

# The Importance of the Reader's Background on Character Perception in Understanding and Teaching Literature

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## Abstract

I will focus on the influence of the reader's social background and on the importance this can have when trying to teach literature to pupils and students, applying the concepts of Fish's reader response criticism, social background, socialization and concepts of empathy and understanding through social background and thus the reader's co-creation of the story. This can be used as a good motivator for readers. I am going to examine an extreme case: two possible readers of Jeff Lindsay's character Dexter and their social backgrounds will be presented and through them the possible moral judgements those readers might develop about the character and his way of life. In the end, parallels between this analysis and its application to teaching using the teacher's realization of the importance of the students' social background and co-creation of interpretation as readers will be drawn as possible motivators for the students' reading.

**Key words:** reader response criticism, Jeff Lindsay, moral judgement, reader's social background, teaching literature

It has often been said that one cannot love, indulge in, benefit from or simply enjoy something one does not understand, and this is something that holds true for many students when it comes to reading literature. It is the teacher's our job to try and help them to understand the story as well as possible, and in order to achieve this understanding in our students, we must engage them. To engage a student in a work of literature, the teacher must trigger the use and application of many ingrained and learned mechanisms such as empathy, imagination, judgement and emotional recall, but none of those can be triggered if we do not understand the students' perceptions, which are influenced by the society they have been socialized in. Through teaching and searching for motivation in individuals to engage in a foreign language, I have come to realize certain necessities – reading helps the learning process immensely but there is often a lack of motivation for it. Reading requires a great deal of concentration and takes some time to ultimately please with the effect of an entire story, and this calls for secondary motivation. I believe that when students are shown the impact that they can have in co-creating the meaning of the story, they may be more inclined to read than to watch a movie, for example, if they perceive that latter is an interpretation by the director. By presenting the influence social background can have on students' interpretation of a text, we can show them other aspects they bring into the story that are their own.

Literature has a tendency to create its own response, as Wayne Franklin put it: "Contemporary literature values heterogeneity in forms and language, pluralism in cultural influences. This literature assumes a context wherein the nature of reality changes" (2007: 2091). This view of modern literature shows a shift in interpreting and evaluating it. It used to be common practise to search for one interpretation of a given text, an ultimate dissection of a piece of art for everyone to read, understand and accept as the truth about this piece of art. Thankfully, we no longer have to follow this prescription; we are now given the option of forming and arguing our own opinions. How far that reading or co-creation can go was largely elaborated upon by American scholar Stanley Fish:

Reader-response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has

come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words *reader*, *the reading process*, and *response* to mark out an area of investigation. In the context of Anglo-American criticism, the reader-response movement arises in direct opposition to the New Critical dictum issued by Wimsatt and Beardsley /.../. Reader-response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its "effects", psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader. (1980: 9).

This is a general description that holds true for the whole approach and not just Stanley Fish's work. Scholars such as Norman Holland, who primarily focused on the psychology of the human mind and the embedding of dreams into the reading process, or Richard Gerrig, who showed how readers shift their morals to viewing criminals as heroes, outlined a similar and very important concept which I will elaborate.

The German scholar Wolfgang Iser forged, like Fish, the term and the concept of the "Impliziter Leser", in English the embedded reader, in Fish's work the "informed reader"; the difference lies in the former being put there by the author who basically tries to lead the reader to get an expected reaction to a given text, whereas Fish's "informed reader", described in *Understanding Contemporary Literary Theory*, is defined as: "Fish's answer is that his reader is 'the informed reader.' The informed reader is anyone who '(1) is a competent speaker of the language... (2) is in full possession of 'the semantic knowledge that a mature ... listener brings to his task of comprehension'.. and (3) has *literary* competence." In other words, Fish believes that all educated readers, professors, students, or cultured laymen share the same fundamental responses to and derive the same essential meanings from a literary text (2003, 130). That interpretation of Fish's work is, in my opinion, too general, and Fish himself later on moved away from the informed reader to "interpretive communities".

