"Darling Dexter's Dark Schemata": The Impact of Readers' Education Level on Storyworld Possible Selves Projection in Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*

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Plagiaatverklaring

Ondergetekende, Lara Delacourt, studente Taal- en Letterkunde Master Engels verklaart dat deze scriptie volledig oorspronkelijk is en uitsluitend door haarzelf geschreven is. Bij alle informatie en ideeën ontleend aan andere bronnen, heeft ondergetekende expliciet en in detail verwezen naar de vindplaatsen.

Antwerpen, 2 juni 2020

Preface

Before you lies the thesis "'Darling Dexter's Dark Schemata': The Impact of Readers' Education Level on Storyworld Possible Selves Projection in Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*." I was engaged with researching and writing it from September 2019 to June 2020. Although the COVID-19 quarantine forced me to make some changes, I thoroughly enjoyed being able to write about my two passions, namely crime fiction and psychology.

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Luc Herman, for his excellent guidance and support throughout the process. Without his help, I would have not been introduced to this theory and would never have dared to imagine conducting a study of this sort. Second, I want to express my gratitude to all of the respondents, who gave up precious hours of their time to help me collect the necessary data. Without you, this study would not have existed. Furthermore, I want to mention the library employees at the University of Antwerp, who continued to provide me with sources regardless of the circumstances.

To all my other family members and friends: thank you for always lending me a hand when I needed it. Some of you voluntarily participated in my pre-tests, while others provided a critical eye when proofreading my draft. Annita Van Craenenbroeck deserves a particular note of thanks for being my sounding board and keeping me motivated.

I hope you enjoy your reading.

Lara Delacourt

Antwerp, June 2, 2020

Abstract

This study aimed to empirically test storyworld possible selves (SPSs), which are mental constructs that allow readers to partially project themselves into a storyworld, as a method to map literary immersion (Martínez, 2014; 2018). More precisely, qualitative research was carried out to investigate which SPSs were activated by real-life readers when reading Jeff Lindsay's novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* and whether these were in accordance with Martínez's predictions. She believed readers would construct Dexter's character by blending the features of the hard-boiled detective and the serial killer. Furthermore, the clash between the readers' and the protagonist's ethical principles would result in a double-scoped network, meaning that the reader would constantly activate and de-activate several conflicting SPSs. On the basis of neo-Kohlbergian moral judgment research, this thesis also hypothesized that readers' education level was a decisive factor in the activation and distribution of SPSs. It was predicted master's students would have more ambiguous responses than high school students.

Via a written questionnaire, this study analyzed the most prominent SPSs during the reading of specifically selected passages. The respondent pool consisted of 20 female, Flemish readers, who were evenly divided per education level. The results implied that Martínez's interpretation of Dexter should be adapted by replacing the hard-boiled detective input space by the vigilante one and that some additional features, namely intelligence and an everyday alias, should be added. With regards to formal education, there were some small differences between the two groups, but the differences were not significant enough to be considered viable. Nonetheless, the neo-Kohlbergian moral schemata were able to explain some intra- and intergroup differences. In conclusion, storyworld possible selves can be used as a tool to study readers' emotional responses to narratives, but the framework should be further developed to extrapolate the findings to include more media, genres, and populations.

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Introduction

The serial killer has been and remains a popular figure in contemporary fiction. The profuse number of Netflix series that deal with murderers and psychopaths exemplifies society's fascination with humanity's dark side. More than a decade before Netflix started producing its true-crime shows, the American television drama *Dexter* (Manos et al., 2006-2013) aired for the first time. The series was based on the books of Jeff Lindsay. In his first novel, called *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), the author introduces the reader to the characters and the storyworld. The protagonist is Dexter Morgan, a middle-aged man who works for the Miami-Dade Police Department as a blood spatter analyst. His adopted sister, Deborah Morgan, is a detective, and together they are trying to find a resourceful murderer. Yet, Dexter's interest in the investigation is not purely professional: he is a serial killer himself, which enables him to understand the psychopathic mind. Notwithstanding, Dexter only kills criminals who have escaped the judicial system, in accordance with his late adoptive father's instructions. The entire novel adopts a first-person perspective, which means Dexter is the sole narrator and focalizer. The success of Lindsay's series demonstrates that this formula works, but it also raises several narratological and ethical questions on the topic of literary immersion.

