice system. Many of Dexter's victims have killed children; an act that is completely unacceptable to Dexter who views childhood innocence (an innocence that he himself was denied and appears to mourn) as sacred. The flashbacks to Dexter's own childhood, which are prevalent throughout the first and second season of the show, create an ambiguity about who the real monster is. Is it Dexter Morgan, the serial killer or is it Harry Morgan, the cop with an apparent desire for revenge and personal justice? Howard (2010:xiv) notes that while there have been a number of programmes on US television in recent years focusing on characters with "significant personality issues", such as *The Sopranos* and *House*, "Dexter ups the ante and the burden for us viewers by providing a hero (or anti-hero) who, for all of his apparent normalcy as a boyfriend, brother, police officer, and Miami native, engages in violent, bloody, ritualistic serial murder". Certainly, Dexter Morgan can be deemed an anti-hero in that he is neither hero nor villain; neither entirely good nor evil; both monster and victim simultaneously.

1.6 Layout of the Project

This thesis has a six chapter structure. The literature review, which follows this introduction, examines the antecedents of the anti-hero. Before embarking on a discussion and analysis of a new breed of extreme anti-hero, it seemed necessary to first firmly establish the historical roots of such a protagonist. Thus, academic opinion about when and where the anti-hero first emerged is outlined and the evolution from literature to cinema to television is traced. The literature review also examines why this character-type has survived, in different forms, for centuries, questioning whether social and economic factors have contributed to the popularity of the anti-hero at various historical junctures. Additionally, the chapter also evaluates the cable television landscape in the USA, examining the initial dominance of HBO in the production of original, edgy drama and the subsequent rise of competitors AMC and Showtime. Finally, the key terms and theories that are drawn upon throughout the thesis, such as masculinity theories, Freudian psychoanalysis and a discussion of 'quality television' are identified. Following on from the review of literature, the methodology chapter provides a thorough explanation of why this research topic was chosen, what the primary sources were and how the research was ultimately conducted. The rationale for the selection of three particular case studies is provided as is a discussion on the decision to render *Dexter* the backbone of the research. A detailed explanation of the research methods utilised and the theories underpinning the research is also included. Finally, the methodology chapter explores further research possibilities that were, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this particular thesis.

The findings section of this research is divided into two chapters; the first primarily addresses the central hypothesis and the second addresses the research sub questions. Chapter four focuses on the representation of the extreme anti-hero. Using the three case studies, it illustrates the widespread depiction of the anti-hero in cable television, thus proving the central hypothesis. The chapter further analyses each central character in detail, exploring the creation and representation of Omar Little, Walter White and Dexter Morgan and justifying how each can be defined as an extreme anti-hero. Chapter Five is concerned with the reasons for the rising popularity of the anti-hero in American cable television at this particular juncture, thus addressing the research sub questions. The chapter examines a number of key contributing factors to the current success of such characters on the American small screen. These factors include the repercussions of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the growing alienation of the individual and the commentary, provided by all three shows, on aspects of contemporary masculinity and sexuality. The chapter also addressed the fact that, despite all of these important contributing factors, without sharp, well observed and insightful writing and clever production and marketing techniques, a show such as *Dexter* could not

have become such a cult hit. Finally, the concluding chapter draws together all of the key findings so as to clearly illustrate how the thesis has successfully addressed the central hypothesis and research questions and suggested a possible trend in US cable television.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This project centres on the television anti-hero and uses a number of key case studies to illustrate the prevalence of this character on US cable television. However, it seems inappropriate to launch into a discussion of the modern day incarnation of the anti-hero without establishing the roots and antecedents of a character that has been cropping up in literature, philosophy and cinema for centuries. This chapter briefly examines the role of the traditional narrative hero because the anti-hero can, at least initially, only be defined in relation to the hero. Following on from this discussion, this literature review outlines the various academic perspectives on the origins of the anti-hero; the reason this character has remained a steady feature in various different types of text throughout the years and why it has risen in popularity at various historical junctures. There will also be a specific discussion centring on the television anti-hero's most recent and comparable relation – the cinematic anti-hero and an examination of the point of focus here, the emergence of the extreme television anti-hero. Once the roots of the anti-hero are firmly established, the focus shifts to US cable television. This section of the literature review outlines the rise in the production of original drama on cable television. The discussion centres on HBO, which was the trailblazer in this regard, and identifies how in recent years, competitors AMC and Showtime have successfully mimicked the HBO model. Finally, a number of key terms and theoretical approaches are outlined; these will be repeatedly drawn upon in the thesis. The term 'quality television', which first emerged in the 1970s, is examined. There then follows a discussion on aspects of masculinity theory and Freudian psychoanalysis, theories which are drawn upon in the findings chapters.

2.2 The Traditional Narrative Hero and the Roots of the Anti-Hero

As mentioned, it was necessary to very briefly examine the role of the traditional narrative hero in order to establish the fundamental differences between the hero and the anti-hero. The hero is, according to Hourihan, a character whose "centrality in our culture is unarguable" and the traditional hero quest story is "about superiority, dominance and success" (1997:1). Traditional hero stories include *Odysseus* and *Beowulf*, *Jack and the Beanstalk* and even *Star Wars*. When it comes to cinema, Mackey-Kallis maintains that "many of the top grossing films in the American cinema have been based, however loosely, on the hero quest" (2001:1). So, who are the heroes at the centre of these hero quest stories and what key characteristics do they possess? According to Fitch, these characters deliver salvation and enact positive change. They display "emotional, physical, and moral strength as well as charity and fortitude" (Fitch, 2004:1). In a discussion of the Western genre,

Hourihan maintains that the hero is almost exclusively a white male, a man of action through whom manhood is defined. His enemies are those who are perceived as 'other'; threats to the dominance and superiority of the West (1997:2). Such hero stories function to re-affirm the superior or dominant of a number of binary opposites such as black/white, male/female and good/evil with the hero always embodying "the superior terms of these dualisms" (Hourihan,1997:2). This is, perhaps, what truly separates the hero from the anti-hero. The anti-hero does not always embody the dominant/superior binary nor does the anti-hero necessarily represent the inferior, thus separating him from the villain. The anti-hero can, in fact, represent both superior and inferior; both good and evil, both masculine and feminine at one and the same time. The anti-hero is neither hero nor villain, or perhaps he is both, represented through one complex and compelling character.

So where and when did the anti-hero character emerge? It is necessary to examine the historical antecedents and subsequent evolution of this figure in order to firmly ground today's television anti-heroes. To do so, the discussion shifts to existentialist philosophy, to literature and to cinema. Santas claims that the anti-hero "has crept into the literary form imperceptibly throughout the centuries" (2007: 157). Indeed, there is a certain amount of disagreement as to when this character came into existence. Some academics cite various Biblical characters as the first representations of the anti-hero. For example, Sawyer cites Jezebel as an anti-hero as she "acts without any alliance with the Lord God of Israel" (Sawyer, 2002:66). Others credit Makepeace Thackeray, claiming that *Vanity Fair* (1848) was the first novel without any real hero in the traditional sense (Edelstein, 1996: 17). Alternatively, there are academics that point to the Byronic hero, introduced in the writings of Lord Byron (Stein, 2004). However, it will be argued here, that it was Fyodor Dostoevsky who produced and developed the original, fully formed, anti-hero in *The Underground Man*; a character who reminds us of man's freedom as well as his responsibility to himself. These themes are almost proto-existentialist with Walter Kaufmann describing Dostoevsky's underground man as "the best overture for existentialism ever written" (1966:14). Furthermore, as will be discussed here, this character's traits are still reproduced in the present day in literature, film, and television.

According to Brombert, "*Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-81) is an altogether crucial text in the antiheroic tradition" (1999:6). Santas concedes that whilst Dostoevsky's description of the anti-hero may not be the first inception of such a figure, it is a "starting point in a discussion" (2007:159). According to Halliwell, this novella is "Dostoevsky's renunciation of moral certainty" (2001:16). So who was the underground man? Kentish and Jones observe that the 'underground' in the novella is the "consciousness of a hero (or anti-hero) morbidly obsessed with

his own impotence in dealing with social realities. This obsession is usually accompanied with feelings of bitterness and resentment towards that society which forbids him entry" (1991:viii). Dostoevsky's nameless anti-hero or 'underground man' is a "moral cripple who blackens himself on purpose and loves his infirmities[...]display[ing] the relentless will to be outside of the norm and in opposition to it" (Brombert, 1999:7). However, Guignon and Aho maintain that "even though we see the man as unpleasant, even despicable, we find ourselves drawn to him in a troubling way. We begin to see ourselves in his insecurity, his excessive vanity, his capacity for cruelty and his self-defeating behaviour" (2009:vii). Thus, the underground man, like today's anti-heroes is simultaneously unpleasant and compelling.

So if we are to take Dostoevsky's underground man as the starting point for the anti-hero character, how has this figure since developed in literary fiction or indeed in philosophical writings? As has been previously mentioned, Dostoevsky is often regarded as one of the great existentialist thinkers. Along with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, according to many academics, can be considered one of the fathers of existentialism, a term that was not in use until the 20th century. According to Earnshaw, existentialism is "a philosophy that takes as its starting point the individual's existence" (2006:1). It begins with the individual, rather than the universal, and so "does not aim to arrive at general truths" (Earnshaw, 2006:1). It has "often been understood as a philosophy of complete nihilism and utter despair" (Olson, 1962:13). Lubin identifies the key characteristic of the literary anti-hero as an inability to find any meaningful direction in his own life or in any of human existence. Lubin claims that "this loss of purpose is tied to the loss of God, heralded by the cry of Nietzsche, 'God is Dead' "(1968: 311). In the book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche identifies the potential of man to create their own values or codes, to rise above the unthinking 'herd' that rely on traditional Christian morals. This 'overman' (Übermensch), according to Earnshaw, "must forge his own 'good and evil', make his own law tables" (2007:48). For Nietzsche, there is no universal 'truth', instead there are multiple 'truths' in various societies and situations.

Whilst Nietzsche was one of the forefathers of atheistic existentialism, Sartre was the first philosopher to use the term 'existentialism' to describe his own philosophy. Edelstein claims that the anti-hero reached "full maturity in the writings of the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre" (1996: 17). In his essay, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre referred directly to Dostoevsky's pronouncement; "Dostoevsky once wrote If God did not exist, everything would be permitted and that, for existentialism, is the starting point" (1997:339). As has been alluded to previously, many writers claim that existentialism was as much a literary movement as a

philosophical one and, indeed, Sartre's own ideas are better known through his fictional works such as *Nausea* (1938) than through his purely philosophical writings. It is in this novel *Nausea*, that Sartre's existential anti-hero, Antoine Roquentin, is fully formed. Roquentin's story is told using the device of a diary that has been unearthed. Through this diary, we see how Roquentin has become disillusioned with the world, and with existence, leading to a feeling of overpowering nausea. "Roquentin becomes aware of the pettiness of this existence, this day-to-day, squalid, hypocritical existence, for which he no longer finds any justification, and is suddenly overcome by nausea" (1977:105). As anti-hero, Roquentin embarks on a journey that leads to further doubt and uncertainty, rather than to reconciliation between intra-psychic confusion and inherited belief and expectation.

This anti-hero figure is further evident in an Irish literary context. Like Sartre's Roquentin, "The Beckettian anti-hero is an inner exodus rather than an epic odyssey his anti-hero is styled more on the Hebraic Job than the Hellenic Ulysses" (Kearney, 1988: 61). Kavanagh and O Leary maintain that "an important critique of the hero can be found in the writings of Joyce and Beckett who were antagonistic to many aspects of the Celtic literary revival, especially to Yeats' heroic images" (2004:126). Instead, both writers centre their narrative on the anti-hero, "the exhausted (predominately male) ego of twentieth century Western man" (Kavanagh & O Leary, 2004:126). Paralleling and contemporaneous with Roquentin, but against a different cultural and historical backdrop, there is no romantic, nationalist reconciliation of the conflict between the disaffected, uncertain individual and collective interests in their work. Kavanagh & O Leary maintain that the anti-heroes evident in the works of Beckett and Joyce have been influential throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day. They claim that as a result, "heroes are routinely presented in caricature or ironically" (2004:127).

2.3 The Cinematic anti-hero

Moving from literature to cinema, portrayals of the anti-hero in late twentieth century Hollywood film, in particular, became more commonplace. Whereas the traditional Hollywood western, typified by John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), was a constant reworking of the riddle in American national identity, of how to resolve the conflict between the right to exercise individual conscience and the demands of collectivist law imposing nationhood. McDonogh at al remark that "the 1960s brought the anti-hero to westerns in films where protagonists, doomed in a West that could not survive civilizing America, turned to violence as mercenaries (*The Magnificent Seven*, 1960), outlaws (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969), or sociopathic killers (*The Wild Bunch*, 1969)"

(2001:1208). Skolsky also commented that “a new style of Western idol has emerged: the anti-hero, the strange, unshaven, cheroot-smoking, nameless gunfighter or bounty hunter casting about amidst the sadistic forces of the desert (1974: 63). He claims that Clint Eastwood is the “embodiment of the new Western man” in movies such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). In these new Westerns, there are “only remnants of the morally superior western hero of earlier Hollywood films” (Tasker, 1993:69), as exemplified by John Wayne’s Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach*. This character achieves his goal of private revenge by an unlawful, but morally justifiable, duel. At the film’s conclusion, he is playfully dispatched by the sheriff (rather than punished) to a future as a ranching cowboy.

So, why did these anti-heroes emerge in American cinema in the 1960s? Perhaps it is useful to look to the previous decade for answers. In the 1950s the notion of the American Dream was promoted by mainstream media, particularly advertisers. This concept centred on the idea that Americans were free to “pursue happiness without socio-economic class barriers” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004:158). The notion that hard work would result in material success was widely disseminated and “the propagation of the American Dream suggests that the only thing holding a person back from wealth (and thus happiness) is their own lack of drive and determination” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004: 159). Weir claims that by the 1950s, “postwar prosperity had unleashed a wave of consumerism that fed the American dream” (2007: 24). This was a period in which Americans began to see themselves in a different light. “There was a marked decline in the number of Americans who identified themselves as working class and an increase in those claiming middle-class identity” (Weir, 2007:24). However, by the 1960s, it had become clear that the American Dream was not accessible to everyone in American society. “African Americans, ethnic minorities, and working women complained that systemic discrimination kept them in subordinate positions both socially and economically” (Weir, 2007:24). Furthermore, the notion that America was a predominately middle class society was shattered through various poverty studies. According to Benshoff & Griffin, “by the 1960s, members of the counterculture were rebelling against the conformity and materialism of the 1950s, and voicing a strong critique of capitalist exploitation (as well as racism, sexism and the war in Vietnam)” (2004:178). It was within this context of uncertainty and disaffection that the morally superior cinematic hero of the 1950s all but disappeared.

Since the Westerns of the 1960s, the anti-hero in cinema has become a recurring figure. When discussing Dustin Hoffman’s acting roles (such as *The Graduate* (1967) and *Little Big Man* (1971), Lenburg defines filmic anti-heroes as “sympathetic , defenceless characters ensnared in situation

that often reflect the worlds complex realities “ (1983: 11). However, to claim that anti-heroes are generally ‘sympathetic’ may be inaccurate given the widespread consensus that characters such as Travis Bickle in Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) can be considered anti-heroic. Rojek offers a different and darker perspective from such a romantic view; “The anti-hero may be defined as an individual who perceives the codes and mores governing respectable culture as hallucinations” (2001: 161). So, whilst some representations of the anti-hero have, as Lenburg identified, focused on a wholly unlucky, likeable character who appears to have no real control over his or her circumstances, more have focused on a darker character, a character whose most identifiable characteristic is that of alienation from society and, like Dostevsky’s ‘underground man’, a character who operates outside the norm. This individual suffering from isolation and feeling alienated from the moralities of society, can only express himself, or herself, through violence. Rojek, further claims that “violence is frequently the means employed by the anti-hero to break hallucinatory structures of power” (2001: 161). Again, this is evident in the violent resolution of Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*. Fitch further notes “The anti-hero is rarely happy in situations that please other men. He prefers conflict and struggle rather than comfort and certainty. His sense of self-actualization or righteousness is achieved through war or strife” (2004:2). Thus, the anti-hero is not simply disillusioned with his or her society, but is frequently actively and violently anti-social, rather than a passive victim and observer of the society they abhor.

There have not been as many notable examples of female cinematic anti-heroes as their male counterparts. However, perhaps, this has less to do with female characters not embodying the same lonely spirit of the anti-hero as male characters and more to do with the much smaller number of films with female protagonists. Clover reminds us that “Precious few American films have had women at the center and men at the periphery, and what ones there are, have not, for the most part, drawn large male audiences” (1991:22). Nonetheless, there are some examples of cinematic female anti-heroes. Both Clover (1991) and Fitch (2004) cite *Thelma and Louise*, a “belated Western” (1991: 28), as a prime example. Whilst the two female protagonists are not lone characters, they rely very much on each other’s friendship and are alienated from a male dominated society. Whilst this film was hugely successful, both critically and commercially, some critics were uncomfortable with two female protagonists behaving “violently and without reflection”. Williams further notes that “obviously there is something unsettling to male viewers about women with guns” (1991: 27).

2.4 Society and the anti-hero

As we have seen, it is also important to explore whether the popular representation of anti-heroic figures occur at certain times in certain societies. As has been previously discussed, the inception of the anti-hero took place in Dostoevsky's Russia where he "lived in the shadow of the Decembrist insurrection [of 1825], and suffered from the harsh police-state atmosphere instituted by Nicholas I to ensure that nothing similar could occur again" (Frank, 1979: 4). Dostoevsky's father was murdered by his own serfs and whilst in his twenties Dostoevsky was banished to Siberia for four years for disseminating writing against the government. This exile was followed by a mandatory four year period as a private soldier. This harsh sentence was, in fact, a reprieve as Dostoevsky had initially been sentenced to death by firing squad. According to Moss (2002, 34), it was his "instincts for social justice, his hatred of serfdom, and his utopian dreams for a golden age" that led to his disillusionment with the way in which Russia was being governed and his critical writings.