Fish claims that members of such a community will have similar responses because of their shared knowledge and therefore different ones from other interpretive communities:

The final section of 'Interpreting the *Variorum*' is entitled 'Interpretive Communities,' and here Fish draws out the implications of his earlier assertion that meaning is 'a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear' on the text. An interpretive model, Fish contends, is a social construct. It is a particular way of seeing things – a strategy for understanding grounded in specific assumptions and beliefs – that a group of people collectively holds. It is through the filter of such strategies that readers create meaning. In Fish's own words: 'Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions' (171) (2003, 132).

One of the most famous incidents at Johns Hopkins University, which Fish uses to illustrate the meaning of these communities, occurred when one of his former students went to another professor with whom she had just started a course, and when the lecture was over, asked: "Is there a text in this class?" The professor told her that the *Norton Anthology of Literature* was on the reading list and she said: "No, no. I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?" This is indeed a very good example of how two different people belong to two different types of interpreters, or according to Fish, to two different interpretive communities. Some might call it context, but context is, according to Fish, created by the community as well. This theoretical construct seems more reasonable and I will also take this position later on, when I will specifically refer to Lindsay's books.

If we take a closer look at Fish's "Interpreting the *Variorum*", we see his work and his interpretations of the readers' role come to life. It is apparent that his technique of interpreting a text lies in putting the readers' point of view into focus. For example, he points out that in the numerous interpretations that critics provide on Milton's poem, they fail to see how it influences

the reader's understanding: For what these formal descriptions point to (but do not acknowledge) is the extraordinary number of adjustments required of readers who would negotiate these lines. The first adjustment is the result of the expectations created by the second half of line 6 – "lest he returning chide.<sup>22</sup> Since there is no full stop after "chide," it is natural to assume that this will be an introduction to reported speech, /.../. This assumption does not survive line 7-. (Fish, 1980; qtd. in Leitch, 2001, p. 2076) The focus stays on the jumping adjustments, which are basically readers' streams of intake and thought of the poem, when they take different clues from the text and form their stream of thought and are then taken away from it by another clue.

Another example of how he tries to stand in the shoes of the reader is evident in "Surprised by Sin: the reader in *Paradise Lost*" As David Daiches points out (not in praise however), "the reader however much he wishes to read *Paradise Lost* "as a poem", is forced to read it at this point as logical argument, and to answer back as he reads. Whether or not he answers back, in the sense of disagreeing, the reader will be unable to ignore the difficulties involved in the logic of foreknowledge and freedom" (1998: 211). What Fish is trying to do in his work is the same as I am going to attempt in this paper; try to find, enumerate and understand different interpretive strategies that readers can create. If we think about it in general, every critical approach to a literary piece of writing is doing more or less the same thing – it is trying to find a meaning; however, it is searching for one universal meaning that was either put there by the author or is embedded in the text itself, whereas Fish points out: "What I would like to argue is that they are not *meant* to be solved but to be experienced (they signify), and that consequently any procedure that attempts to determine which of a number of readings is correct will necessarily fail" (2001: 2072). He is talking about meanings and problems in a text and about its readings. This is just a brief glimpse of the philosophical path Fish follows, in general called the pragmatist camp, and one of the philosophers Fish often quotes is Richard Rorty. Its basic implication is that there is no universal truth that we can search for and find, for the truth is in the eye of the beholder; everyone has his or her own truth.

Social background is one of the crucial factors influencing our interpretations and the most powerful process of learning and shaping through society is definitely primary socialization, where we learn the rules of right and wrong on which we base our moral judgements. Moral judgements are only partly objective; most of them are learned during socialization and the greater part of them lies in our subjective view and is closely connected to our emotions. Everyone knows how powerful the connection between our emotional world and the decision between right and wrong is; we even have the expression that something feels right or wrong, meaning that we are in emotional harmony or peace with a certain subject or that it causes us distress.

