

Searching for His Identity: Aristotle, *Oedipus the King*, and *Dexter*

*Dexter*, the surprisingly popular Showtime drama based on Jeff Lindsay's books, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* and *Dearly Devoted Dexter*, ran from 2006-2013. The elements of this series that made it bearable, nay, fascinating and entertaining, are classic and are discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics* and found in his favorite Greek drama, *Oedipus the King*.

If we view, as I argue we can, *Dexter* as a tragedy with the hero starting high and ending low, then the writers of *Dexter* indubitably were faced with the challenge of creating a character who is likeable while also being a very active serial killer. Aristotle says that the tragic hero must be someone good but whose misfortune is derived from error or frailty (*Po.*1453 a). Dexter's unfortunate childhood where he witnessed the slaughter of his mother plus the strict code he lives by whereby he kills only murderers or criminals, at least in the beginning, create compassion and understanding in the audience. Indeed, the audience feels fear for Dexter as he comes close to being caught and pity for both the life that he feels destined to live and for those whose lives he unintentionally harms (see Arist.*Po.* 1452 a).

The serial begins with a double plot: Dexter, a blood-splatter expert for the Miami police department, searches for both the Ice Truck Killer, a fellow serial killer who toys with Dexter, and his parentage (see Arist.*Po.*1452 a). The Ice Truck Killer revives Dexter's memories of his second "birth", the birth of a serial killer, as he recalls the gruesome incident that led to the death of Dexter's mother and the separation from his brother (season 1, ep. 12). Dexter's big riddles in season one, "Who am I?" and "Who is the Ice Truck Killer?", are both answered through a recognition scene (See Arist.*Po.* 1452 a), as The Ice Truck Killer is revealed in the last episode to be Dexter's older

brother, whom Dexter had forgotten he had. In the following seasons, Dexter continues to explore who he is, asking: “How can I solve a crime when I can’t even solve what’s wrong with me?” (season 2, ep. 2). He experiments with whether or not he can live without killing, accept himself as a killer, have a partner in life or in crime, and completely understand what made him the way he is. Dexter’s search for answers to these questions leaves a path of destruction in its wake as he kills his own brother to protect his adopted sister, loses his wife to a revenge killing, and abandons his child to a poisoner. “ Maybe this is how evil works, destroying everything it touches, including my father,” Dexter states when he learns that his adopted father killed himself (season 2, ep. 11). What Dexter interprets as evil the Greeks viewed as pollution, *miasma*, the same taint from a murder that Oedipus seeks to banish from his community (See *OT.97*). Just as Oedipus unwittingly kills his mother through an uncovering of the truth, so Dexter kills his sister, and then disposes of her body where he has dumped his other victims, thereby recognizing his guilt in her death. He then fakes his death and goes into self-imposed exile in the wilderness, a choice echoing that of Oedipus (*OT 1409 ff.*).

There are numerous themes and features of the *O.T.* present in *Dexter*. For example, the writers of *Dexter* play on the theme of blindness vs. sight, similar to the dichotomy found in the Tiresias/ Oedipus scene (*OT 345 ff.*). The last episode of season 1 begins with Dexter in the dark saying, “I’ve lived in darkness a long time. Over the years my eyes adjusted and total dark became my world and I could see. But then Rudy turned on the light, flooded my memory and now I’m blind.” The role of a prophet to foretell the inevitable is filled by Dexter’s adopted and deceased father, Harry. Harry tells Dexter that he can never live a normal life because it is too dangerous; shortly after

Dexter marries, his wife becomes the victim of the murderer he is hunting. The writers make ample use of dramatic irony as well, especially through Dexter's relationship with the innocent Rita. For example, Rita, discussing the Bay Harbor Butcher, the latest serial killer in Miami, aka Dexter, tells Dexter that she's so angry there's a monster out there scaring her son. "I hope they catch him today. I hope they hurt him," she tells Dexter, before telling him to have a nice day (season 2, ep. 4). Dexter responds to himself: "Make up your mind."