Looking to why the anti-hero has been so popular in American texts throughout the last century Fitch maintains that "these themes resonate with the American psyche to qualify and redeem the many moral indiscretions that accompanied the creation of the nation" (2004:3). For, in order to establish the United States of America, Kendall claims, "many Native Americans were either massacred or died from European diseases and starvation" (2007: 325). It could further be argued that this character becomes prevalent during periods of intense economic or political unrest. Indeed, the very creation of the anti-hero occurred in Russia during a period of "dramatic social and cultural transformations" (Guignon& Aho, 2009:vii). In an American context, Lubin maintains that the anti-hero emerged after World War 1 and "reflects the bitter aftertaste of the war", a war that he claims "marked the collapse of the nineteenth century dream of progress and the perfectibility of man" (1968: 310). Edelstein concurs that whilst the origins of the anti-hero, as we know him, date back centuries, "it is generally agreed that the anti-hero made his appearance in the 1920s, in large measure because so many people thought that the devastation of the First World War required a revision of the traditional hero" (1996:17). Interestingly, Edelstein also maintains that the anti-hero character made a comeback almost immediately after World War 2, "as if in recognition of the fatal wounding of the genuine national hero during the conflict" (1996:17). Further evidence of the anti-hero rearing his head in a post-war America can be found in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, a film which "appeared after a decade of war in Vietnam (1976), and after the Watergate crisis and subsequent resignation of Nixon" (Iannucci, 2005: 63). As will be discussed in greater detail in this project, there has been a resurgence in the popularity of the anti-hero character, this time on our television screens. This rise in prominence could be attributed to the post 9/11 war on terror, or the decade of prosperity prior to the economic recession that has gripped the Western World. Similarly, the rise in

consumerist values and the deterioration of community may all have a part to play in the recent rise of the extreme anti-hero.

2.5 The Television Anti-Hero

The origins of the anti-hero have been discussed in terms of both literature and cinema but it would seem that, today, the home of the anti-hero is on television and it is this particular incarnation of the anti-hero that will form the basis of this research project. "Not surprisingly, the anti-hero has come to play an increasingly central role in television programmes" (Kavanagh & O Leary, 2004:127). This rebirth of the archetype on the small screen is a relatively recent phenomenon. Writing in 1996, Edelstein claimed that anti-heroes will never stick around for a long period of time because "anti-heroes tend to lose, things don't often go their way, and Americans enjoy winning and elation, not losing and frustration" (1996:19). Perhaps much has changed since 1996 as it will be argued here that, in the last decade and a half, there has been a sustained surge in the representation of the anti-hero on television. For example, Fossey (2003) has likened the character of Spike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to Dostoevsky's Underground Man or anti-hero. "Spike will be likened to Dostoevsky's underground man, the alienated and dual-natured anti-hero first encountered in *Notes From Underground* (1864) and continued in *Crime and Punishment* (1866)". Furthermore, in the last couple of years, the representation of the anti-hero in television has spread from supporting characters to protagonists; from comedy to drama; from cable to network television. From the representations of comedic characters such as Larry David in *Curb your Enthusiasm* to protagonists such as Gregory House in *House* on the mainstream network, Fox, the unusual, and often unlikeable, character has come to the fore of television drama.

It is, however, in cable television, that the anti-hero has found his natural home and has been fully developed. Indeed, when looking at the body of quality television drama that has appeared on cable television in America in the last number of years, one would struggle to identify a large number of successful original dramatic programmes without an anti-hero at the fore. *Big Love* (2006-2011) centres on a Mormon polygamist; *The Shield* portrays numerous crooked cops; *The Sopranos* presents us with a sexist, racist and violent mob boss and *Boardwalk Empire* focuses on a womanizing, crooked politician who will steal, maim and kill, even those closest to him, in order to remain in power. Three television shows that will be examined in some detail in this project have, arguably, presented us with the darkest representations of the anti-hero to date. Serial killers, drug dealers and murderers draw us into their worlds in *Dexter*, *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire*. So, not only do almost all of the primetime US cable television drama series contain an anti-hero as a protagonist

or central character, these characters are, for the most part, more extreme than their literary or cinematic counterparts. They exist in a moral grey area, skirting the line between hero and villain, good and evil. In this thesis, this new breed of television anti-hero is termed the 'extreme anti-hero' because they move far beyond previous incarnations.

2.6 Cable Television and 'Quality' Television Drama

Generally speaking, television has historically been perceived as popular or low culture. Lusted claims that "among elite groups, television in general falls into the category of low culture, perhaps even despised culture" (1998:175). Television has been consistently compared unfavourably with cinema. It has been claimed that television's small screen and, at times, poor visual quality defy aesthetic pleasures. Instead, television has been labelled a medium for communication rather than creative or artistic ventures. For example, as recently as 1999, the British broadsheet, *The Independent* claimed (Jacobs, 2001: 429):

What is striking...is the vigour with which cinema has survived the suffocating arrival of television. Television, of course, is merely a medium of communication rather than an art form, a pale substitute for the power of cinema when it tries to be cinematic.

However, Jacobs (2001: 434), claims that the notion of television as "textually anaemic" in comparison with film is vastly out of date. These notions, he suggests, have to be "revised in the light of contemporary television" (Jacobs, 2001: 431). This current focus on 'quality television' could be considered such a revision. But what is 'quality television' and how does it compare with regular television programming?

Within the field of television studies, scholars have sought instances of 'quality' within television and have sought to establish the medium as worthy of study. The birth of what is widely recognised to be 'quality' television was probably in the 1970s. It was then that the "demographic composition of the television audience began to be considered" as opposed to simply the total number of viewers (Johnson, 2005: 58). These changes led to the production of 'quality' television: television that appealed to a specific quality audience; an audience who were young, urban, liberal and educated. According to Jaramillo, "if a series appeals to decent numbers of an upscale demographic, large numbers of lower income viewers are secondary-quality over quantity" (2002: 66). This 'quality' television, according to Johnson, "drew on traditional criteria of aesthetic value, such as authorship, artistic freedom and creativity, formal and narrative experimentation, complex characters and sophisticated writing" to attract this quality audience (2005:58). The first examples of 'quality' television are associated with Grant Tinker's independent production company MTM Enterprises Inc.

MTM went on to essentially define the standard of 'quality' in the television industry. *Hill Street Blues*, for example, is considered one of the cornerstones of 'quality' television. According to Hammond and Mazdon, with *Hill Street Blues* came the notion, amongst some scholars, that television could be art (2005:59).

Since the 1990s, there has been a huge surge in the numbers of programmes that could be considered 'quality'. This surge has been led by cable television, which can be divided in two categories, basic cable and pay-cable. Both are "extra services bought and paid for by the viewer-consumer directly as opposed to "free", over the air, broadcast television" (Jaramillo, 2002:62). Basic cable relies on advertising while pay cable does not. Instead, pay-cable is reliant on high numbers of subscribers who pay a premium each month for the service. Pay cable networks such as HBO, The Movie Channel, Showtime, and The Disney Channel, do not sell advertising. The pay-cable channel that has most frequently been associated with quality television is HBO. Many critics claim that HBO has changed the face of television. "HBO's brand identity, technological innovations, and original programming have taken hold of the public imagination and emerged as unique in television's cultural production" (Leverette et al, 2008:8). Furthermore, numerous other channels have begun to mimic its business model and programming style. Therefore, it is worth briefly looking at the development of the hugely successful channel, its branding and its output.

As cable television appears to be the new home of the anti-hero, it is important to outline when the cable networks began to focus on original dramatic programming and, further, to explore what comparative advantages cable television has over the broadcast networks which might explain their sustained representation of the anti-hero. In America, a number of networks competing for the same 'quality' middle, class audience with disposable income have led to more risqué, artistic and daring niche television content. It is impossible to discuss the current cable television landscape in the US without giving some attention to the evolution of HBO. This was the network that, arguably, started the trend by introducing audiences to morally dubious protagonists in *Oz* and *The Sopranos*. It subsequently attracted such widespread critical and commercial success that competing networks soon began to follow suit; creating edgy drama that almost always centred on an anti-heroic protagonist

It will be argued here that HBO's *Oz* really marked the introduction of the extreme anti-hero and this was soon followed by *The Sopranos*. HBO was created in 1972 and for a number of years it attracted audiences solely through the broadcast of sporting events and the airing of feature films. However,

by the mid-1980s the landscape of American television was changing. The cost of basic cable was rising; the advent of the VCR altered viewing patterns and cable deregulation led to a more competitive marketplace. Thus, in the 1980s HBO began to produce TV movies and experiment with television comedy and in the 1990s, HBO truly came into its own in terms of quality television drama and proved that a cable channel could rival the broadcast networks. This was achieved first with *Oz* (1997) and then with the highly successful *The Sopranos* (1999). Both programs pushed the boundaries of television drama in a number of ways. *Oz*, the less successful of the two shows, paved the way for hit show, *The Sopranos*, and arguably all of HBO's other original series. "Oz broke the necessary ground for all of the dramatic series that followed" (Malach, 2008:60).

Oz was a new departure for American television drama in a number of ways. The programs experimental style, explicit content, and the creative freedom afforded to the show's producers all signalled that a new era had begun for US television drama. Created by Tom Fontana and Barry Levinson, *Oz* was HBO's first original weekly, hour-long, drama series and the show ran from 1997 to 2003. A brutally violent and sexually explicit drama, *Oz* focused on the inmates and staff in a maximum security prison. Malach notes that Fontana was interested in exploring the idea of good and evil and the notion that both could co-exist within an individual. "Fontana chose to focus largely on the interconnection of good and evil (particularly within the individual), the possibility of redemption or lack thereof" (2008, 58). The show focused, in particular, on an experimental unit within the prison known as Emerald City which featured clear cells and had a higher ratio of guards than elsewhere in the prison. Although, *Oz* is made up of an ensemble cast featuring actors from various ethnic groups, there is a point of identification for the audience in Tobias Beecher, a white, middle-class lawyer who killed a young girl whilst drink driving. *Oz* took the traditional model of the prison drama and turned it on its head. Not only did *Oz* push the boundaries of serial television by its graphic depictions of violence, racism and sexuality, specifically homosexuality, the program also played with the conventions of television drama in a number of ways. Malach makes reference to the very first episode of *Oz*; "Dino Ortalani (Prisoner # 96C382, played by Jon Seda), the man on the gurney, is introduced as one of the main characters in *Oz*, only to have him gruesomely dispatched at the end of the very first episode" (Malach, 2008:52). Stylistically, the show was also quite experimental in its use of a narrator, Augustus Hill, a black inmate and former drug dealer who is confined to a wheelchair. Hill is serving life for the murder of a police officer. Malach claims that "Hill typically outlines the liberal position for the audience's edification, presumably voicing that of the show's creator and primary writers" (2008: 55).

In relation to the creative freedom afforded to the show's creators, *Oz* made fewer episodes than those of a regular season on network television, thus allowing more time and more money to be spent on each individual episode. *Oz* comprised of seasons that were just eight episodes long. These eight episodes ran for a full hour each week and did not have to factor in commercial breaks which can affect the flow and pacing of a programme. The freedom afforded to the creators of *Oz* was a new phenomenon in American television. Malach (2008, 60) argues;

Oz was the audience's introduction to what would clearly be HBO's philosophy of original, serialized, dramatic programming. Equal parts melodramatic, political, and deeply philosophical. Tom Fontana's series showed that HBO would not fear censorship of any kind, and that it would push the envelope in terms of scheduling, format and most especially content.

Although the programme was well received critically and attracted a respectable number of viewers, it was never destined to be the big hit the channel needed to propel itself into a new era. However, the show did result in "HBO quickly establishing itself as pushing the boundaries of serial television" (Malach, 2008:52).

HBO did, indeed, continue to push the envelope and its breakthrough came with *The Sopranos* in January of 1999, another series with an anti-hero to the fore. This was the show that put HBO on the map and offered a real threat to the broadcast networks, pulling in huge viewers, not just huge viewers for a pay-cable channel. Thorburn notes that *The Sopranos* became the "first cable series to achieve larger audience ratings than its broadcast competition" (2008:61). Created by David Chase, *The Sopranos* enjoyed critical success, won numerous awards and drew in a huge, quality viewing audience for HBO. "The series received unprecedented critical acclaim in both popular and elite circles" (Thorburn, 2008:61). Like, *Oz*, *The Sopranos* features an ensemble cast, although Santo notes that *The Sopranos* does have a "more clearly defined 'main' character" (2008:29). This 'main' character is troubled gangster, Tony Soprano, a character who is repeatedly referred to by numerous writers as an anti-hero and the source of much critical debate and academic attention. "More essays have been written on Tony Soprano himself than on any other single topic, almost all seeking to come to grips, in one way or another, with the central question of the morality of the series' anti-hero" (Lavery, 2006:8).

Whilst, like *Oz*, *The Sopranos* did not shy away from graphic depictions of sex and violence, it was, in this context, more widely accepted. Jaramillo claims that whilst "prison violence is dark and disturbing", mob violence is "sexy and presold" (2002:59). Indeed, in some regards, *The Sopranos* is

more cinematic than televisual. The gangster genre, for example is a cinematic genre and had no previous connection to television. "In *The Sopranos*, HBO had found a strong link to the cinematic gangster tradition - a generic showcase for violence legitimated by academy awards, Hollywood auteurs, and best-selling novels" (Jaramillo, 2002:59). Throughout the six seasons of *The Sopranos* there are continuous intertextual references to classic gangster movies such as *The Godfather* (1972) and *Goodfellas* (1990). The pilot episode, for example, features a discussion of how Tony ranks *Goodfellas* and all three instalments of *The Godfather*. Furthermore, many cast members had previously appeared in classic gangster movies, further reinforcing the link between *The Sopranos* and its cinematic roots. Lavery remarks that Chase was not himself a huge fan of the medium of television; "Airing on HBO, already branded as "not TV", is a series created by David Chase, a man who scorns the medium in which he has spent his career" (2006:4). Indeed, Chase has continually denigrated American television claiming that its sole focus is to sell commodities to the audience. Thus, Lavery claims, with every episode of *The Sopranos*, Chase set out to make a mini movie, making he and HBO a perfect fit (2006:5). Chase was given the creative freedom he desired and HBO further distanced themselves from traditional television, having landed their very own auteur. According to Jaramillo, "the best part of the deal was that the broadcast networks had passed on series creator David Chase's pitch. HBO emerged as the saviour, rescuing television from itself" (2002: 59).

HBO followed up the initial success of *The Sopranos* with more hit television shows, shows that were well received by viewers and critically acclaimed. Their original programming, including *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), continued to separate it from the other television networks. In fact, HBO's branding is reliant on this differentiation from 'regular' TV. Its slogan has been, since 1996, 'It's not TV. It's HBO', is implying that HBO's offerings are a cut above regular television content. This strategy appeared to work and according to Edgerton, "By the late 1990s, HBO had emerged as the TV equivalent of a designer label (2008:9). Of course, HBO did have some regulatory advantages over broadcast television. HBO appeals to a niche market, a middle-class market, those with an extra \$15 per month to spend on its services. Santo maintains that pay cable and HBO in particular, "sells cultural capital to its subscribers, who are elevated above the riffraff that merely consume television" (2008:20). Furthermore, In HBO drama, there are no ad breaks. This means that HBO drama does not have to pace itself in relation to commercial breaks. Also, the lack of influence from advertisers as well as less regulation has meant that there is "more leeway in the area of explicit content" (Jaramillo, 2002: 63). They are also not confined to a typical 25 episode season structure. HBO seasons generally

contain significantly fewer episodes and more money to spend on those episodes. Importantly, HBO dramas are writer-led. According to HBO's head of original programming, "the biggest single thing [HBO tries] to do is to fulfil the purest form of the writers' creative vision" (Jaramillo, 2002:65).

However, in the last number of years, it would appear that HBO has become a victim of its own initial success and critical acclaim. Edgerton claims that "by the mid-2000s, HBO engendered a certain backlash from its competitors and some television critics for not being able to produce more breakout hits fast enough" (2008:13). Leverette et al claim that the channel "had lost nearly all of the recognizably 'HBO' shows, perhaps the key works that made it 'not TV'" (2008:6). Indeed, it was not until 2009 that HBO could lay claim to another bona-fide hit. The premiere of season two of *True Blood*, a quirky drama following vampires in the deep South, was the highest rated program for the network since the finale of *The Sopranos* (Hibberd,2009). However, from the time *The Sopranos* ended to the time *True Blood* began, a number of other cable channels had mimicked HBO's programming style and produced hit shows that were attracting large audiences and critical acclaim. Suddenly, it would seem, HBO had rivals with the same advantages over broadcast television that it had enjoyed. Nordyke claimed that Showtime had emerged from the shadows of HBO and was "generating its own buzz with original series that are being recognized by the Emmys and Golden Globes and pulling in some of its highest ratings ever" (2007). Similarly, the basic cable network AMC, which had previously been known for airing classic Hollywood movies, was proving it could rival premium cable in terms of 'quality television'. Indeed, AMC is currently airing two of the most successful and most talked about quality television programmes of the moment, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*, programmes that, apparently, had been passed on by HBO and Showtime. Indeed, Fernandez, writing in the LA Times noted that "for the second year in a row, AMC made television history, earning more Emmy nominations than any other basic cable network" (2009). Indeed, *Mad Men* was nominated four times in the writing category, a category consisting of only five nominations. Thus, while times were getting tougher for HBO, audiences were being provided with more edgy, quality television than ever before and in this context, it seemed that was no stopping the anti-hero.