The process that creates the close bond between rule and emotion is socialization. As normally functioning members of society, we are expected to play certain roles and thus the definition: "Socialization may be broadly defined as the inculcation of the skills and attitudes necessary for playing given social roles" (Mayer, 2004, p. xiii). What I am particularly trying to point out is primary socialization, which has a similar definition: "The process by which children learn the cultural norms of the society into which they are born. Primary socialization occurs largely in the family" (Primary Socialization, 2010). Both definitions show that it is a process where our norms and rules about right and wrong and our beliefs are formed. All of it occurs during our childhood; although we never stop learning throughout our lives, the most strongly rooted and the most emotional beliefs come from primary socialization. They lie so deep within us, that in later life, breaking even the most innocent ones can cause us distress.

I am going to examine a series of novels that present an extreme case of an author who challenges the values and beliefs of his readers. Jeff Lindsay's *Dexter* is a serial killer, but in the novels (and the television series derived from it), the readers and viewers are asked first to sympathize with, and then identify with, him. In no way am I suggesting that this would be appropriate reading for children. These are novels for adults. Imagine going on a bus when you are thirty years old and asking a lady in her seventies to give you her seat ... there are very few of us who would even go through with this, let alone decide whether a character like Lindsay's *Dexter*, a

sociopath with a flair for killing other killers, is justifiable or not without our norms and beliefs. A society that put individual rights into the centre of its values might not be as approving, whereas one that has a high emphasis on the community and taking care of fairness on your own might see a fair point in the logic of returning what you have received from others. As we have seen now, going against basic socialization is almost impossible, but what types of societies taught them to us and to other people around the world? Quite simply – different ones.

Let us now examine our actual moral dilemma. Dexter is a young man in his mid twenties who works for the Miami police department as a blood spatter analyst. He went through a horrible experience as a child; he witnessed the murder of his mother with a chainsaw and was then left sitting in her blood inside a shipping container for three days before the police found him. In psychology, what Dexter experienced is referred to as a traumatic event or psychological trauma. People who suffer from one are described as: "/.../ trauma survivors often view themselves and the world as if through a glass darkly, a psychological experience in which inner representations of self and world are disrupted, colouring all future perceptions (McCann, 1990, p. 3). Dexter sees the world through a dark glass when it comes to understanding human emotions, compassion and social roles involving emotional security, which can be compared to the numbness victims of trauma experience: At the time of a traumatic event, the person experiencing the event might feel numb and therefore not know how to respond. Later on, memories of the trauma can bring out feelings of helplessness, fear, even horror -- like reliving the trauma all over again (Traumatic events – Overview, 2010). In the beginning, we are asked to sympathize with him. Let us take a closer look at an example when Dexter sees how hard it is for Cody, his wife's son, who was badly mistreated by his biological father, to adapt and blend in with normal children. He is in fact not normal, but more or less impacted by the same blood lust as Dexter as a result of his own traumatic event. When Dexter observes Cody it becomes clear that Dexter's 'numbness' to the emotional world and social roles is almost complete, and that all the social skills he has have been artificially studied and learned and never actually experienced:

And for me? I could only watch, and possibly give him a few pointers in between rounds. I had gone through a similar phase myself, and I still remembered the terrible pain of it; realizing that this was all and forever something for the others and never for me – that laughter, friendship, the sense of belonging, were things I would never really feel. Even worse, once I realized that I was outside all of it, I had to pretend to feel it, learn to show the mask of happiness in order to hide the deadly emptiness inside. I remembered the dreadful clumsiness of those first years of trying; the first horrible attempts at laughter, always at the wrong time and always sounding so very inhuman. Even speaking to the others naturally, easily, about the right things and with the right manufactured feelings. Slowly, painfully, awkwardly learning, watching how the others did these things so effortlessly and feeling the added pain of being outside that graceful ease of expression. A small thing, knowing how to laugh. So very inconsequential, unless you don't know and have to learn from watching others, as I did. (Lindsay, 2009, p. 139)

As Dexter goes through his trauma, besides being numb to emotion, he also develops a certain cruelty and blood lust. The first officer to reach the container in which Dexter was sitting in blood as a child was Harry Morgan, who would later become Dexter's foster father and the one teaching Dexter the Harry code. When Harry sees what Dexter's past has done to him and combines that with the frustration he experiences at work where he has to let a criminal go because the procedure does not fit the requirements, the following twisted logic emerges:

Harry, my wise foster father, had taught me the careful balance of Need and Knife. He had taken a boy in whom he saw the unstoppable need to kill – no changing that – and Harry had molded him into a man who only killed the killers; Dexter the no-bloodhound, who hid behind a human-seeming face and tracked down the truly naughty serial killers who killed

without code. And I would have been one of them, if not for the Harry Plan. *There are plenty of people who deserve it, Dexter*, my wonderful foster-cop-father had said. (Lindsay, 2008, p. 174)

We have seen how Dexter came to be what he is and how he was put onto the path he walks. Now we are asked to understand him. Another thing we should examine is what is actually happening inside him to get a complete picture of whom we are judging. The following example shows what happens when he follows the call of the moon for which he seems to have a special fascination, and makes a move to satisfy his need:

It's that moon again, slung so fat and low in the tropical night, calling out across a curdled sky and into the quivering ears of that dear old voice in the shadows, the Dark Passenger, nestled snug in the back seat of the Dodge K-car of Dexter's hypothetical soul. That rascal moon, that loud mouthed leering Lucifer, calling down across the empty sky to the dark hearts of the night monsters below, calling them away to their joyful playgrounds. Calling, in fact, to that monster right there, behind the oleander, tiger-striped with moonlight through the leaves, his senses all on high as he waits for just the right moment to leap from the shadows. It is Dexter in the dark, listening to the terrible whispered suggestions that come pouring down breathlessly into my shadowed hiding place. My dear dark other self urges me to pounce – now – sink my moonlit fangs into the oh-so-vulnerable flesh on the far side of the hedge. But the time is not right and so I wait, watching cautiously as my unsuspecting victim creeps past, eyes wide, knowing that something is watching but not knowing that I am *here*, only three steely feet away in the hedge. I could so easily slide out like the knife blade I am, and work my wonderful magic – but I wait, suspected but unseen. (Lindsay, 2008, p. 173)

There is now a rough outline of the man being judged and I will present examples from the text and show how they can be interpreted according to the different backgrounds of two hypothetical readers. While doing that, I am going to try and connect those interpretations to some background of the reader and his or her culture. I am going to divide potential readers into two camps, those who would in general approve of Dexter and those who would not. The arguments for approving of Dexter's actions will be failure of the legal system, fear for own well-being and easing the financial strain on society.

I will posit two different readers and their two different societies which provided them with their primary socialization and thus with their basic tools for forming moral judgements. Let us look at a possible approver of Dexter's actions first. Living in a time and place where the most popular shows on TV include forensic detectives finding and putting criminals behind bars and where the law is enforced by formal authorities, many of us find it hard to believe that only a few hundred kilometres to the south in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, the law has a different meaning. In Macedonia there is a book called *Kanun of Lek Dukagjin* that was described by a field researcher who was given a copy as a present, as follows:

The code of Lek Dukagjin The most common version of customary law among the Albanians is the *Kanun of Lek Dukagjin*. The Albanian Gëgs inhabiting the territories north of the Shkumbin River had lived for long centuries in large clans observing the code of the Kanun – a primitive constitution regulating not only their community life, but also their private lives. The norms were passed on from generation to generation by an oral tradition and were decreed by the council of elders. It is considered that the Code was rationalised by despot Lek III Dukagjin (1410 – 1481).

This code was compiled throughout the centuries chiefly by adding new norms (Mangalakova, 2004, p. 2). As we can see, it is simply an old book of law and order, similar to the legal codes we

know in the Western world. The difference is striking though. If you follow the canon, you do not pick up the phone to call the police to come and lock someone up when they threaten or offend you; you simply kill them or make sure they are killed. In some of its sections, the Kanun includes an elaborate legal code trying to regulate blood feud (*gjakmarrja*) – a system of reciprocal "honour killings". According to the Code, if a man is deeply affronted, his family has the right to kill the person who has insulted him. However, by doing this, the family will become a target for revenge on the part of the victim's family. The victim's closest male relative is obliged to kill the murderer of his family member. The pattern of reprisal killings thus formed has been passed on for generations of families up to the present day in Albania, Kosovo, and, partly, in Montenegro. "Blood is never lost", states the Kanun (Mangalakova, 2004, p. 2). As we can see, a reader from this background could very well relate to Dexter's kill or be killed code. Human life in this society can be payment for even an insult.