At the end of the twenty-first century, the "cognitive turn" in the field of narratology changed the way researchers looked at narrative engagement. They started to focus on the reactions of real-life readers to literature, investigating "the mind-narrative nexus" (Herman, 2014, pp. 48-50). Cognitive narratologists initially focused on the possible causal relationships between narrative engagement and empathy, sympathy, identification, or feelings of self-transformation (Keen, 2007; Oatley, 2016). Nonetheless, these variables could not account for idiosyncratic differences. Consequently, María-Ángeles Martínez (2014; 2018) proposed a new framework based on the application of conceptual integration to existing narratological and psychological theories. She claims that *storyworld possible selves* (SPSs)

are "mental projections of readers inside the fictional world" that can "be used both in the disambiguation of discourse reference and in the understanding of attention priming, empathic attachment, and emotional involvement in narratives" (2014, p. 111). Although Martínez has strengthened her theory with literary analyses, storyworld possible selves have only been empirically tested to a limited extent (Martínez & Herman, 2020).

For this reason, this study is simultaneously explorative and experimental, making its purpose two-folded. First, it aims to provide an empirical basis for Martínez's storyworld possible selves theory by testing her analysis of Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* against real-life readers' experiences. Martínez (2018) argues that most to all readers will activate two input spaces for the character construction of Dexter, namely the serial killer figure and the hard-boiled detective. In addition to these socio-culturally based SPSs, each reader will produce more idiosyncratic SPSs. She also states that the reader will set off a double-scope network, referring to the clashing organizing frames of the reader's ethical attitude versus Dexter's. Martínez's analysis, however, does not examine whether there are certain patterns and/or explanations for the convergence and/or divergence of individuals' SPSs. Correspondingly, this study will expound on the factors that may explain these idiosyncrasies. Since the protagonist primarily poses an ethical problem, an empirical study of the novel might benefit from the application of neo-Kohlbergian moral judgment theory. Experts in this area indicate that formal education has an enormous impact on a person's moral development. Departing from Martínez's double scope idea, this thesis raises the question of whether formal education might be important in readers' ethical judgment of Dexter, ensuing in the activation of certain SPSs. It is hypothesized that readers with a higher education level will judge Dexter more ambiguously than readers with a lower level.

The overall structure of the study takes the form of six chapters, including this introduction. The next chapter deals with the existing literature and research on the topic of

storyworld possible selves and neo-Kohlbergian moral development theory. The third section begins by laying out the methodology used: an overview of the questionnaire and the selection of respondents, amongst other things, will be provided. The fourth chapter is concerned with interpreting and discussing the results in light of the activation of SPSs, specific ethical attitudes, and their distribution across the educational groups. Moreover, attention will be paid to idiosyncrasies. The final chapter draws upon the entire thesis, tying up the various theoretical and empirical strands in order to provide a conclusive answer to the research questions posed in this introduction. It also includes suggestions and a discussion of the implications of the findings to future research into this area.

Literature Review

### Storyworld Possible Selves Theory

In 2014, Martínez first outlined her theory on storyworld possible selves. Using an interdisciplinary approach, she created a new construct that was meant to support a more thorough "understanding of the dynamics whereby individual narrative experiencers project themselves into storyworlds, a move necessary for literary appreciation and artistically motivated self-transformation" (p. 110). Martínez based her theory on recent developments in the fields of neuroscience, social psychology, and cognitive narratology. More precisely, she adopted and reconciled insights from blending theory, self-schemata theory, possible worlds theory, and deictic shift theory. In her subsequent published book *Storyworld Possible Selves* (2018), the author substantiated her ideas and provided a thoroughly developed framework qualified for empirical testing. The following section will provide a summary of each primary theory, while simultaneously explaining their relevance to the concept of storyworld possible selves and Martínez's interpretation of Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*.

Blending Theory

One of the foundations of SPS theory is *blending theory* or *conceptual integration.* It emerged around the turn of the twenty-first century and can be described as "a theory of everyday human reasoning capability" (Martínez, 2018, pp. 9, 12). Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002) developed this theory to chart the way our brains process information, and Martínez (2018) subsequently adopted their framework to create a prototype of the basic blending network in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (see Figure 1). Via this specific novel, the process will be illustrated step-by-step.