2.7 Masculinity

This thesis argues that all three of the case studies, in particular, *Dexter*, offer a commentary on 21st century masculinity, a masculinity which is, according to Hamilton, in crisis. "The erosions of masculinist privilege at both the global and the national levels produce a dialectics of crisis (2011: 3). Thus, it is necessary to briefly outline evolving representations of masculinity on screen as well as address some of the key concepts that will be discussed in this project. In order to understand

representations of masculinities on the small screen from the turn of the millennium onwards, it may be fruitful to begin with a brief examination of the evolving cinematic representations of masculinity during the previous two decades. The masculine heroes of Reagan's 1980s were white, muscular, fearsome machines. Jeffords (1994) refers to the "hard bodies" of the 1980s heroes evident through characters such as Rambo in *First Blood*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *Rambo III* who, she claims, were linked to Reagan's own masculine image. The 1990s were then, according to Malin, characterised by a Clinton-esque conflicted masculinity; strong but sensitive 'new men'. New masculine heroes emerged such as Steven Seagal and Patrick Swayze. These "new male heroes" were strong and sensitive but this sensitivity was always embraced "with caution" (2005:31). In his discussion of John Woo films of the 1990's, Robert Hanke notes that Woo "picks up on recent Hollywood films which feature male protagonists who are both violent and sensitive, who perform their own contradictions, and who struggle with themselves as much as with evil" (1999:39). Fred Pfeil draws particular attention to films released in the year 1991. Films such as *The Fisher King*, *City Slickers* and *The Doctor*, lead him to label 1991 as "the year of living sensitively", with each of the aforementioned films "concerned with the redemption and conversion of their white male protagonists from one or another variant of closed-down, alienated boor to an opened-up, sensitive guy" (1995:37).

The 1990s also saw what Kusz refers to as "images and narratives of victimized young white males" (2007:80). Savran notes that the 90s saw "the ascendancy of a new and powerful figure in U.S culture: the white male as victim" (1998:4). The film *Fight Club* (1999), addresses the crisis in masculinity and the notion of white male as victim. "The men of *Fight Club* believe that, through pain and violence, they are reviving a lost element of their masculine identity" (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004:301). A particularly extreme example of the notion of white male as victim is exemplified through Kimmel's research into rural militia in the US. This research analysed a grouping of white men who believed themselves to be entitled to power, "by a combination of historical legacy, religious fiat, biological destiny, and moral legitimacy". However, these same men felt their power had been taken away by "a federal government controlled and staffed by legions of newly enfranchised minorities, women, and immigrants, all in service to the omnipotent Jews who control international economic and political life" (2010:148). This claim that the white male was the new casualty of American social and economic change has little factual basis. Savran notes that while there is evidence to support the notion that white lower and middle class males have seen their incomes remain static or fall, money was not being channelled from working class white men to

working class African Americans but to the very rich who are, he claims “overwhelmingly white” (1998:207).

The duality of the 1990s masculinities as illustrated in the previously mentioned films which contained strong yet sensitive, and violent yet caring masculine representations, continued into the early 21st century. Malin (2005:173) claims that the latest conception of manhood presented “similar anxieties and tensions but in a still more schizophrenic form”. He cites two small screen characters: Tony Soprano and Vic Mackey, the central character in FX’s cop show, *The Shield* (2002-2008), as exemplars of this new representation of masculinity. These two characters were both violent enforcers and caring family men. “Both Tony and Vic live in the netherworld between right and wrong, performing an act as a compassionate father or law abiding citizen one minute, and then putting a gun to someone’s head the next” (Malin, 2005:173). *Dexter*, to some extent, continues and extends this extreme duality through a character who is both serial killer and suburban dad.

The representation of both black and gay masculinity is also key in this thesis as one of the key characters, Omar Little, is a homosexual, black gangster. The representation of gay men on the American small screen has, to date, been extremely limited with characters generally being depicted as either highly promiscuous or almost asexual. It is impossible to talk about gay representation on television without mentioning *Will & Grace*. One of the most successful television shows of all time, NBC’s *Will & Grace* certainly brought gay representations into the mainstream and was according to Streitmatter (2009:115), “the most visible gay media product of all time”. However, whilst the programme has been applauded by some critics for its depiction of gay masculinity, it has been simultaneously criticised for its safe storylines and tired caricatures. This is a show that is not centred on a gay sexual relationship but a ‘safe’ friendship between a gay man and a heterosexual woman. According to Kalamaras, there is a sense that “no one wants to hear that gay men actually have sex. Keeping them soft, cuddly and cute on TV makes society feel better” (476). Streitmatter argues that *Will & Grace* portrays two different types of gay men; Will and Jack, thus “communicating that all gay men aren’t alike” (2009:115). Feasey (2008), on the other hand, finds the representation of Jack too problematic to ignore. Jack is portrayed as camp in the extreme, reinforcing the “longstanding and negative link between the gay man and camp performance” (Feasey, 2008:28). Jack is portrayed as innately different to a heterosexual man. This depiction of a fundamental differentiation between men based on sexual orientation is further reinforced through

programmes such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* which may feature gay men but is “marketed toward straight audiences” (Kalamaras, 2007: 476). The show reinforces stereotypes about gay men having a natural aptitude for design and fashion and also, according to Kalamaras, reinforces ideologies about the superiority of heterosexual masculinity. The gay men on this show are catering to the needs of the straight man. “These wonderful gay men are on TV and are working their magic in service to straight men” (Kalamaras, 2007: 476). So whilst there have been attempts to represent gay men on US television, for the most part, these representations have been limited and one dimensional, depicting gay men through a heterosexual lens, packaged for a heterosexual audience.

If the representation of gay men on US television can be referred to as limited, then the representation of gay, black men is almost obsolete. Davis and Needham (2009:3) note that “queer characters and people on television remain largely white”. In fact, even since *The Wire* finished, with the exception of the character Lafayette on HBO’s new drama, *True Blood* (2008-present), it is difficult to think of one other black, male homosexual character on a US television program, let alone a homosexual, black, gangster operating in the inner city projects. Black Masculinity is widely represented as solely heterosexual. Perry claims that “black masculinity demands the performance and policing of a narrowly defined version of manliness that requires heterosexuality” (2001:133). The boundaries of black sexuality are defined in the dominant black institutions. The African Methodist Episcopal Church has publically denounced homosexuality and, according to Rhue & Rhue (1997:118), “homophobia in African American communities is inextricably linked to the black church”. In fact, one Florida minister was so vehemently anti-gay that he announced from the pulpit that “If the KKK opposes gay marriage, I would ride with them,” (Boykin, 2004). Indeed, Staples points out that various passages in the bible which condemn homosexuality are used as justification that homosexuality is inherently wrong. However, he points out that ironically, “the bible was also used as a pretext to defend slavery” (2006:64). Black Muslims are also warned of the depravity of homosexuality. Members of the Nation of Islam “routinely characterise gays and lesbians as the consequence of a degenerative white society” (Rhue & Rhue, 1997:118). Furthermore, the Howard University Newspaper referred to black homosexual men as “freaks” engaged in “depravity” (Perry, 2001:133). Myers claims that “for many, being black and gay means having to go back and forth between identities and learning to make peace with them” (2003:140).

Televisual and cinematic representations of black masculinity, paired with gangsta rap music lyrics, all contribute to this image of the misogynistic and aggressive black male. Kimmel notes that “masculinity is the central organising principle of rap music” (2004:658). Jarman-Ivens further notes that “rappers’ masculinity is, notably, also constructed as unquestionably heterosexual, perceptible

through a mixture of homophobic lyrics and the insistence of heterosexual activity between the rapper(s) and women” (2006:200). Rap/Reggae artist Beenie Man’s lyrics actually encourage the killing of gay men and women; a practice that is widespread in his home country of Jamaica; a place that has been referred to as “the most homophobic place on earth” (Padgett,2006). One of his songs tells listeners to “hang lesbians with a long rope”. The controversy surrounding Beenie Man’s lyrics eventually lost him a lucrative endorsement deal with Puma after European gay rights groups staged numerous protests about Puma’s affiliation with a number of Jamaican artists who incited violence against homosexuals. Furthermore, a number of black male celebrities have made openly homophobic remarks. The most recent example is black actor Tracy Morgan, star of *30 Rock*, who remarked during a stand-up routine in June 2011 that if his son came home talking in a high pitched voice he would stab him to death.

2.8 Freudian Psychoanalysis

Freudian psychoanalytic criticism is also key in this thesis as it underpins much of the analysis of *Dexter*. It is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of texts. Psychoanalytic criticism is associated with the mind and therefore, places emphasis on the personal rather than the social. The Freudian approach assumes that the mind has two components-consciousness and unconsciousness. Linked with the idea of the unconscious is repression, which is the ‘forgetting’ or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unedited desires, or traumatic past events, so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious. A similar notion is that of sublimation in which repressed urges are disguised, generally as something more noble. For example, according to Barry (2002:97), sexual urges may be given sublimated expression in the form of intense religious experience. To fully explain the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious Freud devised a three part model of the psyche consisting of the ego, super ego and the id. Barry (2002:97) notes that these three ‘levels’ of the personality correspond (respectively) to the consciousness, the conscience and the unconscious.

Freud also stressed the importance of dreams. Dreams, for Freud, have two types of content, the manifest and the latent. The manifest level, is the dream itself, the latent level is the thought that cannot be known or expressed consciously because it has been repressed or censored. The dream-work, according to Freud, is this process by which real events or desires are transformed into dream images. These include displacement, whereby one person or event is represented by another which is in some way linked or associated with it and condensation, whereby a number of people, events,

or meanings are combined and represented by a single image in the dream. Thus, according to Barry (2002), characters, motivation and events are represented in dreams in a very literary way. Dreams, like literature, do not usually make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly, avoiding direct or open statement, and representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person. However, because the statements made in dreams are not explicit there is an inevitable element of judgment involved and, consequently, psychoanalytic interpretations of literature, and indeed, cinema, are often controversial.

Many of Freud's ideas concern aspects of sexuality. For example, primitive sexual desires are repressed into the unconscious and can appear, perhaps displaced or sublimated in dreams. In fact, Freudian interpretation is popularly thought to be a matter of attributing sexual connotations to objects, so that sticks, towers or guns, for example, are seen as phallic symbols. For example, the tower in Rapunzel can be viewed as a phallic symbol. According to Barry (2002), this kind of thing had become a joke, even in Freud's own lifetime, and Freud once famously observed, 'sometimes a cigar is just a cigar' in response to constant jokes about his own cigar smoking. Freud also controversially discussed childhood sexuality. "Infantile sexuality, for instance, is the notion that sexuality begins not at puberty, with physical maturing, but in infancy, especially through the infant's relationship with the mother" (Barry, 2002:97). Freud's notion of the Oedipus Complex proposes that all young boys go through a phase of wanting to kill their father and marry their mother. This urge is eventually resolved through identification with the father. However, if these urges are not completely resolved, this can, according to Freud lead to later sexual problems.

Another of Freud's concepts that will be drawn upon in this thesis is the theory of trauma. Freud is, according to Leys (2009:18), "a founding figure in the history of the conceptualization of trauma"; Freud initially discussed the concept of trauma in relation to female hysteria and later returned to in relation to soldier's experiences in World War 1. The original meaning of the word trauma relates to a "surgical wound" but as Leys notes, "psychical trauma is still bound to the concept of surgical shock" (2000:19). Freud's view was that trauma led to "increased libidinal excitation, which led to a break in the stimulus barrier" (Van der Kolk, 1988:27). Freud believed that there was often a compulsion to repeat the trauma both in dreams and in reality. "Trauma is relived in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, haunting memories" (Bloom, 2008:166). Furthermore, the victim of trauma would often later become the perpetrator of trauma thus creating a cycle of violence. What Freud termed *Nachtraglichkeit*, roughly translated as belatedness or afterwardness, is also worth considering. According to Radstone (2007:78), *Nachtraglichkeit* is the "revision or rearrangement of

memory traces to give new understanding". This is, in essence, the relationship between an initial traumatic childhood incident and the recollection of the trauma as an adult. There will be a further discussion of trauma in relation to *Dexter* later in the project.

There has been much criticism of Freud, in particular (originally) from feminist critics who were appalled by his views on women. He was condemned by Kate Millett in 'Sexual Politics' in 1969 as a prime source of the patriarchal attitudes against which feminists must fight. Although this view is still shared by many feminists today, there was another attitude, sparked by Juliet Mitchell in 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism'. Mitchell (1974) claimed that Freud does not present the feminine as 'given and natural'. Therefore, gender roles are malleable and changeable as opposed to inevitable and unchangeable givens. Mitchell claims that the Freudian notion of penis envy which outraged many feminists need not be taken as envy of the male organ but as envy of the social power held by men. From this point on, a number of feminists took a psychoanalytic approach to reading texts, which combined the insights of these two approaches. For example, an important film theorist Laura Mulvey (1987) combined these two approaches in her study of 1950s melodrama.

2.9 Conclusion

It seemed necessary to firmly establish the narrative and cinematic roots of the anti-hero prior to embarking on an analysis on a new type of extreme anti-hero on television. Thus, this review of literature has examined the antecedents of the anti-hero, tracing its emergence in literature and examining its cinematic and early televisual incarnations. There was also an examination of the current cable television landscape, with particular emphasis being placed on HBO's move towards original dramatic programming, a move that was later mimicked by the other cable networks that will be examined here. The term 'quality' television was also explained as this is a term that will be used repeatedly throughout this thesis. Finally, it was necessary to outline two theoretical approaches that are drawn upon in this research; Freudian psychoanalysis and masculinity theories. While Freudian psychoanalysis underpins much of the research on *Dexter*, all three case studies will be examined in relation to their representation of masculinity and sexuality.

3. Methodology

3.1 Hypothesis & Research Questions

As outlined in the introduction, this thesis centres on the following hypothesis: there has been a sustained depiction of the anti-hero in US cable television drama since the late 1990s. There seemed to be anecdotal evidence of the rise of the television anti-hero with almost every contemporary cable television drama featuring a criminal, addict, drug dealer or crooked politician at its core (for example, *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *Weeds*, and *Damages*). This project aimed to gather substantial academic evidence suggesting indications of this trend. Thus, using a number of key case studies, the aim is to prove this hypothesis. Additionally, the research also poses a number of research sub questions. It seemed that indicating the existence and popularity of the anti-hero on US cable television wasn't enough. It was also necessary to address why this might be the case. Thus, the following four closely related sub questions were also addressed:

- Why the anti-hero?
- Why now?
- Why in America?
- Why cable television?

3.2 Primary Sources

The contemporary, cable anti-heroes that have been referenced in this project will be termed 'extreme anti-heroes'. They are not simply characters who take the law into their own hands for a greater good; these extreme anti-heroes wholly blur the lines between good and evil and extend the boundaries of acceptability on television. The primary sources in this research project were the following three dramas: Showtime's *Dexter*, HBO's *The Wire* and AMC's *Breaking Bad*.

Dexter is the key case study and this project centres on an in-depth analysis of this particular show. It was chosen as the central case study for a number of reasons. Firstly, unlike *The Wire*, for example, which concluded in 2008, *Dexter* is still being produced. Furthermore, there is one clear central character and point of identification for the viewer in Dexter Morgan. In contrast, *The Wire* features an ensemble cast, and while each character is an anti-hero, none affords the role of protagonist in a drama which is not about any one individual but about a city, specifically the city of Baltimore. In *Breaking Bad* there is also some ambiguity surrounding the point of identification. While Walter (Walt) White initially fills this role, as the show progresses, the focus arguably shifts from Walt to Jesse Pinkman, his sidekick who displays regret, remorse and the desire to escape the life of hard criminality that he has embarked upon. *Dexter* on the other hand has a clear point of identification;

Dexter Morgan, a forensic analyst who doubles as a serial killer is the show's protagonist and narrator. Thus, *Dexter* forms the backbone of this project with *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* providing supplementary evidence of the widespread depiction of the anti-hero on US cable television. A number of other, relevant, shows are also discussed, on occasion, throughout the project. These shows include *The Sopranos*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Oz*.

3.3 Methods of Analysis and Theoretical Underpinnings

Dexter first aired on the cable network, Showtime, in 2006 and its eighth season is scheduled for broadcast in Summer 2013. *Dexter* has become a global hit despite the fact that it is not easily and legally accessible in many countries. For my own research, it was necessary to keep up to date with the show by accessing episodes on the day following their US screening via online streaming or bit torrent sites. Additionally, DVD box-sets were also purchased, as they became available, in order to facilitate the re-watching of each series; crucial for the detailed analysis required for this project. In order to analyse *Dexter*, it was first necessary to pick a representative sample of the drama series. Each season of the show contains twelve episodes, each of which is approximately forty five minutes in length. As there was such a large body of work, which continues to grow as the show is currently still in production, this project focused on seasons one to five, which amounts to sixty episodes in total. The primary research method was close textual analysis, one of the key methods for conducting contemporary television studies research. Textual analysis can be described as a "style of analysis developed in and across multiple disciplines for the purpose of studying various types of texts" (Gray & Lotz, 2012:28). This method analyses programme features such as images, dialogue, characters and plot.