As we can see, someone who has been brought up in a society where people take justice into their own hands might be more inclined to approve of someone who punishes murderers and does so with meticulous proof, searching to ensure the right person is punished. Let us look at a more specific example of the approval. The most obvious one is the law of the lesser evil. One of the most primal human emotions is fear. It is the natural defence system nature has given to us in order to survive. The body is overwhelmed by a rush of adrenaline and every nerve says to either run or do what is necessary to stay alive. People have been known to move abnormally heavy loads in the face of death and run distances that would have been unimaginable without the stimulus of fear. If our potential reader is faced with the choice of being threatened by a killer who does not care whom he kills of having to put up with one who is so obsessed by a code of not killing the innocent that it dictates his entire life, I think fear would quickly guide him or her to the latter.

The following examples will show what types of individuals Dexter is up against to illustrate how a reader might, out of fear or contempt, choose Dexter as the solution. Another thing that I am trying to point out is that someone brought up in a world ruled by the blood justice of feuds could definitely see prison as a mild punishment for the following individuals:

'Yes, beg me. That's good. Much better.' I yanked again. 'Do you think that's it, Father? Seven bodies? Did they beg?' He had nothing to say. 'Do you think that's all of them, Father? Just seven? Did I get them all?' 'O, God,' he rasped out, with a pain that was good to hear. 'And what about the other towns, Father? What about Fayetteville? Would you like to talk about Fayetteville?' He just choked out a sob, no words. 'And what about East Orange? Was that three? Or did I miss one there? It's so hard to be sure. Was it four in East Orange, Father?' /.../ 'Please,' he said. 'I couldn't help myself. I just couldn't help myself. Please, you have to understand-' 'I do understand, Father,' I said, and there was something in my voice, the Dark Passenger's voice now, /.../ 'I understand perfectly,' I told him, moving very close to his face. The sweat on his cheeks turned to ice. 'You see,' I said, 'I can't help myself either.' We were very close now, almost touching, and the dirtiness of him was suddenly too much. I jerked up on the noose and kicked his feet out from under him again. Father Donovan sprawled on the floor 'but *children*?' I said. 'I could never do this to children.' I put my hard clean boot on the back of his head and slammed his face down. 'Not like you, Father. Never kids. I have to find people like you.' 'What are you?' Father Donovan whispered. 'The beginning,' I said. 'And the end. Meet your Unmaker, Father.' I had the needle ready and it went into his neck like it was supposed to, slight resistance from the rigid muscles, but none from the priest. (2008: 10)

Children are a weak point for most of us; even in prison, rapists and child molesters are considered to be the lowest of the low and are commonly assaulted or even killed by their fellow inmates. Even for people who do not have very high moral standards, hurting an innocent being who cannot stand up for him or herself is despicable. A potential reader who him or herself justified in

killing anyone who touches their family members could see his or her children as potentially endangered by such an individual, and once they go into that kind of personalization the Dexter code seems more than welcome. They welcome his murderous glee and share his disgust with the man who harassed and then killed orphaned children he was supposed to take care of. By this stage, we are being asked to identify with him.

The next example has a level of gruesomeness that inflicts enough fear on its own, let alone allow a thought of disapproving of any procedure that would eliminate a person capable of such a thing. This killer displays such a cruelty that even Dexter is inclined to judge:

I would never have thought, for instance, of cutting off the lips and eyelids like that, and although I pride myself on my neat work, I could never had done so without damage to the eyes, which in this case were rolling wildly back and forth, unable to close or even blink, always returning to that mirror. Just a hunch, but I guessed that the eyelids had been done last, long after the nose and ears had been oh-so-neatly removed. I could not decide, however, if I would have done these before or after the arms, legs, genitals, etc. /.../ Everything on the body had been cut off, absolutely everything. There was nothing left of it but a bare and featureless head attached to an unencumbered body. I could not imagine how it was possible to do this without killing the thing, and it was certainly far beyond me why anyone would want to. It revealed a cruelty that really made one wonder if the universe was such a good idea after all. Pardon me if this sounds a tad hypocritical coming from Deathhead Dexter, but I know very well what I am and it is nothing like this. I do what the Dark Passenger deems necessary, to someone who truly deserves it, and it always ends in death- which I am sure the thing on the table would agree was not such a bad thing. (2008: 207)

The reaction to this grotesque scene could only be emotional revulsion on the part of the reader. Mutilating someone like that and leaving him alive to look at himself in the mirror that the torturer put there for that exact purpose is truly horrifying. If readers could imagine being threatened by something like that, they would not wait for the police to follow standard procedure, they would call someone like Dexter right away.

The final example of cruelty that Dexter encounters creates a similar effect as the previous one, but with the addition of disgust:

He sat beside running water in the shade of a palm tree, dressed in baggy cotton shorts, the flimsy kind that have somehow become acceptable to wear in public recently, and he wore the rubber flip-flops that invariable go with the shorts. He also had on a T-shirt that said, 'I'm with Butthead' and he was draped with a camera and pensively clutching a bouquet. Although I say pensively, it was a very different kind of pensiveness, because his head had been neatly removed and placed with a colorful spray of tropical flowers. Instead of flowers, the bouquet consisted of a bright and festive heap of intestines, topped by what was almost certainly a heart and surrounded by an appreciative cloud of flies. (2009: 24)

The displays of cruelty and disgust that Dexter is trying to stop would definitely swing the pendulum in his favour, but one that would make the reader even more convinced of the righteousness of his deeds is probably the fact that he feels genuine offence when Deborah doubts his code; this tells the reader that he is very strongly ruled by it and despite his own cruelty has something like a guideline and even pride:

I took a deep breath and tried to organize the crew to bail out a little. Deborah was the only person on Earth who knew what I really was, and even though she was still getting used to the idea, I had thought she understood the very careful boundaries set up by Harry, and understood, too, that I would never cross them. Apparently I was wrong. 'Deborah,' I said.

'Why would I-' (2008: 500)

All of the events described in the novel are, sadly, everyday reality in many places around the world. People are mistreated, abused and murdered in a variety of ways that would scare anyone, and being shown a vivid picture like these makes it that much easier to appreciate someone who would protect himself and his loved ones. The thought of having to wait for the police to do something only after having dealt with all the procedural requirements is unacceptable for the type of reader we are postulating. The fact that Dexter is efficient and has a code that ensures fair punishment, and that he follows it with a sense of responsibility and even pride, would probably satisfy those people who believe in eye for an eye justice.

As a contrast for our students to see that an interpretation truly comes from the individual, we need to show them the path of the condemner as well. A reader who would raise an eyebrow would probably be someone who believes in the functioning of the legal system they know in western societies. Many people believe that the western system is good, if not the best. They copy the culture, they copy the ways of life and, most importantly, they try to copy the ways of making money. Throughout history, countries like the UK, Spain or the Netherlands have reached out into the world and spread their way of life and thinking. This caused some good, but a lot of destruction as well. A disapproving reader from this background will most certainly be influenced by his or her belief that the individual is the main force that keeps society running. All the contemporary problems of war, famine and pollution have brought the western world to a point of trying to promote life, tranquillity and unison with nature. Someone who believes in the new age preservation of human life and dignity will certainly have a problem with a mentally disturbed individual deciding who gets to live and who to die. Second, this type of reader will most certainly be a proponent of human rights and forgiveness. Documents like The Bill of Rights have inspired many to study law and to protect people from having their rights abused. The questions arise why someone like that should neglect the right to live, or why he or she should believe in ending a life when they are, despite their cruelty and aggression, equal in the face of the law, or if someone like that does not deserve a fair chance to better him or herself as well. Last but not least, we will encounter readers with confidence in the legal system. Since childhood, these readers have been raised in the belief that rules have a purpose and that they are a good thing. Laws are made to protect and serve us, and we should never break them. Someone who grew up in that world will certainly be of the opinion that an individual such as Dexter needs to be stopped as soon as possible.

Another objection regards the killer's self-control. Many modern readers constantly question virtually everything. There are conspiracy theories circling the globe and people constantly ask themselves whom they can trust and who will abuse their trust. Why trust an emotionally unstable serial killer? It is hard to trust someone who thinks there is a Dark Passenger inside him. There are scientific debates going on about people like Dexter, abused in his childhood by the trauma he had to endure and how their self-control is negatively affected. Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime (GTC) is one of the most widely tested theories of crime and delinquency in the past 20 years. In general, this research demonstrates that the theory's core construct, low self-control, is associated with antisocial behaviour and other negative social outcomes (see meta-analysis by Pratt & Cullen, 2000; e.g., Benda, 2005; Crettaci, 2008; Jones & Quisenberry, 2004). The theory has also been tested among special populations like criminal offenders (Longshore, Turner, & Stein, 1996; Piquero, MacDonald, Dobrin, Daigle, & Cullen, 2005), incarcerated juveniles (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2008), and homeless youth (Baron, 2003; Baron, Forde, & Kay, 2007), again demonstrating a relationship between low self-control and negative social outcomes (2011: 38). This can be a very disturbing factor for a reader in a western society.

An example from the novel should definitely lead to some considerable doubt on the part of the reader. Although Dexter is an intelligent and unemotional killer, he gets to a point where his psyche plays tricks on him in the form of dreams and makes him unsure of his own actions:



I woke up standing at the sink with the water running. I had a moment of total panic, a sense of complete disorientation, my heart racing while my crusty eyelids fluttered in an attempt to catch up. The place was wrong. The sink didn't look right. I wasn't even sure who I was- in my dream I had been standing in front of my sink with the water running, but it had not been this sink. I had been scrubbing my hands, working the soap hard, cleansing my skin of every microscopic fleck of horrible red blood, /.../ I turned off the water and stood for a moment, swaying against the cold sink. It had all been far too real, too little like any kind of dream I knew about. And I remembered so clearly the room. I could see it just by closing my eyes. /.../ I opened my eyes. It was me in the mirror. Hello, Dexter. Had a dream, old chap? Interesting, wasn't it? Three of them, hey? But just a dream. Nothing more. I smiled at me, trying out the face muscles, completely unconvinced. And as rapturous as it had been, I was awake now and left with nothing more than a hangover and wet hands. What should have been a pleasant interlude in my subconscious had me shaking, uncertain. I was filled with dread at the thought that my mind had skipped town and left me behind to pay the rent. I thought of the three carefully trussed playmates and wanted to go back to them and continue. I thought of Harry and knew I couldn't. I was whipsawed between a memory and a dream, and I couldn't tell which was more compelling. This was just no fun anymore. I wanted my brain back. (2008: 111, 112)

The passage clearly displays a troubled individual, and troubled people are never far from cracking, as even Dexter knows. He is starting to doubt whether or not he is killing people in his sleep. The reader might very well think: "Well, he is a damaged killer, why should that be so uncommon for someone like him?" Further on, we see the fight he is having with himself about not killing while asleep or in a type of trance. It appears that we are reading about a desperate individual who is trying to convince himself that he is innocent of something he might well have done:

Because far beyond simply doing some interesting things with a new friend, I needed to find this killer. I had to see him, talk to him, prove to myself that he was real and that-- That what? That he wasn't me? That I was not the one doing such terrible, interesting things? Why would I think that? It was beyond stupid; it was completely unworthy of the attention of my once-proud brain. Except- now that the idea was actually rattling around in there, I couldn't get the thought to sit down and behave. What if it really was me? What if I had somehow done these things without knowing it? Impossible, of course, absolutely impossible, but-- "(2008: 113)