To facilitate the textual analysis, each season of *Dexter* was viewed five times, focusing on a slightly different element of the show or drawing on different theories (i.e. Freudian psychoanalysis, masculinity theories) to direct my viewing on each occasion. The first and last viewings were general overviews in which notes were taken, various patterns and storylines noted and interesting and relevant quotes identified. During the second viewing, the show was watched through a Freudian psychoanalytic lens. Thus, on this occasion, attention was directed to Dexter's childhood trauma and his subsequent desire to punish the perpetrators of violent crime. Further consideration was given to the interruption of his Oedipal journey and the effect that had on his character's sexuality and intimate relationships with women. The third viewing then focused on Dexter's masculine identity, or identities, as it transpired. During this re-watch, it became apparent that Dexter displayed both

dominant and subordinate masculinities; the latter operating almost as a disguise and ensuring that Dexter, a seemingly well-meaning lab geek, avoided detection. Finally, the fourth viewing focused entirely on Dexter's relationship with his father, Harry. After this particular re-watch, each and every scene featuring Dexter and Harry was cut and a DVD compiled, comprising of every scene in which the two characters appear together. This proved to be a useful exercise as it clarified when Harry appeared as a flashback and when he appeared as a hallucination in the present. This re-watch and subsequent analytical exercise also facilitated the reaching of certain conclusions about Dexter and Harry's relationship. This includes the notion, which will be explained in detail later, that Harry is in fact, Dexter's 'dark passenger', a term Dexter uses to describe his inner monster that drives his desire to kill. The notion that Harry is Dexter's dark passenger is suggested through the repeated appearance of Harry in the passenger seat of Dexter's car. From this passenger seat, he offers Dexter guidance and re-enforces the legitimacy of the code.

As mentioned, psychoanalytic theory was drawn upon in order to conduct the close textual analysis of *Dexter*. It seemed impossible to analyse a show such as *Dexter*, which featured a dead mother, an overbearing father, and a central character that was unable to develop any sort of meaningful intimate relationship, without drawing on a number of Freudian theories. This research examined the notion that Dexter's Oedipal journey was interrupted by the brutal murder of his mother, a murder that was witnessed by Dexter at a very young age. This traumatic incident is best viewed in light of Freud's conception of trauma. In terms of repeating or reliving a traumatic event in reality, Freud noted that the victim of trauma would often later become the perpetrator of trauma, thus creating an on-going cycle of violence. There was also an examination of Dexter's relationships with women and this thesis argues that Dexter has a mother fixation. This fixation can also be traced back to Dexter's childhood trauma, the point at which his Oedipal journey was interrupted. It is manifested in Dexter's choice of partner as he appears to be drawn to women who are visually similar to his dead mother and who require saving from a brutal male, for example, his wife, Rita. Johnson claims that "the mother-fixation is often identified in this way, through choosing sexual partners who are discernible surrogates for their parents" (2010:83). This mother fixation would also explain why Dexter seems incapable of, and disinterested in, sexual relationships with his partners.

The analysis of *Dexter* is further underpinned by masculinity theories. *Dexter* addresses confusion surrounding 21st century masculinity in a number of ways. Throughout the show, various modes of masculinity, masculine relationships and differing representations of fatherhood are all explored.

Dexter Morgan, himself, exhibits various different forms of masculinity. For example, the subordinate masculinity Dexter displays in the workplace is at odds with the violent, dominant form of masculinity displayed when he is planning and executing his latest kill. This research explores whether Dexter merely uses the “lab geek” workplace persona as a disguise in order to avoid detection or if the duality within him is genuine. The alternate notion that perhaps Dexter is simply invisible due to his status as a young, white, middle-class male, a status which seems to render him an unlikely suspect, is also explored. The fact that Dexter’s crimes are conveniently pinned on a black ex-military colleague, who is deemed a much more likely fit, does not go unexamined. Finally, there will be an examination of Dexter’s relationships with other men. Dexter appears to lack the ability for casual male friendship and camaraderie and his attempts to mimic this sort of behaviour pokes fun at, and mocks, the ‘norms’ of acceptable masculine behaviour.

The Wire and *Breaking Bad* were subject to similar textual analysis, albeit in less detail. Each season was watched three times with detailed notes being taken on each occasion. Points of commonality and points of differentiation between all three series were noted and afforded particular attention and consideration. For example, the differing masculine identity of all three characters was of particular importance. Omar, though homosexual, was not represented as stereotypically effeminate as is so often the case in mainstream television. Walt offered, at least initially, a very traditional representation of a masculine breadwinner and Dexter, as previously discussed, displayed a fractured masculinity and duality. Sexuality was also an important point of commonality. While all three characters exhibited very different sexual preferences and desires, their sexuality was a focal point in all three shows. While Dexter Morgan displayed little to no interest in sexual contact, which appeared to be merely a distraction from his murderous desires, Walt’s sexual appetite seemed to increase alongside his growing criminal status. Omar’s homosexual status, on the other hand, sets him apart from all the other gangsters and perhaps contributes to his existence on the periphery of the drugs trade.

There were also a number of points of differentiation amongst the three shows. While each character was involved in acts of violence and brutality, their motivations differed. For Dexter, his actions seemed to be instinctual or deeply ingrained. Omar’s actions, on the other hand, seemed to stem from a need for survival whereas Walt’s was motivated by a desire for control and power. The setting of each show was also a point of differentiation. Whilst *Dexter* was set in the glittering sunshine of Miami making the brutality of the killings seem surreal, both *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* are set in more bleak, less colourful surroundings. *Breaking Bad* is set in suburban New Mexico, a

setting which appears devoid of colour and contrast. *The Wire* is not only set in Baltimore but it is a show that is ultimately about Baltimore, examining the city's social and economic problems and the associated issues of governance in each season. Similarly, the point of identification for the viewer differentiates the three series. *Dexter* is named after its central character and the audience are encouraged to understand Dexter's past and his motivations. Indeed, Dexter narrates the show, giving him ample opportunity to rationalise his actions and to make the normality of those around him appear bizarre. *The Wire* on the other hand features an ensemble cast and no real singular protagonist. *Breaking Bad*, arguably, shifts focus after Walt kills Jesse's girlfriend, Jane. This is a massive turning point in the show and thereafter, it becomes more difficult to identify with Walt's increasingly menacing behaviour and the character who was once his troubled sidekick, Jesse Pinkman, becomes a closer point of identification for the viewer.

While all three texts were initially examined through a close textual analysis, many academics have noted that television studies require an integrated approach; pure textual analysis is sometimes not sufficient. Kellner (2010, 43), argues that television studies should be "multiperspectival" drawing on political economy, text analysis and audience reception. Similarly, Gray and Lotz note that "text alone is rarely enough for television studies, even if it is often the first port of call before embarking to context, audience and/or industry" (2012:28). Without an additional focus on industrial and socio-cultural factors, it would have been almost impossible to answer the research sub questions, why cable television? Thus, this project also analyses the changing television landscape in the USA, examining the leeway cable television is granted in the depiction of explicit content and also discussing the increasingly competitive world of cable television drama. Such an analysis will address why the last ten years have seen a movement on cable television, towards shows that depict morally ambiguous, and often violent, protagonists.

The three closely related sub questions, that are concerned with why the anti-hero has appeared at this time in American television drama, are addressed in a number of ways throughout this project. To understand why the character has become so prevalent at this juncture in an American context, it was necessary to examine American cultural-norms and sociological factors that may have contributed to the success of the contemporary extreme anti-hero. Thus, the thesis argued that the rise in prominence of the anti-hero character can be partly attributed to the post 9/11 war on terror and this is something that is explored in this project. In fact, interestingly, the original creator of *Dexter*, James Manos jr. has commented that a character such as Dexter could only have been embraced post 9/11 as, thereafter, there was a fundamental shift in the values embraced by the

average American and a re-evaluation of what is right and wrong (Howard, 2010). It is also argued in this project that the rise in consumerist values and the deterioration of community may have a part to play in the recent rise of the extreme anti-hero. Certainly, both factors contribute to the acceptance and continued success of the anti-hero; an individualist who takes the law into his own hands instead of relying on a flawed justice system.

3.4 Further Research Possibilities

In terms of further research, there is scope for a number of offshoots arising from this project. Firstly, it would be interesting to conduct some comparative research on Dexter's representation on television and his original incarnation in the books written by Jeff Lindsay. However, taking on this literary research would have been beyond the scope of this particular project. Furthermore, as it is difficult to definitely prove a trend through the analysis of just three key case studies, it would have been interesting to combine different methods of research. For example, some quantitative research examining US cable television drama and providing statistical evidence of the volume of shows that centre on an anti-hero would have been hugely interesting and informative and could have marked the starting point for the subsequent qualitative, textual research. It would also have been fascinating to conduct audience based research, examining in detail why fans are increasingly drawn to shows that centre on extreme anti-heroes. This research could be conducted in a number of ways. There could be an initial analysis of fan bulletin boards pertaining to the three key case studies; *Dexter*, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. International sites such as 'Television without Pity' as well as Irish bulletin boards such as 'Boards.ie' that contain various threads and forums relating to the three case studies could be used for this initial analysis. This additional research could focus on fan's reactions to particular characters and storylines and their thoughts on the morality of the anti-heroes actions. This would provide initial clues as to what the broad appeal of each character was to their fan-base. Further research could then be carried out via one to one interviews, focus groups or online interviews with fans situated in various geographical locations worldwide. This fan focused analysis would add another dimension to the research. However, unfortunately there was not scope for these additional elements in this particular project.

4. The Representation of the Extreme Anti-Hero

4.1 Introduction

While the subsequent chapter focuses on the research sub questions, this chapter primarily addresses the central hypothesis, that there has been a sustained depiction of the anti-hero on US cable television since the late 1990s. As previously argued, HBO's *Oz*, a dark prison drama in which there is no central character, and certainly no singular hero, marked the start of this trend in the late 1990s, a trend which continued with dramas such as *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *Damages*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Weeds*. Indeed, now almost every cable television drama being produced features a central anti-hero, each engaged in morally ambiguous activity. Through the use of a number of case studies, this chapter details how the trend has been sustained since the turn of the millennium. The primary focus will be on *Dexter*, a show narrated by a serial killer. However, there will also be a discussion of the two supplementary case studies, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*, each of which is produced and broadcast by a different cable network. This chapter will provide an analysis of each of the three extreme anti-heroes, Omar Little, Dexter Morgan and Walter White, examining how each is represented.

4.2 The Wire

The archetypal cop show relied on binaries such as good versus evil and law and order versus crime. As previously discussed, the police show genre provides a relatively simplistic picture of law and order and of criminality. Both *Dexter* and *The Wire* turned many of these generic conventions on their head. *The Wire* portrays cops who have little to no moral authority over those they seek to apprehend. There are no clear divides between good and evil or right and wrong, with the state on one side and the criminals on the other. Unlike *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad*, which feature one clear central anti-hero, *The Wire* comprises an ensemble cast and most of the primary characters have anti-heroic tendencies. "*The Wire* has no main character and certainly no singular hero" (McMillan, 2009:54). While various characters in *The Wire* could have been chosen for this case study, it is Omar Little who will be examined in detail. Omar, it will be argued, is the most interesting and thought provoking character in *The Wire*; a character who exists on the peripheries of gang culture, Omar earns his living by stealing from the drug dealers. Perhaps, his liminality arises from his sexual orientation. Omar is openly homosexual in a world dominated by machismo and, ultimately, he is a character who transcends stereotypes about race and sexuality. Omar captured the imagination of millions of viewers of *The Wire* and has been cited as President Barack Obama's favourite TV

character (Coolican, 2008). Furthermore, Omar Little's fictional death "warranted an obituary on the pages of Newsweek where he was tagged 'Robbin' Hood'" (LeBesco, 2009:219).

Whilst Omar is a criminal, and we repeatedly witness him stealing, maiming and murdering, it is also abundantly clear that he is a highly moral person. Thus he, like the other extreme anti-heroes, exists in a moral grey area, committing acts that are illegal but perhaps not entirely unethical. He, like Dexter operates according to a code, "a man gotta have a code" (TW,S04E07). Like Dexter's mantra that he will not kill an innocent, Omar's code of ethics insists that he will only hurt others who are involved in the drugs 'game'. There is no collateral damage for Omar Little. "I ain't never put my gun on nobody that wasn't in the game" (TW,S01E07). Indeed, Omar's ethics seem to be more authentic and heartfelt than some outwardly 'upstanding' members of society. This is illustrated in season two when Omar appears as a court witness ironically wearing a t-shirt with the logo, 'I am the American Dream'. The attorney who earns his living by defending most of the high level criminals involved in the drugs trade refers to Omar as a parasite. "You are amoral, are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You're stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city" (TW, S02E06). However, it is abundantly clear that Omar's leeching is far less ethically dubious than that of the attorney who has, perhaps, not committed any crime but whose personal morality leaves a lot to be desired. Omar is quick to identify this parallel. "I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase. It's all in the game, though, right?" (TW, S02E06). This scene struck a chord with many viewers and Omar's t-shirt has become somewhat iconic with replicas regularly available for sale on eBay, even in 2013, five years after the programme finished airing.

Furthermore, Omar Little, our anti-hero, seems like a relic of a bygone era. Despite the fact that he is a young man, he appears to share some of the old fashioned values of his parents, or even his grandparent's, generation. Omar's weapon of choice is an old fashioned shotgun and while he is undisputedly violent, he doesn't hurt innocent bystanders. "No stakes, no bystanders, no tax payers getting caught in the mix - you get close and you get the right nigga" (TW, S01E08). Even those who are termed "good police" have a certain amount of respect for Omar's way of life. Lester comments, "We all have a certain admiration for your do it yourself nature" (TW, S01E08). He has an old-fashioned code of honour and an old fashioned way of speaking, often referring to police officers, much to their amusement, as "gentlemen" and "ma'am" (TW, S01E08). *The Wire* is a show that is often remarked upon for its use of profanities. One character, Senator Clay Davis was best known for his catchphrase which was his elongation of the word 'shit'. There is also a notable scene, of over four minutes in length, featuring two police officers examining a crime scene using nothing but

variations of the word 'fuck' to express concern at their findings. In this context, it is worth noting that Omar Little does not ever use swear or use 'bad language'. In fact, in Season One, he questions his boyfriend on his use of several swear words. "why you always gotta say f-this and f-that [...] no one wants to hear them dirty words, man" (TW, S01E05). Omar also believes in upholding the codes of the past. In season three, Omar is taking his grandmother to church on Sunday. There has been a long standing rule that there is no violence at Sunday services – the Sunday morning truce – a remnant of days gone by. However, the younger members of the Barksdale crew are desperate to get Omar and they shoot at him regardless, knocking the hat from his grandmother's head in the process, much to Omar's disgust (TW, S03E09). This scene illustrates that the latest generation of gangsters have no regard for the codes of honour that existed in the past. Omar, on the other hand still longs for an outdated sense of honour amongst criminals.

Scherer likens Omar Little to a character from a Western. "His long coat and ever present shot gun constitute an iconography that establishes him as the generic inheritor of the western outlaw tradition, the rugged individual who inhabited that luminal frontier territory where existential questions were of necessity addressed" (Choat & Fox, 2009:272). Omar's whistling of nursery rhymes such as "The Farmer in the Dell" is reminiscent of Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns such as Clint Eastwood's casual whistling in the opening sequence of *For a Few Dollars More* (1967). Omar can also be likened, in some ways, to a comic book character; perhaps, in a nod to the unlikely scenario of a black, homosexual man being involved in 'the game'. Omar is one of the few characters in *The Wire* who is not portrayed in achingly realistic detail. He is portrayed as almost super-human. In an almost super-heroic scene in season five, Omar, while trying to escape from enemies, jumps from an apartment window. Omar walks away from this fall, a fall that should have killed him, with only an injured leg. Those who had been sent to kill Omar are shocked at the "spiderman shit" (TW, S05E06). It is perhaps this super-heroic quality that has inspired the neighbourhood kids, who in one particular scene, can be seen squabbling over who gets to play Omar next in their game of make-believe.

In *The Wire*, even the hardened criminals in the ghettos appear as victims of sorts. Their lives have been shaped by poverty and social exclusion. Omar, too, grew up in the projects, on the outskirts of society and his status as a black homosexual would have rendered him further marginalised. However, despite this, Omar never comes across as a victim. Omar makes his own choices and doesn't have choices made for him, like many of his rivals in 'the game'. He works for himself and doesn't answer to anyone or kill to order. He makes his own decisions and doesn't play by the rules

of “the game”. Perhaps the character of Omar is a beacon of hope as he represents a kind of freedom within the constraints of a disadvantaged, decaying, inner city.

4.3 Breaking Bad

Breaking Bad and its central character, Walter, ‘Walt’, White is arguably, considerably darker than both *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad* in both its subject matter and its execution. The show’s first season introduces us to this central character– a middle class, high school chemistry teacher living in bleak suburban New Mexico. Walt initially appears to be a hopeless and tragic figure. A non-smoker who is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, Walter does not appear to have a bright future. Even before his diagnosis, he is unable to make ends meet despite working two jobs. Thus, it seems that there is no possibility of him being able to afford specialist cancer treatment. Therefore, initially out of desperation, Walt forms an unlikely partnership with an ex-student, Jesse Pinkman, who is involved in the narcotics industry at a very low level. Walt and Jesse begin to ‘cook’ crystal meth, which is exceptional due to Walt’s knowledge of chemistry.

Initially, Walt, the shows protagonist is similar to the other ‘extreme’ anti-heroes that are the focus of this thesis. Walt’s apparent misfortune in life initially positions him as a somewhat sympathetic character. This is a man who is told that he is months away from death and is haunted by the knowledge that his family will be left, not only without an income, but with huge medical bills. Therefore, his actions, though shocking, appear to be a result of his desperation to ensure his family are not left in financial ruin when he passes away. So, like Dexter and Omar, to some extent, White rebels against the governing laws and the institutions that do nothing to aid him. At first, the drug trade is a means to an end for White, an immoral, drastic action taken because of an innate desire to protect those closest to him. Indeed, Walt has worked out the exact amount of money he needs to earn in order to provide security for his family when he passes away. He is working towards a figure that will cover his children’s education, the mortgage and the cost of living. However, as the show progresses, it becomes apparent that no sum of money will ultimately satisfy him as it appears to be power and control rather than monetary gain that ultimately drive him.

Throughout the first season, Walt retains some redeeming characteristics. He has moments of emotional turmoil and regret, or at least disbelief, about the bizarre path he has chosen. He appears to suffer genuine emotional distress when it comes to killing Crazy 8 – a high level drug dealer who is being held captive in his basement out of fear of a reprieve. Walt makes a list of pros and cons for

killing his prisoner. The list of cons is lengthy but the single pro is this: "He will kill you and your entire family if you let him go". Walt forms a relationship of sorts with Crazy 8 and reveals intimate details such as his cancer diagnosis. He confides: "I don't know what to do" (BB, S01E03). In fact, Walt is almost ready to trust Crazy 8's promises that he will not harm Walt or his family upon release. He prepares to free him when he realises that the captive's plan is to stab Walt with a piece of ceramic plate as soon as he gets close enough. Even though the narrative suggests that Walt is left with little choice, in the end, but to kill him, he is distraught and asks, "why are you doing this, why are you doing this?" as he realises the course of action he must take.

Despite Walt's initial rationale for his entry into the narcotics industry, there are signs that perhaps Walt has not so much been changed by his diagnosis and circumstances as he has been freed by them. Jesse questions Walt's motives and ponders on why a teacher would want to get involved in the drugs trade. Is Walt depressed or crazy? Walt simply replies with a wry smile: "I am awake". It is as if he were in a dreamlike state in his prior mundane existence and now he has been woken with a bang. Despite living through what most people would term the nightmare of diagnosis; it is as if the news has, ironically, freed Walter. He can now live the life he secretly or unconsciously desired, free from consequence and long term ramifications. It becomes apparent through various scenes, particularly in Season One and Two, that Walt's life had, up to this point, been something of a disappointment. He had a promising career in the private sector that didn't work out; he is now making a meagre income in a job that does not appear to satisfy him. There is also the insinuation that he married the wrong woman; that it was his first love Gretchen, and not Skyler, who he had anticipated marrying. Indeed, Walt acknowledges the string of disappointments in his life. "My wife is seven months pregnant with a baby we didn't intend. My fifteen-year old son has cerebral palsy. I am an extremely overqualified high school chemistry teacher. When I can work, I make \$43,700 per year. I have watched all of my colleagues and friends surpass me in every way imaginable. And within eighteen months, I will be dead."(BB, S02E03) Thus, Walt's entry into the drugs trade is unusually, a chance for him to redeem himself, to make a success of his life and to regain the control that he had, seemingly, lost over his own fate.

As the show progresses, it becomes apparent that Walt is, largely, no longer grappling with a guilty conscience nor is he simply manufacturing drugs to provide enough money to leave to his family. Walt is enjoying the sense of control and power. He is thrilled by the illegality and danger of his actions. In a major turning point in Season One, Walt shaves his head. His new look, however, does not make him look like a cancer sufferer; instead, he more closely resembles a menacing member of

a white supremacist group. It is as if Walt is not only shedding his hair but he is taking control, leaving behind the old Walter White, the under-achiever who never lived up to his potential. This new Walt is a far cry from the semi comical image of a tubby, middle aged man in his Y fronts in the desert; an image the audience was initially presented with in the first season. Even his son comments "Bad ass Dad" (BB, S01E06). It would appear that the man, now known in the narcotics industry as Heisenberg, has been severed psychologically and physically from the old Walter White. It also becomes apparent that Walt is neither focused on the monetary target that he initially set himself, nor the future and welfare of his wife and family. In fact, by the end of season two, Walt's actions have become more sinister and his motivations less clear. He places his family in grave danger on numerous occasions and he fails to take any opportunity to extricate himself from the criminal underworld in which he has become involved. Instead, Walt focuses on growing his business empire, eliminating anyone who gets in his way. It soon becomes clear that Walt will not be satisfied until he is running the entire crystal meth distribution network in New Mexico. White becomes a completely different monster than any of the other anti-heroes mentioned or examined in detail in this thesis. With large sums of money put aside, there is no longer any moral rationale for his actions nor is there any sense that he is guided by anything other than the desire for power and control.

While Walt's behaviour grows darker in each episode, it is in Season Two that he reaches a key turning point, from which there is no return. In one of the most disturbing scenes in *Breaking Bad* to date; Walt is in a room with Jesse and Jesse's young girlfriend, Jane. Both are high on heroin and have passed out. Jane begins to choke and needs to be turned over on her side to prevent herself from choking on her own vomit. Walt watches but he does nothing and Jesse does not stir. He is complicit in her death; he allows her to die because she has become a problem for him and has interfered in his business dealings by urging Jesse to get his share of the cash from Walt and flee the country with her. This is a key moment in the show and in the development of Walt as anti-hero. There is no longer any rationale for Walt's actions. He allows Jane to die purely to serve his own self-interests and to rid himself of a nuisance or an irritation. At this point, Walt no longer merely exists in that grey area between right and wrong. In fact, we later see the dire consequences of Walt's actions when the girl's father, an air traffic controller, returns to work stricken with grief and causes two planes to collide killing hundreds of innocent people. This can be, indirectly attributed to Walter White, yet he continues his involvement in illegal activity, perhaps suggesting that his conscience is no longer guiding him or that his moral compass is more skewed than the viewer had initially imagined. This is the point at which Walt ceases to be the point of identification for the viewer and

the focus shifts to his business partner, Jesse Pinkman, who becomes the emotional core of the show.

4.4 Dexter

Like *The Wire*, *Dexter* offers a take on the cop/forensic investigation show format. While, the binaries of good versus evil and law and order versus crime do exist in the show, Dexter himself manages to exist in a grey area, embodying all binary elements at once. He is a character within whom there appears to be the co-existence of good and evil. Furthermore, Dexter is simultaneously working on behalf of law and order, through his role as a blood spatter analyst within the Miami police department and against it, through the perpetration of his own violent crimes. Dexter is not the villainous serial killer we are used to being presented with on film and television. He, like Omar, operates by a code of ethics. This code - 'the code of Harry' – which was instilled in him by his late adoptive father Harry Morgan insists that Dexter's victims are criminals who deserve to die as punishment for their own heinous crimes. This ensures that Dexter's victims are almost exclusively criminals who have never been apprehended or who have been released without having been rehabilitated. The flashbacks to Dexter's own childhood which are prevalent throughout the first and second season of the show create an ambiguity about whether the real monster is the teacher or the protégé. In this way, Dexter Morgan could certainly be deemed an extreme anti-hero; neither hero nor villain; both monster and victim simultaneously.

Dexter leads a double life. By day he is a 'lab geek'; a straight laced, blood spatter analyst working within the forensics department of the Miami Metro Polices Homicide division. Dexter's alter-ego, on the other hand, is a brutal but precise serial killer who uses his knowledge of forensic science to ensure that no evidence of his murders is left behind. Dexter is always one step ahead of the police even his sister Deborah who, despite proving herself to be an exceptional detective, fails to identify her only brother as a serial killer. Dexter refers to his inner desire to kill as his "dark passenger" - an inescapable dark force within him. In Season Two, Dexter's alter-ego is referred to in super-heroic terms as the "dark defender". This name comes from an episode in which he is investigating a crime scene in a comic book store. In the store, Dexter sees a poster of 'The Dark Defender', a character inspired by the serial killer "The Bay Harbour Butcher" - a killer who has grabbed the public attention as he only kills 'bad guys'. This killer is, in fact, Dexter Morgan whose discarded corpses have been discovered in his deep sea dumping ground off the coast of Miami (D, S02E05)

As the nickname the “dark defender” suggests, Dexter Morgan’s acts are not vilified by all of Miami’s citizens. Dexter is a ‘defender’ of the values that Western society holds dear. Although Dexter does act unlawfully as judge, jury and executioner, he targets dangerous criminals who have been undetected by the law or unindicted following trial. Thus Dexter Morgan does not alienate the viewer, a viewer who may, in fact, secretly desire the efficient and targeted brand of law and order offered by Dexter. Pierson claims that this notion of Dexter as “Dark Defender” suggests darkness while also reinforcing Dexter’s protagonist role, “moving beyond the law and into the underworld, where the police cannot or will not go” (2010:192). Dexter’s murders are not random acts of violence. His victims, primarily male, are the most terrifying types of criminals; they are those who murder and rape women and children. In this way, Dexter anti-heroically imposes a sort of vigilante justice. Howard (2010:xiv), claims that “within the framework of the series, his murders come off as a kind of public service, a bizarre, psychopathic waste management for society”. Furthermore, according to Beeler, (2010:221) there is some history and understanding of vigilante justice in America. “The American psyche has a deeply rooted understanding of justice which insists that the rule of law must be, from time to time, adjusted by individuals who compare existing legislation to a template of natural justice”. Thus, Dexter is like a highly efficient law enforcer, free from the bureaucracy of a flawed justice system; he administers a brutal but precise form of justice

As discussed, Dexter does not kill indiscriminately but lives by ‘Harry’s code’. Though deceased, Harry features heavily in the show, through flashback sequences and dream-like hallucinations, in which he functions almost as Dexter’s super-ego, reminding him of his ‘true nature’ and his many limitations, “there’s a reason serial killers don’t have children - you can’t be killer and dad. Haven’t you learned anything?” (D, S05E09). Harry’s code insists that Dexter kill only those who he, subjectively, deems deserving of death for their own heinous crimes. Thus, Dexter’s choice of ‘victim’, a term which does not seem entirely fitting for the elements of society that Dexter ritualistically disposes of, does redeem him to a large extent. Most of his victims are exemplars of variously abhorrent masculinities. This paradox of an anti-hero struggling with his own masculine identity, while dispatching from this world men who might represent equally problematic, or worse, alternatives for himself appears to have struck a chord with a global ‘cult’ audience. Furthermore, Dexter Morgan operates in one of the thirty seven US states which allow capital punishment. Thus, Dexter’s actions, although unlawful, are, indeed, consistent with this form of retributive justice. So, while on paper, *Dexter* is a show centring on a serial killer; his code insists that perhaps he is more vigilante enforcer than psychopathic predator. This is an important distinction because, no matter

how radical the changes in the television landscape or audience expectations, while a vigilante could be a hero (many super-heroic characters are essentially vigilantes), the Mansons, Bundys and Dahmers of this world certainly could not.

So, Dexter's choice of victim and the unusual moral code by which he operates is the first way in which he is enabled to be an anti-heroic protagonist. The second way in which he is constructed as an extreme anti-hero is through the deliberate ambiguity surrounding who is to blame for his "dark passenger"; the voice inside that drives him to kill, the voice that craves blood and wrestles for control. The show puts forward two explanations for Dexter's dark desires, the first of which relates to the severe trauma that he suffered as a young child. It is trauma that Dexter has repressed for many years but which, very gradually, re-surfaces in his adult life. It transpires that Dexter and his older brother, Brian Moser (whom we later discover is also a serial killer), witnessed the horrific murder of their mother Laura; a murder that was particularly brutal as Laura Moser was a police informant and her murder was designed to send out a warning signal. Dexter was just three years of age when he witnessed his mother being killed by three men wielding chainsaws. Dexter and his brother sat for hours in a thick pool of their mother's blood, incarcerated in a cargo container, before eventually being rescued by Miami police officers, one of whom was Harry. This incident provides some justification for Dexter's desire to kill and his obsession with blood. Perhaps, the series infers, this horrific incident instilled within Dexter Morgan a sociopathic streak and a desire for vengeance. This childhood trauma also serves to muddy the waters and create an ambiguity about what level of responsibility and blame can be directed at Dexter Morgan for his actions. Is he, too, not a victim of sorts? This 'trauma', along with various other elements of *Dexter* can best be examined through a psychoanalytic reading. Johnson argues that "a psychoanalytic reading of Dexter is appropriate and resonant due to the self-referential nature of Dexter's own psychological reflections" (2010:78). For example, when Dexter drifts off on one of his daydreams at a narcotics anonymous meeting, he explains to his latest girlfriend, Lila, a pyromaniac, that he was having a "bizarre dream" about his mother. She replies "say no more - Oedipus complex - explains a lot" (D, S02E05). Again, after another dream in which he drags the body of his latest murder victim into the office he comments, "Nice. My subconscious isn't even bothering with symbolism" (D, S02E09). This is a show that is clearly actively engaging with psychoanalysis or at least 'pop psychoanalysis' and thus cries out for such a reading.

The trauma experienced by Dexter and Brian Moser (who we discover was the ice truck killer in Season one) not only interrupted the children's Oedipal journey but, it seems, shaped their future

actions. Freud believed that there was often a compulsion to repeat the trauma both in dreams and in reality. "Trauma is relived in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, haunting memories..." (Bloom, 2008:166). Freud conceded that these particular dreams or nightmares in which the traumatised individual relives aspects of the initial trauma cannot be explained in terms of unconscious desires or wishes. "The returning traumatic dream perplexes Freud because it cannot be understood in terms of any wish or meaning, but is, purely, an inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (Caruth, 1996:30). Furthermore, the victim of trauma would often later become the perpetrator of trauma thus creating a cycle of violence. What Freud termed *Nachtraglichkeit* (which can be loosely translated as belatedness) is also worth considering in relation to *Dexter*. Freud explored the relationship between the initial trauma, which may be incomprehensible at the time of the incident to a young child and the recalling of this childhood trauma later in life and the meaning on which is attributed to the traumatic incident at this stage. "...trauma was constituted by a relationship between two events or experiences – a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child's development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event..." (Leys, 20).

Dexter Morgan certainly relives and repeats this initial childhood trauma, an incident which he had little memory of until adulthood. His recollection of childhood events is aided by his biological brother's brutal murders which are staged as key snippets from Dexter's childhood. Dexter has daydreams in which he constantly replays snippets of this initial childhood trauma. His dreams and flashbacks to his mother's murder in the cargo container are frequent and haunting. Furthermore, his own desire to murder could be indicative of his desire to recreate or redress this childhood incident. However, unlike his brother Brian, who kills vulnerable women, Dexter (perhaps due to Harry's influence) primarily kills men, often men who have committed violence against women. Furthermore, the suggestion is that because the two young boys sat in a thick pool of their mother's blood all those years ago; Dexter and Brian Moser are, in turn, both obsessed with blood. Whilst Dexter likes to keep trophy blood slides and to see the blood pouring out of his victims chests, trapped by the cellophane in which they are covered, Brian relives the trauma in a different way. He drains his victims of all of their blood and cuts their bloodless corpses into tiny pieces.

Another explanation put forward for Dexter's "dark passenger" centres on his troubling relationship with his adoptive father, Harry. Harry was one of the police officers who rescued Dexter and Brian Moser from the bloody scene of their mother's murder. He subsequently adopted Dexter (but

interestingly not his older brother whom he perceived to be beyond help). When we first meet Dexter, he has a strong admiration for his dead father; a man he credits with recognising a sociopathic streak within him and ensuring that his drive to kill was channelled correctly. However, as Dexter begins to recall details of his childhood trauma and pieces together various clues from the past, it becomes apparent, through various flashback sequences, that Harry may not have had Dexter's best interests at heart. The snippets of information about Harry, gleaned from these flashbacks in the first and second season, form a disturbing picture of a man who used a vulnerable child to fulfil his own twisted desire to right the wrongs of a flawed criminal justice system. For instance Harry tells the young Dexter, "Son, there are people out there who do really bad things-terrible people and the police can't catch them all" (D, S01E01). The question marks relating to whether Dexter is innately sociopathic, or if this tendency was something that was nurtured and promoted by Harry, further contribute to the ambiguity surrounding whether Dexter is fully accountable for his crimes

Indeed, although Dexter forms relationships with a number of women throughout the five seasons of the show, the central relationship in *Dexter* is, without a doubt, the relationship between Dexter and his deceased, adoptive father, Harry. As already outlined, Dexter was adopted by Harry, a Miami police officer, at the age of three after witnessing the brutal murder of his mother. Harry, though deceased, features heavily in the programme in two ways; through flashbacks in the first two seasons of the show and through dream like hallucinations throughout the rest of the programme. 'The code of Harry', the governing rules by which Dexter lives his adult life, consist of two founding principles; don't take an innocent life and don't get caught. This code encouraged a sort of vigilante justice and serves as a "Ten Commandments for Dexter, a sacred set of principles that restrains and directs his desire to kill" (Howard, 2010:64).

In the first flashback sequence of the programme, we see Harry questioning a young Dexter about the fate of a neighbourhood dog whom he suspects Dexter has killed. He says "You're different aren't you Dexter?" (D, S01E01). Instead of condemning Dexter for his behaviour, Harry continues to calmly question him about why he had never killed anything bigger than a dog. Dexter replies that he considered it but he thought "you and mom wouldn't like it" (D, S01E01). Again, Harry doesn't seem shocked or disturbed by this admission which is rewarded with a hug. Continually, we see Harry drawing these violent urges out of Dexter. He condones them and rewards Dexter for sharing his deepest, darkest fantasies. The more disturbed Dexter appears, the more private time he is awarded with Harry. These shared secrets bring Dexter and Harry closer together at the expense of

Harry's biological daughter, Deborah, who is continually excluded and ignored in favour of Dexter. Dexter's 'dark urges' entitle him to accompany Harry to crime scenes and go on private hunting trips with the father whom he idolises. Despite Deborah's pleas and regardless of the fact that she is actually better at shooting than Dexter, she is continually left behind. This exclusion is justified by Harry who claims he wants Deborah to remain completely unaware of Dexter's sociopathic streak so that she can never be implicated if he is caught. He tells Dexter, "what we do on these weekends your sister can never know about" (D, S01E06).