The most shocking turn in starting to doubt whether Dexter is capable of restraining himself forever occurs when his biological brother kidnaps Deborah and lures Dexter into the shipyard container where their mother died and tapes Deborah to a table. Even at this point Dexter has to think whether he did this, and even more shockingly, he thinks for a few seconds whether he should kill her – his own sister – a very powerful point to doubt his character for the reader:

There were many things in her eyes, but the plainest was fear, and that held me there in the doorway. I had never seen that look on her before and I was not sure what to think about it. I took half a step toward Deborah and she flinched against the duct tape. Afraid? Of course- but afraid of me? I was here to rescue her, most likely. Why should she be afraid of me? Unless-- Had I done this? During my little 'nap' earlier this evening what if Deborah had arrived at my apartment, as scheduled, and found my Dark Passenger behind the wheel of the Dexter-mobile? And unknown to me I had brought her here and taped her so tantalisingly to the table without consciously realizing it- which made absolutely no sense, naturally. Had I raced home and left myself the Barbie doll, then gone upstairs and flopped

on the bed and woke up as 'me' again, like I was running some kind of homicidal relay race? Impossible: but... How else had I known to come here? (2008: 155)

The final example we will look at is a comment of Dexter's on having to wait for a kill because Sergeant Doakes is tailing him:

And once again I was left with virtuous patience and a feeling of long suffering rectitude. Dour Dutiful Dexter. *It will come*, I told my other self. *Sooner or later it will come. Has to come; it will not wait forever, but this must come first.* And there was some grumbling, of course, because it had not come in far too long, but I soothed the growls, rattled the bars with false good cheer one time, and pulled out my cell phone." (2008: 309)

The pressing need presented here really makes the reader wonder how long he can withstand this. It presents the image of a ticking time bomb; what if next time he will not be able to wait, will he kill an innocent bystander? A reader from a world where thinking with your own head is encouraged would certainly have trouble finding confidence in this killer. It would seem that it is better to trust a group of people who are sane and balanced and who do not feel an irresistible need to kill.

This way of reading literature presents a very interesting insight. It can teach us a lot about the groups of people who read certain types of books, but it also lets us remember at the same time how different they can be. I cannot deny the fact that other reasons for approval or disapproval of Dexter could be found, or that all the members of a given community will not necessarily have the same reaction to him, but I have shown that the reflection we give to a given text says a lot about us as individuals. As a teacher, I believe that this notion can be carried on to those students who may not yet have discovered the importance of reading for the improvement of their language knowledge, personal development and growth, and it could in some ways contribute a lot to the individualisation of reading materials in the classroom. If more programmes were focused on the needs of the individual, the teachers who know their students well would also be able to assign reading materials that would be more interesting and motivating for a specific student.

It really does matter what part of the world a reader is from, for cultural norms will sway him or her to either approve of a vigilante, frown upon his actions, or simply decide that he or she can not decide to either approve or disapprove. The most important consideration, though, is that no matter how thick the glasses of society are, the reader still remains the beholder who has joined in Dexter's journey and it has made him or her see more clearly what complex situations the world has to offer. The value of reading such extreme and grotesque works as the Dexter series is that it challenges us to examine our values and beliefs, and finally to draw the line beyond which we are not prepared to go. Again, these are not books for young readers, but the insights we as adults gain from examining our own reactions to them can be very useful when applied to other works that we ask our students to read, think about, and discuss.

The conclusions we can draw from the application of Fish's reader response to the case of this particular novel can contribute to further discussion. They show an unmotivated reader that through the application of his or her own intellect, one can learn about oneself. Students can be given a wide range of self-analysis exercises based on the interpretation they chose for a given work of literature, and they can be given tasks where they put themselves into the shoes of another reader from another social background (I tried a short discussion with my students asking them to interpret Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* from the viewpoint of a Hobbit; they found the exercise both fun and engaging.). Another thing they can try is to interpret a story pretending to be someone else, someone they might know very well or not at all, and they can thus express their opinion about the person they chose and how they see them and again realise the multitude of meanings a story can contain.

Further research into interpretation can help teachers to bring books to their students and show students the power of their interpretations. This can have many beneficial factors, not only

for their learning but also for their mental self-discovery and well-being.

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