Instead of trying to heal Dexter through counselling, Harry is obsessed and intrigued by Dexter's violent urges. In fact when Dexter's adoptive mother, Doris, suggests that there is something "off" about the child and insists that he undergo psychological testing, Harry does everything in his power to ensure that the counselling is futile by demands that Dexter admit nothing about his true feelings. "I want you to think of your answer first and then tell him the exact opposite" (D, S02E04). When Dexter does as he is told and the counselling session goes smoothly, Harry praises him telling him that he did a great job, "that doctor didn't even see the monster inside of you" (D, S02E04). Harry, it would appear, never wanted Dexter to get better. He insists that Dexter will always feel this way; that there is no escape from his urges or from the darkness inside. Instead, Harry trained Dexter to be a skilful murderer; a killer with inside knowledge into the workings of the Miami metro police department; a killer who can right the wrongs of the justice system.

As Season One and Two progress, Dexter's feelings towards Harry begin to change. This is sparked by a number of incidents. Dexter is left a house in his biological father's will. This comes as a shock to Dexter who at first insists that there must be some mistake. Harry had told him that his father was dead and Dexter struggles to cope with the knowledge that Harry lied to him. Dexter realises that their 'mutual trust' was not so mutual after all and wonders what else Harry may have lied to him about (D, S01E09). Furthermore, Dexter finally remembers all the details of his childhood trauma; the grim murder he and his brother witnessed and how they had lay scared and starving for two days, until they were found by police. This memory prompts Dexter to begin digging up old case files which connect Harry with his mother, Laura. Dexter discovers that his biological mother not only worked as an informant for Harry but was having a sexual relationship with him. Up to this point, not only had Dexter been unaware of the details of his childhood trauma, but he had been unaware of any connection between his biological mother and his adoptive father. This discovery, according to Howard (2010:65), "casts a pall over his character and leads Dexter to doubt the true nature of his intentions".

Howard refers to Harry's relationship with Dexter as a sort of recreation of the Frankenstein story and Harry as "another man who would be God through the act of creating" (2010:61). Harry is no longer the man Dexter had thought him to be and slowly begins to question his upbringing and his training. Indeed, as the television show progresses, "Harry becomes less and less of a candidate for Father of the Year" (2010:61). It becomes increasingly clear that Harry's teachings have not been designed purely to keep Dexter alive. In a final betrayal, Dexter learns that Harry did not simply die as a result of a heart attack, Harry killed himself after witnessing Dexter kill a man who had been allowed to walk free due to a technicality. Harry had encouraged Dexter to kill Juan Rinez. After finding out that he wouldn't be convicted he tells Dexter, "I did the right thing in training you. This just proves it - I did the right thing" (D, S02E10). However, when Harry walks in on Dexter and the body, he vomits and tells Dexter to "stay away" (D, S02E10). Dexter reflects that, "the idea of a code was one thing...but the reality of it. Harry walked in on what he created and he couldn't live with himself" (D, S02E10). It would appear that although Harry aided the creation of Dexter, the vigilante serial killer, he could not bear to see his creation in practice.

Whilst it is easy to finger Harry as this twenty first century Frankenstein, the fact that the only representations of Harry that we are privy to are through the recollections of Dexter is highly problematic. Dexter's version of events would certainly place a huge amount of blame on Harry; a man who exploited a young boy who had suffered extreme trauma. Dexter's flashbacks would place him as a victim of sorts. So, we must question if this representation is truthful or if it is simply the story Dexter would like us to believe or perhaps would like to believe himself? We must question whether the flashbacks of Harry are accurate or fictitious. Is Dexter a reliable narrator? Although growing up, Dexter could never remember the trauma of his childhood; we are supposed to believe that he remembers his relationship with Harry, even as a very young boy, in great detail. Freud's account of trauma would suggest that as traumatic childhood memories are, only "elicited at a later age when childhood is already past", it is almost impossible to distinguish memory from fantasy (Schacter & Coyle,1997:7). Indeed there are a number of incongruities in relation to Dexter's version of past events. If Dexter really did display an undoubtedly sociopathic streak, why did his sister, Deborah, now a sharp and esteemed detective, never suspect a thing? If Harry really was this Dr Frankenstein character, then how did this desire for vengeance, this need to right the wrongs of the legal system go unnoticed by his colleagues in the Miami Metro Police, one of whom is now police captain? When commenting on an incident involving Sergeant Doakes in Season One, Dexter

interestingly notes that “trauma can distort the memory” (D, S01E09). Is this what has happened in Dexter’s case? Can we trust Dexter’s recollection and can Dexter’s version of events be taken as fact? Unfortunately, the series offers us no way to definitively answer these questions.

The flashbacks of Harry cease at the end of Season Two, after Dexter has, to some extent, addressed, or at least uncovered, the details of his childhood trauma. Despite Dexter’s new found doubts about Harry’s motivations, he is not easily able to discard Harry’s advice or his code. Harry continues to appear in the show. This time, he appears as an illusion or hallucination in the present acting as Dexter’s counsel; offering advice and constantly reminding him that living by the code is crucial. This imagined Harry also repeatedly reminds Dexter of his limitations, never allowing him to develop into anything more than the “monster” he had referred to him as a child. Furthermore, this Harry views Dexter’s new family as a distraction and actively discourages Dexter forming close relationships with anyone. For example, In Season Four, after Dexter has been involved in a car accident losing all recollection of where he has left the body of his latest victim, Harry appears and places the blame on his young son. “If you ritual hadn’t been interrupted by going to pick up medicine for Harrison...” (D, S04E02). Similarly, Harry warns Dexter against forming any bond with Lumen, “Dex - she’s gonna bring you down” (D, S05E05).

Howard claims that Harry serves as the “voice of Dexter’s conscience or super-ego, reminding him of the consequences of his actions as he attempts to move beyond the code” (Howard, 2010:72). However, a close viewing of all scenes containing Dexter and Harry suggests that this imagined Harry is in fact the personification of Dexter’s “dark passenger”, his demonic desire to kill that is deeply ingrained within him. This representation of the deceased Harry, who appears in dream- like sequences in the present, acts as Dexter’s counsel, constantly reminding him of the founding principles of Harry’s code. This ensures that, despite Dexter’s desire to lead a normal life, he continues on this violent and murderous path. In Season Four in particular, it would seem that the notion of Harry as Dexter’s dark passenger being suggested by the literal way in which Harry repeatedly appears to offer Dexter advice from the passenger seat of his car. In fact, it cannot go un-noted that Harry appears in this way seven times in this particular season.

In Season Four of the programme, Dexter’s own fatherhood also comes to the fore. Whilst he had been something of a father figure to his two step children Astor and Cody in previous seasons, the birth of his first biological child appears to have made him further question the base belief ingrained

in him by his own adoptive father, Harry, that he is a sociopath with no real capacity for love, warmth or human connection. This belief that Dexter had a murderous streak and was, without a shadow of a doubt, destined to become a killer was the foundation for Dexter's training. To Dexter's own surprise he appears to be quite a caring, loving and devoted father. He tells the imagined Harry that perhaps his teachings were wrong. "You [...] taught me I couldn't be with people, couldn't get married-you taught me a lot of things I learned were wrong" (D, S04E07). His family are suddenly no longer camouflage; hiding him from suspicion. This further begs the question, if Harry was wrong about Dexter's inability to love, what else was he wrong about? Could Dexter have gone down a different path? Or are we simply being led down endless avenues in Dexter's imagination?

The idea that Dexter could have followed a different path is also explored through the many 'doubles' that he encounters. These 'doubles' are characters who display many striking similarities to Dexter and offer a glimpse of what could have been. In the first season, we are introduced to Dexter's 'blood' brother, Brian Moser aka Rudy (the ice truck killer). Like Dexter, Brian witnessed the violent murder of his mother and he too has an overwhelming desire to kill. Brian offers Dexter the first glimpse of what life would have been like without a code. Whilst the ice truck killer's murders are equally meticulous and share an anal regressive quality, his victims are female prostitutes, while Dexter's are generally men who 'deserve to die' for their murders of women. Dexter's murders suggest a rescue fantasy that contrasts with Brian's seeking and murdering maternal substitutes, painting his victims nails as their mother had painted her own. This rescue fantasy is acted out in one of Dexter's daydreams. This daydream, which unfolds in black and white, sees Dexter, dressed up as "The Dark Defender", save his mother and his childhood self from the cargo container (D, S02E05). Arthur Mitchell, also known as The Trinity Killer, is another possible double. At first, Dexter is fascinated by Trinity; a serial killer who has avoided detection for decades and who appears to have mastered this duality that Dexter has never felt quite at ease with. Trinity is a teacher who is involved in a charity organisation that builds homes for the poor. However, when Dexter, posing as Kyle Butler, becomes close to Arthur Mitchell, it becomes apparent that he, in fact, terrorizes his wife and children and they live in a constant state of fear. So, whilst Trinity, like Dexter, is a serial killer hiding in plain sight, as a tyrant to his family and as a murderer of women and children he is a "very different kind of monster" (D, S04E12).

While Brian and Trinity offer Dexter a cautionary glimpse of what life might have been like without Harry's code, Agent Frank Lundy provides a positive insight into the kind of person Dexter could have

become without Harry's influence. Lundy represents what Dexter might have been if his desires and instincts had been channelled and honed in a different manner. Agent Frank Lundy is similar to Dexter in numerous ways; they are both obsessed with their work, preferring to operate alone. Dexter is intrigued by the similarity of Lundy's outlook to his own. Like Dexter, Lundy doesn't "belong anywhere"; a statement that sums up Dexter's own experience as an outsider in this season. Further, it would appear to imply that Dexter's life could have taken a very different turn, in other circumstances.

I just know there's something dark in me and I hide it. I certainly don't talk about it, but it's there always, this Dark Passenger. And when he's driving, I feel alive, half sick with the thrill of complete wrongness. I don't fight him, I don't want to. 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? 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 (D, S02E03).

Thus, Dexter's reflection would, again, appear to place the blame squarely at Harry's door.

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, all three shows which, between them, have been broadcast between 2002 - present, depict a central anti-heroic character and all three appear on different networks, thus providing evidence of the widespread depiction of the anti-hero. There are points of commonality between the three characters, all of whom can, at least initially, be classified as extreme anti-heroes. All characters exist, in varying degrees, in the grey area between law and order and right and wrong and all characters have some sort of skewed rationale for their violent actions. However, each character is represented differently. Omar is like a relic of a bygone era. He is a character who dresses rather like a Western hero, refuses to use profane language and tries to hold on to a sense of honour amongst criminals. However, his open and unashamed homosexuality marks him as a truly modern character and certainly adds to his complexity. Omar cannot be defined as any one thing. He is multi-faceted and as the next chapter will explore, he is one of the most complex, three dimensional black homosexual characters ever to appear on the small screen. Walter White, on the other hand, is a completely different kind of anti-hero than Omar. Keen to redress the past disappointments in his life, Walt becomes less sympathetic with each episode. He is motivated, almost exclusively by his hunger for power and status. It seems that, despite his initial rationale for entering into the drugs trade, no amount of money can satisfy him and convince him to extricate himself from the industry in which he has become embroiled. He is driven by his growing infamy, with his alter-ego, Heisenberg, having gained almost mythical status, both amongst members of the narcotics industry and law enforcement. As the show progresses, it becomes clear that unlike Omar and Dexter, Walt is

a man without a code and he is willing to eliminate any threats to his power and status, even innocents such as the heroin addict, Jane. Thus, while Walt starts out as a great example of the extreme anti-hero, over time, he becomes, perhaps, more villain than hero.

While Dexter, like Omar, lives by a code, Dexter's code did not arise from an inbuilt moral compass but was dictated to him by his late, adoptive father, Harry. Like Omar, Dexter strives not to take innocent life, preferring to seek out victims he deems worthy of death, thus acting as judge, jury and executioner. It is almost impossible to discuss Dexter, the anti-hero, without also discussing Harry, the central driving force in Dexter's life, both past and present. Harry, though deceased, is a central character within the drama, appearing initially in flashback sequences and later in dream like sequences in the present. Both incarnations of Harry are highly problematic. The flashback sequences demand that we place our faith in Dexter as a reliable narrator, that we trust his version of past events, suspending disbelief that he can recollect events from more than twenty years ago in perfect detail. The dream-like sequences, on the other hand, appear to be Dexter's hallucinatory notions of what Harry would say if he were still alive. Thus, we cannot really damn Harry based on these sequences either. Indeed, as suggested in this chapter, the vision of Harry who appears in the present years, after the real Harry has passed away, is, in fact, merely the imagined personification of Dexter's dark passenger. This is suggested through the literal way in which Harry offers advice to Dexter, repeatedly from the passenger seat of his car.

This chapter primarily addresses the central hypothesis, proving and providing evidence that there has indeed been a sustained trend in US cable television when it comes to the phenomenon of the anti-hero character. Each of the three shows discussed in this chapter depict an extreme anti-hero. While the characters differ in many ways there are points of commonality between all three. As each of the three shows has been broadcast on a different cable network, this is surely indicative of a widespread and sustained trend which shows no signs of slowing down. The chapter which follows will examine why such a trend may have occurred. It will address the research sub questions in detail, probing why the anti-hero has become such a mainstay of US cable television at this juncture.

5. The Rise of the Extreme Anti-Hero

5.1 Introduction

While the last chapter aimed to prove the central hypothesis – that there has indeed been a sustained depiction of the anti-hero on US cable television, this chapter addresses many of the research sub questions focusing on why the anti-hero is enjoying such success in American cable television at this juncture. Arguably, the three morally dubious shows that are used as case studies in this thesis could not have existed on prime-time television even ten years previously. So, what changes had occurred in the intervening decade, both socio-culturally and industrially, that enabled a character like Dexter Morgan to become a leading man, Omar Little to be a cult favourite, or Walter White to be broadcast on prime-time television without mass objection? It will be argued here that the growing disassociation of the individual from ‘mainstream’ society, the impact of 9/11 and, in particular, confusion surrounding twenty-first century masculinity are all contributing factors to the success of the extreme anti-hero at this juncture. This chapter also addresses the notion that without clever writing techniques and shrewd marketing strategies, a show such as *Dexter* could never have been such a global hit. Marketing the show was certainly a challenging task. It was necessary to ensure it was being directed at the right audience and publicised in a quirky and novel way so that it appealed to a quality audience; an audience who would understand and appreciate the risqué content. This chapter will examine how the clever marketing tactics employed by Showtime, have positioned *Dexter* as a flagship show for a network that is now a viable competitor to HBO.

5.2 9/11 and The Extreme Anti-Hero

Dexter Morgan is certainly a new kind of protagonist, a protagonist who would have terrified television executives in the 1990s. Whilst, there is a long tradition of anti-heroic characters in both literature and film, Dexter is a one of a new breed of extreme anti-hero who has found a home on US cable television. It can be argued that a character, with a seemingly insatiable desire for vengeance, can only be a successful and popular protagonist in the light of the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11th 2001. A society permeated by paranoid fear, post 9/11, has embraced a dark and violent individualist who operates outside of the confines of the law to restore ‘justice’ by killing only those (mostly male victims) who ‘deserve to die’ for their own heinous crimes such as murder, rape, and paedophilia. James Manos Jr., original developer of *Dexter*, claims that Dexter Morgan, as a character, could only exist, or at least thrive, post 9/11. He argues that the terrorist attacks on New York on September 11th 2001 made Americans, in particular, question who are friends and who are enemies. Furthermore, Manos suggests, many now question whether or not

governments are indeed looking out for the interests of their citizens. Indeed, governments have curtailed civil liberties and assumed greater power and influence through the passing, for example, of The Patriot Act (2001) in the USA. Manos also claims that 9/11 created a sense of universal uncertainty about what is right and what is wrong. "I think 9/11 helped create a sensibility in the world, certainly in America, so that there's no longer a black and a white" (2010:20). In this atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, a protagonist like Dexter Morgan, who takes the law into his own hands acting swiftly, decisively and without consultation to eliminate threats to law abiding society, can be a leading man.

Furthermore, Kaiser, Vick and Major conducted research into the 'just world beliefs' (JWB) of eighty three students, both pre and post 9/11. Just world beliefs, as identified by Lerner (1980), refer to "the conviction that individuals get what they deserve and deserve what they get" (Kaiser et al, 2004: 503). The students who had most strongly endorsed just world beliefs before 9/11 were the most distressed, when assessed two months after the terrorist attacks, as these events had, effectively, mounted a challenge to their beliefs. These students also had the greatest desire for revenge to restore some degree of justice. "Punishing the people who perpetrated the injustice is a form of retributive justice. Although bad things happened to good people, if those responsible are punished, they will get what they deserve, which will restore justice" (Kaiser et al, 2004: 505). Again, in this context, a character like Dexter Morgan who kills only those who are 'deserving' of death could be deemed to be restoring justice to a society in which many feel that injustice is pervasive.

Post 9/11, the media buzzword was "hero" and much was made of individual acts of heroism both on September 11th 2001 and in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York. However, interestingly, *The Wire* seems to place no importance in the straight-forward heroism of any one individual. Characters that try to act courageously or implement change are ultimately punished for doing so. Major Colvin is disgraced for legalising the sale of drugs in 'Hamsterdam', Jimmy McNulty is transferred to the marine department at the beginning of Season Two for his insubordination and his insistence that the department go after the major players in the drugs trade and D'angelo Barksdale is ultimately killed for his co-operation with police and his desire to get away from the drugs trade and live a normal life. "*The Wire* disavows the idea that a few heroic individuals could solve the entrenched problems of a city like Baltimore" (McMillan, 2009:62). The problem is that it is the system, and not the individuals, that are broken and *The Wire* offers little in the way of solutions to these huge problems. Those involved in the drugs trade refer to the world in which they live and the rules by which they operate as "the game".

However, it would seem that those working on behalf of the state are also involved in a game of sorts. In order to progress in the police department, for example, it is necessary to play the political game or risk never moving up the ranks. Foucault's understanding of 'discipline' and his concept of 'docile bodies' is an important one in relation to the hierarchies of the police department. Foucault (1991:135) claimed that by the late 18th century, "the soldier has become something that can be made". *The Wire* illustrates that the same is true of high ranking police officers in the Baltimore police department. "One of discipline's concerns is with producing docile, healthy bodies that can be utilised in work and regulated in terms of time and space [...] So disciplinary power accords a person a space within an institution and a rank within a system" (Danaher et al, 2000:50). Thus, it is the "docile" Rawls and Burrell who rise to the top in the Baltimore Police Department; those characters who are happy to play by the unspoken rules, to massage the stats and pander to politicians. So, it would seem that while *The Wire* offers a realistic critique of American society post 9/11, a society in which injustice, corruption and social exclusion are pervasive, *Dexter* offers viewers a controversial but, perhaps, idealistic solution to at least some of the perceived societal issues. Indeed, perhaps it is only in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 2001 that an extreme anti-hero, who is willing to take the law into his own hands and right some of the wrongs of the criminal justice system, could become a cult icon. Thus, September 11th, it could be argued, is a contributing factor in the rise and sustained depiction of the anti-hero in contemporary American television.

5.3 Alienation and The Anti-Hero

Another major factor in the popularity of *Dexter*, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad's* centres on the growing number of individuals who feel disassociated or alienated from mainstream Western society. The notion of the alienated individual is certainly not a new concept. Alienation was one of the key ideas in the works of Marx (1844, no pagination) who argued that alienation was one of the results of a capitalist society. In the face of economic growth, workers, who reaped none of the rewards of their labour, lost all power and sense of self.

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.

The concept of alienation has evolved over time but is as relevant today as ever before. Douglas Kellner claims that the discussion surrounding technology and alienation "is not just an academic affair [...] but rather concerns the fate of the human being in the contemporary world" (2006:48). Langman & Kalekin-Fishman argue that "Many forms of popular culture, ranging from punk

lifestyles to the “ghetto rap” that have been appropriated by large segments of privileged youth, articulate the pervasiveness of alienation” (2006:3). Furthermore, they cite terrorist attacks, campus shootings, and random sniper attacks on civilians as the works of alienated individuals. Western society’s reliance on technology, has, it could be argued, increased the alienation of the individual. There are popular debates about the dangers of excessive use of the internet, especially if this is the primary outlet for one’s social life. In fact IAD, internet addiction disorder, is now a legitimate condition. “On the one hand, these new technologies can make our lives easier, advance medicine, and enable new kinds of freedom and fulfilment. On the other [...] they have fostered new forces of domination, dehumanisation, and, indeed, of alienation” (Langman et al, 2006:3).

Thus, perhaps part of Dexter Morgan’s appeal lies in the fact that he is an extreme example of an individualist who cannot, and will not, integrate into society. Whilst Dexter appears outwardly, to be a ‘normal’ middle-class suburbanite, he is alienated from community, wider society and ultimately from his own humanity. This sense of alienation is made apparent through Dexter’s cynical voiceover which breaks with straightforward realism and makes apparent his position as an outsider at the fringes of society. “People fake a lot of human interactions, but I feel like I fake them all, and I fake them very well” (D, S01E01). His often amusing voiceover, which allows the audience to be privy to his interior monologue, is mocking and disdainful of many societal norms. According to Pierson (2010:195), this voiceover, which is a “nourish trope” offers “Dexter’s real opinion on the events taking place around him, an opinion which is always at odds with his outward comments and demeanour”. It is also one of the reasons that Dexter’s character is so compelling; Dexter is voicing the concerns and observations of all alienated individuals. “The danger with community is that those who don’t belong are looked upon with suspicion. Those of us who prefer to work by ourselves, the lone wolves, risk being singled out.” (D,S04E03).

5.4 The Masculinity and Sexuality of the Anti-Hero

Another key reason that the anti-hero, a character who is primarily represented as male has been so successful is, arguably due to the fact that each anti-hero appears to explore or offer some commentary on twenty-first century masculinity and sexuality. LeBesco notes that part of the appeal of the character of Omar Little is his “unexpected collision of identities”. He is “a man with a code who also robs and kills, sensitive and openly gay in a hyper masculine black urban subculture” (2009:219). Omar’s identity as a black, homosexual, gangster in the criminal underworld in Baltimore is fascinating in a number of ways which will be explored here. To date, the representation of gay

men on American television has been extremely limited. Homosexual men tend to be portrayed as one of two extremes; promiscuous and incapable of monogamy or almost asexual with no reference being made to any sexual encounters. In the latter case, the gay man's role is confined to the catty best friend of a lead female character. So whilst there have been attempts to represent gay men on US television, for the most part, these representations have been limited and one dimensional, depicting gay men through a heterosexual lens, packaged for a heterosexual audience. This is problematic as Hart claims that "many heterosexual Americans do not (knowingly) interact with gay men on a regular basis and may, therefore, rely heavily on the mass media for their knowledge of gay men and the gay lifestyle" (2000:61)

If the representation of gay men on US television can be referred to as limited, then the representation of gay, black men, is almost obsolete. Black masculinity is widely represented as solely heterosexual. Perry claims that "black masculinity demands the performance and policing of a narrowly defined version of manliness that requires heterosexuality" (2001:133). The boundaries of black sexuality are defined in the dominant black institutions with both black Christians and Muslims being repeatedly warned about the dangers of homosexuality. Black masculinity tends to be portrayed as hyper masculine. Television and Cinematic representations of black masculinity paired with gangsta rap music lyrics all contribute to this image of the misogynistic and aggressive black male. Myers claims that "for many, being black and gay means having to go back and forth between identities and learning to make peace with them" (2003:140).

It is within this context that the character of Omar Little is so fascinating. Whilst some rappers, such as Ice Cube, may claim that "real niggers ain't faggots", Omar is deeply involved in a world that is so often referenced in rap music. When Avon Barrksdale finds out that his rival is gay, he remarks "So, he got a lot of heart for a cocksucker" (TW, S01E04). Omar is a more multi-faceted gay man than we have encountered previously on American television. He is neither an object of horror or laughter, neither camp nor promiscuous. In fact, Omar is involved in a number of loving, long-term relationships throughout the five seasons of the show. He does not fall into any of the stereotypes commonly associated with the portrayal of homosexual men on American television. Omar is not a caricature but a very new and unique representation of homosexual masculinity and, indeed, black masculinity. Choat and Fox maintain that "Omar Little's very visible queer identity enables him to have an acute perception of his place in the power structures of the city" (2009:271). They argue that "his queerness enables him to exist in that liminal zone between police and criminals, lawyers and hustlers, politicians and gang leaders" (2009:271). Indeed, Omar's identity enable him to exist

independently, unconnected with any gang and without any real allegiances to anyone but himself and those he chooses to associate with. This lack of gang association allows Omar to make his own decisions and, to some extent, allows him to be the master of his own destiny.

In *The Wire*, Omar is slick and smart. On numerous occasions, including his very first appearance on the show in season one, we witness Omar and the police both watching the Barksdale crews' stash. Omar gets to the stash long before the police who are left red faced after making a scene breaking into the now empty stash house under the watchful eye of the local media. In the opening scene of Season Three, episode two, Omar gets into a house in which the Barksdale gang have stashed their product by disguising himself as a wheelchair bound old man with his carer (who is actually a female member of his gang). Despite their tight security, Omar successfully robs the gang. The scene shows how easily Omar manages to outsmart the drug dealers. This illustrates that he is not only more resourceful than the major players in the drugs trade, he is more resourceful than the police who despite their efforts, rarely manage to locate and bust the Barksdale stash houses. This scene also brings another interesting feature to light. The fact that Omar has female gang members is interesting as, up to this point, there have not been any female gangsters. The woman associated with the Baltimore projects have, up to this point, been wives, girlfriends, mothers or prostitutes (Marlo does later employ a female assassin of sorts called Snoop). Whilst the masculinity of the gangsters in Barksdale crew seems, on the whole, to exclude or marginalise women, this is not the case for Omar. Indeed, women form an integral part of Omar's own gang of associates. Not only does Omar place a great deal of trust in the female members of his gang but he has realised that in the male environment of "the game", female gang members can avoid detection and be valuable assets.

By contrast, *Breaking Bad's* Walter White is a more traditional masculine figure. Though the family is struggling to make ends meet, he sees himself as the primary breadwinner and Skyler, his wife, is not expected to work outside of the home. In Season One, Walt takes on a second job, working, in what is portrayed as a menial and humiliating job at a local carwash. Thus, when Walt is diagnosed with terminal cancer and realises that he neither has sufficient funds to pay his mounting healthcare bills, nor can he leave anything behind to support his family, it is not entirely unbelievable that he considers unusual and illegal means of supplementing his meagre teacher's income. In an unlikely, but ultimately fruitful partnership, Walt, together with a former tearaway student, Jesse Pinkman begin to cook and distribute Class A drug, Crystal Meth. Walt's knowledge of chemical compounds and Jesse's knowledge of the narcotics industry allow for a successful fledgling business. While, the

drug trade is a means to an end for White, an immoral, drastic action taken through an innate desire to protect those closest to him, as the show progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Walt is not just in this for the money.

Walt is enjoying the power and danger associated with his new life and seems to be aroused by his changing status and bank balance. This is clear in his sexual encounters with his wife Skyler. At the end of the first episode, Walt, despite having received such bad news about his health, seduces his wife, obviously in a different manner than would be usual for him. Consequently, Skyler asks, "Walt, is that you?" Again in Season One, episode seven, while at a school meeting, Walt runs his hands along his wife's inner thigh under the table. Immediately after the meeting, they have sex in the car outside the school which is ironically parked next to a police car. Again, Skyler is taken aback and asks "Where did that come from and why was it so damn good?" Walt replies "because it was illegal". It seems that Walter has certainly had a sexual awakening. He is turned on by the new found power and sense of thrill of danger in his life. While, the new sexually liberated Walt was embraced by Skyler in Season One, his sexual advances turn a little more sinister in Season Two. After returning from a large scale drug deal, in which he witnessed a gang member beaten to death, Walt tried to force himself on Skyler in the kitchen. Skyler tries to brush off Walt's advances sensitively, but to no avail. It is only when she screams "Stop It" does he back off (BB, S02E01).

While both *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* offer intriguing commentary on twenty-first century masculinity and sexuality, it is *Dexter* that offers the most complex and at times, contradictory representations of masculine identity. Throughout *Dexter*, various modes of masculinity, masculine relationships and differing representations of fatherhood are all examined. Through Dexter Morgan, the series explores the notion of what it means to be a heterosexual white male in twenty first century America. Dexter does this by 'trying on' various masculinities, using various modes of masculinity as disguises. For instance, his lab coat signifies the subordinate masculinity he displays in the workplace while his black leather gloves are a marker of the dominant masculinity he employs when he is allowing his dark, murderous side to take control.

I love Halloween. The one time of year when everyone wears a mask – not just me. People think it's fun to pretend you're a monster. Me, I spend my life pretending I'm not. Brother, friend, boyfriend – all part of my costume collection. Some people might call me a fraud. Let's see if it will fit. I prefer to think of myself as a master of disguise (D, S01E04).

Dexter, it appears, is a character like Sir Percy Blakeney in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* – effecting a subordinate masculinity in order to evade capture. Similarly, there are numerous super-heroes who

display a similarly 'geeky', almost effeminate, persona to avert suspicion. Characters such as Clark Kent as Superman and Peter Parker as Spiderman embrace this same duality, hiding their masculine strength and super-human abilities beneath glasses and an awkward social persona. Dexter notes this connection himself claiming, "I never really got the whole superhero thing. But lately, it does seem we have a lot in common. Tragic beginnings... Secret identities... Part human, part mutant..." (D, S02E05).

In the workplace, Dexter is the "lab geek", marginalised from the macho world of the Miami metro police department. He carries a clip board rather than a firearm and wears a white coat rather than a holster. Dexter plays up to this subordinate masculine persona obviously having recognised its potential as a disguise. In one scene, Quinn, a cop who embodies the machismo of the police department, asks Dexter "Do you like the dolphins?" Dexter replies "I'm really more of a manatee guy" (D, S04E03). Whannel claims that "knowledge of the esoteric details of sporting cultures functions as a form of alternative cultural capital" (2002:11). Kimmel further argues that "the world of sports has long been a masculine refuge, a pristine homosocial world of male bonding" (2006:246). Dexter's claims of ignorance are merely a means of reinforcing his persona. This scene also demonstrates the American practice of using animal names for sports teams, thus linking sports to the natural world. Furthermore, sports teams are often linked to ferocious animals (i.e. Chicago Bears) thus highlighting the aggressive and commanding nature of the team. Dexter's response, invoking manatees, also known as sea-cows, pokes fun at the theatrical nature of American masculinity. Dexter's joke about the sea-cow is also humorous on another level, as the audience know that, in reality, he is much closer to a predatory creature, like a shark. Dexter is not interested in sport, which can be viewed as a symbolic representation of violence as he is routinely the enforcer of a very real and brutal sort of violence.

It is not just in the workplace that Dexter has problems relating to other men. He lacks the ability and desire for any sort of homosocial camaraderie. In fact, his voiceover mocks this sort of behaviour at the community garden party.

The backyard barbeque – it's a holdover from the last ice age when food was scarce and men had to work together to take down such a large beast. Those who worked well with others survived and their genes had been passed down through the centuries until they landed here in this...my community (D, S04E03).

Although Dexter is mocking this supposed hunter-gatherer instinct that makes the backyard barbeque so popular, he is also drawing attention to the fact that, amongst all these men, he is the only one who is a real hunter and who has really taken down numerous 'beasts'. Here, Dexter again

refers to himself as an outsider who has to “become an expert at blending in” (D, S04E03). However, at this same party, it becomes abundantly clear that Dexter is far from an expert at blending in; his attempts to mimic the behaviour of other men whom he perceives to be ‘normal’ backfires. Dexter witnesses another father jokingly push his young stepson into the pool; getting laughs from the crowd in doing so. Dexter, in turn pushes his teenage step daughter, who had been desperately trying to impress a neighbourhood boy, into the pool, unwittingly humiliating her. Here, it is clear that Dexter is no good at ‘pretend’ violence; he can only engage in the real thing.

Dexter’s ‘disguise’ certainly averts any sort of suspicion but his invisibility can surely be, at least in part, attributed to his status as a young, middle-class, white male. According to Byers, in *Dexter*, “whiteness remains inscrutable, especially white masculinity dressed up straight and middle-class” (2010:146). Despite living in Miami, a city which has the largest foreign-born population in the world, Dexter’s whiteness, far from making him ‘other’, allows him to remain undetected and unsuspected. In 1995, when the Oklahoma bombings occurred, the media and the police initially rushed to blame foreign terrorist organisations, rather than home-grown, white criminals. Similarly, Dexter is the least likely suspect when The Bay Harbour Butchers murders are discovered. Instead, problematically, the blame is placed on Sergeant Doakes, a black police officer and war veteran, whose blackness makes him a more credible suspect. Connections can also be made between Dexter and the notion of the victimised, working-class, American white male. Such a character has been represented fictionally in films such as *Falling Down* (1993), in which the lead male character, as played by Michael Douglas, is a victim of the multi-cultural city of Los Angeles in which he lives. While Dexter is dressed up as middle-class, he was born to a poor, ‘white trash’, drug-using mother. There is a sense that Dexter as a white male, is cleaning up the multi-cultural mess of a city which he inhabits, a city where the solve rate for murders is low. “With the solve rate for murders at about 20% , Miami is a great place for me. A great place for me to hone my craft. Viva Miami” (D, S01E01). Dexter, problematically, represents the white man taking control, ridding the city of the ‘scum’ that have been allowed to take root, thanks to an inept police department. This police department staffed by a media-savvy female Latino boss whose primary concerns centre on, not solving crime but being *seen* to be solving crime. Similarly, Dexter’s senior work colleague in the forensics department, Vince Masuka, an Asian American is represented as a comical buffoon. Masuka, who is characterised by his vulgar and inappropriate sense of humour, is, despite his seniority, represented as far less capable and competent than Dexter.

In terms of his sexuality, although heterosexual, Dexter seems to have little desire for sexual intimacy, seeming at times asexual. There are numerous potential reasons for Dexter's apparent lack of sexual drive which will all be explored here. When Dexter first met his wife Rita, she was an emotionally damaged victim of domestic abuse with little interest in sexual intimacy. "Rita's ex-hubby, the crack addict, repeatedly raped her, knocked her around. Ever since then she's been completely uninterested in sex. That works for me!" (D, S01E01). As Rita and Dexter's relationship develops and her confidence grows, Rita changes, becoming more sexually demanding, much to Dexter's annoyance. This is exemplified in season four when Dexter arrives home-exhausted hoping to get some sleep. Rita tells Dexter that the baby is asleep and that she wants "slow, hot, steamy, naughty sex" to which Dexter replies "Look, if you're too tired..." (D, S04E01). Crawley et al, discuss sex in relation to the "performance of masculinity". Men, they claim, are expected to "exude immense sexual energy and to always be on the prowl" (2008:73). They further maintain that "men are expected to be hypersexual – wanting sex constantly and always pursuing it actively with any available woman" (2008:73). Dexter's lack of interest in any sort of sexual activity with his wife throughout the first four seasons of the show would suggest that Dexter is not adequately 'performing masculinity'.

Rita, the picture-perfect, maternal figure is continually referred to, and indeed refers to herself as, a "soccer mom" (D,S04). This is a term that originated in the 1990s to describe a grouping of women that were considered swing voters in the 1996 presidential election. These women, were "assumed to be married, white, suburban resident, driver of a sport-utility vehicle or minivan (large enough for a team of young soccer players), and embodying the values and concerns of many female voters" (Safire, 2008:678). Carroll & Fox further note that "one of the most important characteristics of the soccer mom was that she was not primarily concerned about her own self-interest, but rather about her family, and most importantly her children" (2006:93). Rita's primary concerns do seem to centre on her family and the potential threats to her suburban family and community. Her perfect suburban life appears to provide her with a good deal of satisfaction. "Car pools and swimming pools. How much are we living the dream?" (D, S04E01). Indeed, Rita is so seduced with all the trappings of middle class suburban life that she fails to notice that there are huge inconsistencies in her relationship with her husband. Rita is either hugely naive or is happy to ignore Dexter's abnormalities in order to live the life that outwardly appears like a fairy-tale. She is happy to believe Dexter's constant claims that he is working long hours in the office and seems blissfully unaware of Dexter's total lack of sexual interest in her.

In many ways, the relationship between Dexter and Rita is more of a maternal relationship than an equal partnership. This is made clear in one particular episode in which Rita has forbidden Dexter from driving after his car crash. Whilst being driven to work, Dexter tells Rita that he wants to stop for a cup of coffee. Rita tells him he cannot stop for coffee as he has had one already. She goes on to rattle a toy in Dexter's face in time to the music as she had previously been doing to amuse their baby son, Harrison. The skewed relationship between Rita and Dexter can be best examined through a psychoanalytic reading. Referring to Rita's maternal relationship with Dexter, Johnson posits that Dexter's Oedipal journey was interrupted by the murder of his mother Laura when he was just three years old. This interruption left him with "anal" personality traits; an obsession with neatness, control and order and a desire to collect objects such as his blood slide trophies. Furthermore Dexter has a "mother-fixation". This fixation, Johnson claims, is manifested in Dexter's choice of partner. Johnson notes that Rita is similar in appearance to Dexter's mother. Furthermore, like Dexter's mother, Rita has young children and initially "requires saving from male violence and terror" (2010: 84). Johnson claims that "the mother-fixation is often identified in this way, through choosing sexual partners who are discernible surrogates for their parents" (2010:83). This would also explain why Dexter does not wish to have any sort of intimate, sexual relationship with Rita.

However, it could also be argued that Dexter's refusal of sex is not necessarily a sign of subordination. He, like many cinematic Western heroes, may refuse sex as he has more 'important' things to do or because, like a boxer before a fight, he feels that engaging with his own sexuality would somehow weaken him and render him incapable of doing his real job; killing. Speaking about the Western hero, Hayward claims that this character's "lust for adventure far outweighs his lust for women" (2006:440). Alternatively, it may be the case that Dexter's receives sexual gratification through alternative means. Perhaps Dexter has no desire for sexual relations with his wife as he receives sexual gratification from killing. The image of Dexter in leather gloves, holding a phallic knife above his cellophane covered victims is highly suggestive. Furthermore, Dexter's blood-slides can be likened to pornography. These 'trophies' which he regularly gazes at, caressing each slide one by one, are kept to remind him of each kill/each sexual encounter.

It seems that Dexter is both a sadist and a masochist in that he receives sexual gratification from both inflicting *and* receiving pain. Though these two tendencies appear to be conflicting, Freud (2012, no pagination) would claim that they can both exist in the same individual:

The most striking peculiarity of this perversion lies in the fact that its active and passive forms are regularly encountered together in the same person. He who experiences sexual pleasure by causing

pain to others in sexual relations is also able to experience the pain emanating from sexual relations as a pleasure.

However, Freud also maintains that whilst a sadist can simultaneously be a masochist, one desire will be more developed than the other and this more developed desire will “represent his preponderate sexual activity” (2012, no pagination). In Dexter’s case, it is through his sadism that he receives sexual gratification. However, he also displays masochistic tendencies. He is what Freud would term a ‘moral masochist’, someone who unconsciously seeks punishment. “The moral masochist seeks suffering but is not aware of the sexual satisfaction that he or she takes from the wished-for feelings of pain, which has to do with an unconscious sense of guilt” (Quinodoz, 2005:215). Dexter could be unconsciously seeking punishment in two ways. Firstly, Dexter is strikingly similar to the characters on which he inflicts pain and murder. Thus, by being a killer of serial killers, he is, in some respects, punishing alternate versions of himself. Secondly, Dexter’s killing renders him incapable of having a “normal” existence, an existence which he craves. He voices that longing when he says, “it might sound weird. I want to someday be content. Just feel comfortable, like everyone else” (D, S01E05). Despite the desire for normality, he is incapable of putting a stop to his violent actions. This is at its clearest in Season Five when he loses out on a chance at a meaningful relationship with Lumen who leaves him as her desire for vengeance has been satisfied whereas Dexter’s is insatiable. Thus, his killing is a form of self-punishment, ensuring that he will never amount to more than the monster his father Harry had envisioned.

5.5 Producing and Marketing The Extreme Anti-Hero

The evolution of cable television drama was examined in the literature review but to recap briefly, at present, there are a number of pay cable stations in the US all competing for a ‘quality’ middle-class audience; an audience who are looking for edgy content that differs from the typical broadcast network fare, and have enough disposable income to pay the monthly subscription fee. As a pay cable station, Showtime has numerous advantages over broadcast television in relation to the production of ‘quality’ television drama. Showtime, and pay cable generally, do not have to adhere to the same broadcasting laws as the networks nor do they have to pander to advertisers. Hamilton claims that “one of the comparative advantages of premium cable is its ability to use programming that might not survive the constraints of advertiser approval or indecency regulation on broadcast television” (1998:223). Indeed, pay cable does have a good deal more leeway in terms of the airing of explicit violent and sexual content; leeway that shows such as *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* and *Dexter* have all taken advantage of.

Seven years after *Dexter* first aired on Showtime, it would still be almost impossible to imagine one of the US broadcast networks commissioning a show like it. Furthermore, this show, according to Byers, “would never have made it past the [US] network censor” (2010:90). Although *Dexter* was not Showtime’s first original series, it has been its most successful to date. In 2007, Showtime “would smash all its previous records with an audience of 1.23 million for the season finale of *Dexter*” (Aaron; 2009:66). The success of *Dexter* has certainly contributed to Showtime’s profile as a “purveyor of high-quality series” and has positioned the channel as a viable rival to HBO which operates a similar business model (Byers, 2010:90). Despite a change in the landscape of US television and a shift in audience expectations, it would be naive to claim that *Dexter*, as a protagonist, is an ‘easy sell’. The show has not escaped public controversy. This controversy came to the fore when during the writer’s strike, CBS decided to buy in edited episodes of *Dexter* to fill their depleting schedules. Despite scenes of a violent nature being edited out, the very premise of the show outraged groups such as the Parents Television Council who objected to CBS airing the show at 10.00, claiming that numerous children could be watching and could be disturbed by a “graphically violent, sexually explicit and profanity-laden program” (Parents Television Council, 2008).

Pay cable seems to be the new home of ‘cult TV’, a somewhat ambiguous term used to describe edgy television which exists outside of the mainstream. “Cult shows attract loyal fans but in fewer numbers than the more highly rated shows that constitute the mainstream” (Pearson, 2010: 9). The term actually relates more closely to the types of fans a show attracts than to the show itself. Pearson claims that “audience, their activities, and the industry’s exploitation thereof” are central to the conception of cult television (2010:8). Like *Star Trek* fans of the past, *Dexter* fans seem willing to immerse themselves in this fictional universe. For example, *Dexter* is a favourite at Comic-Con, a popular culture convention held yearly in San Diego which attracts more than one hundred thousand fans annually. In 2012, Comic-Con featured a *Dexter* panel discussion and a preview of the seventh season of the show. Similarly, huge amounts of *Dexter* memorabilia are available for sale via official and unofficial channels. Articles such as *Dexter* syringe pens, shot glasses and iPhone cases are available for sale on the Showtime website whilst, controversially, *Dexter* dolls have been available for sale in mainstream toy stores such as Toys “R” Us. On unofficial sites such as eBay, an even larger array of *Dexter* collectibles are for sale; items such as *Dexter* knives and full cutlery sets can be shipped direct to one’s home.

Furthermore, unlike cult television shows of the past, *Dexter* is taking full advantage of the various media outlets available to fans and becoming a 'transmedia product', a term which refers to the use of various platforms to tell different aspects of a single story. "In essence, the term 'transmediality' describes the increasingly popular industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present information concerning a single fictional world through a range of textual forms" (Evans, 2011:1). As Evans (2011:1) argues, "television is now bigger than TV" and *Dexter's* creators have certainly worked to create a *Dexter* universe for fans. There are 3d games available for Android and Apple phones in which the player can take on Dexter's role. Similarly, in the 'Where's Dexter?' YouTube game, the player must find Dexter in the middle of a crowd. At Comic-Con 2010, an alternate reality game was launched in which fans had to search for the 'infinity killer'. Comic-Con attendees were taken to a secret kill room via SCAVNGR, a treasure hunt app. In this kill room, numerous clues led fans to a bizarre sleep therapy website called sleeps superbly.com which was laden with yet more clues taking fans to social media sites and real life locations and encouraging a 'community of crime solvers'. This dedicated community's in depth engagement was phenomenal, with one element of the search for the killer consisting of a live twenty two hour video stream which fans had to watch for clues. Along the way, fans unlocked extra content, for example, a Season Five teaser was unlocked after 100,000 fans accessed the SCAVNGR app. *Dexter* also makes use of the transmedial process of 'chunking', whereby chunks of the story, generally backstory, are told via a different platform. This is achieved through various animated webisodes available online. One such webisode entitled "Dark Echo" shows Dexter attending Harry's funeral and subsequently starting university. Such scenes have never appeared in the TV series. In these ways, fans are now engaged more comprehensively than ever before and the content that can be produced, in conjunction with a television show, seems endless.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the closely related research sub questions, which were detailed in the introduction. These questions addressed the why's associated with the extreme anti-hero. Why did this character appear at this time in America and why has cable television become its home? A number of contributing factors in the success of the anti-hero at this juncture have been explored. Perhaps, the anti-hero's sustained depiction on US television relates back to 9/11, an event which altered the American psyche and changed public perceptions of justice and governance. Within a society permeated by paranoia and fear, a character like Dexter Morgan who enforces a vigilante justice, killing only those who have committed atrocities themselves can be a successful protagonist. Similarly, the increasing alienation of the individual in a society which is becoming increasingly

reliant on technology and in which any sense of community is being eroded over time has contributed to the success of the anti-hero. Dexter is an alienated individual who continuously mocks societal norms through his cynical voiceover. This commentary on individual alienation is perhaps speaking directly to a generation of fans who understand and have experienced the same sense of isolation and disassociation. Most importantly, it has been argued here that the representation of the masculinity and sexuality of the anti-hero is a key contributing factor in the character's success in the twenty-first century. While Dexter Morgan, Omar Little and Dexter Morgan all display differing masculine identities and sexual preferences, their masculinity and sexuality is central in all three cases. Indeed, it is *Dexter* that has offered the most complex representation of twenty-first century masculinity. Through 'trying on' various masculine identities, ranging from the subordinate lab geek persona to the family man to three dominant enforcer who hunts down his victims, *Dexter* offers a commentary on twenty-first century masculine identity, masculine relationships and fatherhood.

Finally, this chapter discussed the industrial factors that have contributed to Dexter's success. While the literature review detailed the US cable television landscape, this chapter identified how the show was cleverly written and marketed in order to appeal to a wide viewing audience. These tactics have clearly proved successful as Dexter has become a cult hit and Dexter merchandise is widely available. Dexter has also positioned itself as a truly modern television product, taking advantage of various additional media outlets and becoming a transmedia product, allowing fans to access additional content and creating a Dexter universe.

6. Conclusions

While each chapter in this thesis has featured its own conclusion, summarising and re-enforcing the key arguments and research findings of the chapter, this final conclusion will establish that the thesis has completed its overall objectives. This research had a number of key aims. The thesis set out to prove a central hypothesis – that there have been indications of a sustained depiction of the anti-hero on US cable television drama since the late 1990s. There were also a number of closely related research sub questions identified. These sub questions were as follows:

- Why the anti-hero?
- Why now?
- Why in America?
- Why cable television?

This chapter will draw together the findings in order to illustrate how the hypothesis was proven and how all the central research questions were clearly addressed in this project.

Chapter four, which focused primarily on the representation of the extreme anti-hero, addressed this central hypothesis. Through an analysis of three anti-heroic characters (Dexter Morgan, Omar Little and Walter White) each appearing on a different show and produced by a different cable network, it has been comprehensively argued that there is a widespread trend toward the anti-heroic character and it is not confined to any specific cable network. It was previously argued that *Oz* contained the first representations of the extreme anti-hero on cable television in the late 1990s and this was closely followed by *The Sopranos*. The three key case studies were then broadcast between 2002 and 2013. Thus, it is apparent from this timeline, that there has, indeed, been a sustained depiction of the extreme anti-hero from the late 1990s right up to the present day. This chapter also identifies the key points of commonality, and of differentiation, between all three anti-heroes. All three characters occupy that moral grey area, engaging in brutal violence, but holding on to some skewed rationale for their actions; all are guided, at least initially, by some sort of personal moral compass or by a survival instinct born of desperation. Only Walter White, struggles to maintain his rationale throughout the show and after a key turning point in Season Two, in which he is complicit in the death of Jesse Pinkman's girlfriend, Jane, it can be argued that he is no longer guided by anything other than an overwhelming desire for power, status and control.

Chapter five focused on the rise of the extreme anti-hero and turned its attention to the research sub questions. Initially, the chapter addresses the first three questions:

- Why the anti-hero?
- Why now?
- Why in America?

To this end, the research identified a number of key factors that have contributed to the rise of the extreme anti-hero in America over the past ten to fifteen years. The first key factor relates to the impact of 9/11. This event, it was argued, had a profound impact upon the American psyche, changing public perceptions of law & order, revenge and governance and allowing for characters who advocated an alternate and radical mode of justice to gain popularity. It was argued that in a society permeated by fear and paranoia, a character such as Dexter Morgan, who takes swift and decisive action, without consultation, captured the attention of millions of fans, who may have secretly questioned if his subjective methods of enforcement were more effective in tackling crime than those offered by the police department. After all, as Dexter reminds us through his narration, he is operating in a city in which only 20% of crimes are solved. Another key contributing factor in the success of the contemporary anti-hero in America relates to the growing alienation of the individual. In an increasingly fractured society, in which technology has taken precedence over community, an anti-hero who is himself alienated and marginalised can speak directly to millions of viewers. Dexter Morgan, despite his status as a middle-class, white, male is represented as an eternal outsider. He never feels a sense of belonging nor is he entirely comfortable in the company of others. Indeed, it doesn't seem that he is comfortable in his own skin, as he continually alternates between different identities, depending on the social scenario. Dexter also displays a lack of understanding and a cynicism toward American cultural norms. This cynicism is expressed through his sarcastic narration.

Finally, a third key factor that was identified as contributing to the rise of the extreme anti-hero relates to the confusion surrounding twenty first century masculinity. Each of the key case studies offers a differing representation of masculinity with Walt, initially representing traditional masculinity, striving to be the breadwinner who provides for his family. Omar, on the other hand, offers a new and unique representation of black homosexual masculinity. Omar's complexity is very much at odds with previous homosexual representations. Finally, Dexter, as previously discussed, offers the most compelling representation of masculinity. He appears to be 'trying on' various masculine identities, perhaps due to the fact that he had no clear sense of self or else he may have been using various masculine identities to disguise his true self: a self that he feared society would find abhorrent. For example, in the workplace, Dexter displays a subordinate masculine identity, at odds with the machismo of the police detectives he works alongside. However, when Dexter is

fulfilling the murderous desires of his dark passenger, he displays a completely different brand of dominant masculinity.

Finally, chapter five focuses on some industrial factors that may have contributed to the rise of the extreme anti-hero, thus addressing the final research sub question: why cable television? The comparative advantages of the cable networks over the traditional broadcast networks were identified. The first key advantage enjoyed by the cable networks is the model by which they generate revenue; via a monthly subscription fee. Thus, not only have their subscribers pro-actively chosen to opt in to the content being provided but these are, largely middle-class, 'quality' viewers with enough disposable income to afford the additional monthly charge. Furthermore, the cable networks do not have to adhere to the same broadcasting laws as the likes of NBC, CBS and ABC, nor do they have to pander to advertisers. This allows them a good deal of leeway in relation to the broadcasting of explicit content. This leeway has allowed shows such as *The Shield*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* and *Dexter* to be produced. It seems unlikely that shows containing the levels of violence, profanity and graphic sexual content, that were evident in the aforementioned examples, would have been produced by the over-the-air television networks.

As has been outlined here, this thesis has successfully proven the central hypothesis and addressed all the central research questions. It is clear that there have indeed been suggestions of the rise in the anti-hero and, though there is no definitive way to answer why this has been the case, this thesis has certainly identified a number of key contributing factors. The anti-hero has been going strong on US cable television since the late 1990s and this situation looks unlikely to change. As was briefly mentioned in the literature review, this thesis marks a starting point in research relating to the television anti-hero but there is much more that could be done. Quantitative research which provides statistical evidence on the rise of the television anti-hero would be extremely useful. Additionally, research relating to fan's perceptions of the anti-hero could, perhaps, offer more concrete evidence as to why this character has enjoyed such dominance and continues to endure in US cable television drama.

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