Figure 1

The Basic Blending Network in Darkly Dreaming Dexter
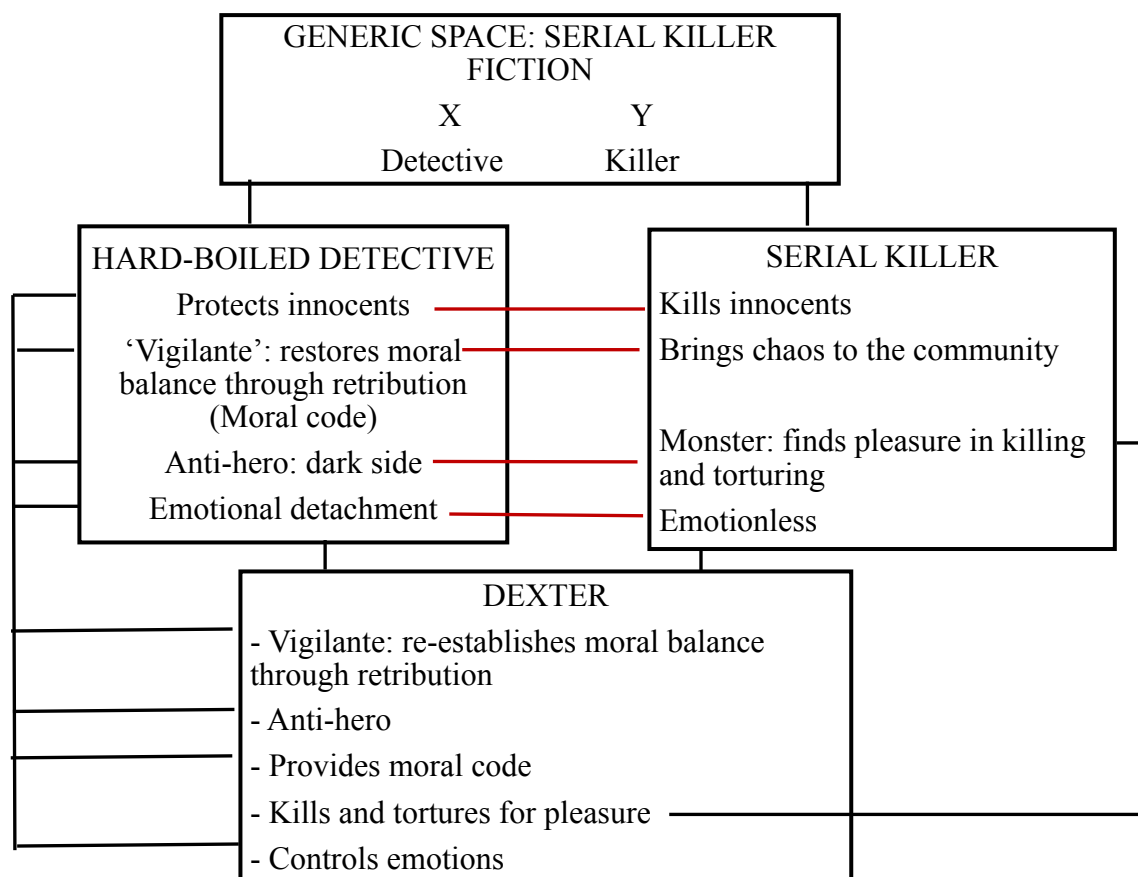
Note. This scheme was derived from Martínez (2018, p. 169). Each rectangle symbolizes a mental space: the black lines mark the connections and the red ones mark the differences.

The theory relies on the concept of *mental spaces*, which Fauconnier and Turner (2002) define as "small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action" (p. 40)[1]. These packets are contextually activated, for instance, while reading a novel such as Lindsay's. The mental spaces this activity evokes are labeled as *input spaces*. In the most basic blend, there are generally two input spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Martínez (2018) claims the character of Dexter will draw on two input spaces: that of the serial killer and of the hard-boiled detective (p. 168). After the input spaces are activated, the next step is *cross-space mapping*. This term refers to the brain connecting the similarities and differences of the two input spaces, as shown by the lines in Figure 1. Subsequently, all parallels between the individual spaces are assembled in one *generic space* (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 40-41). Martínez denotes the generic space behind the persona of Dexter as "serial killer crime fiction" (2018, p. 169). Isabel Santaularia (2010) specifies the genre of Lindsay's novel as:

> psycho-horror, a serial killer fiction subgenre in which the serial killer is the main protagonist and readers/audiences become direct witnesses of his thoughts and murders unmediated by an external agent that posits a moral frame to the serial killer's actions. (p. 58)

Dexter's personality, however, does not adhere to all of the serial killer's features: the hard-boiled detective and serial killer are both marked by their emotional aloofness, but their other features are contradictory. Hence, cross-mapping provokes a fourth space, called the *blended space,* or simply, the *blend*. It selects several features in the input spaces and combines them to create a new "emergent" mental space (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 41-42). Figure 1 portrays the way Dexter's character is interpreted by readers "familiar with the genre"

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[1] The exact nature of these mental representations is still being contested. Proportionists argue that mental spaces "must be reduced to nerve impulses and synaptic events," while the imagists maintain that the mind projects unconscious "image-schemas" (Johnson-Laird, 2005, p. 186; Mandler, 2004). Fauconnier and Turner (2002) founded their theory on the latter assumption.

as a mixture between the hard-boiled detective and serial killer input spaces, with the former providing the majority of defining traits (Martínez, 2018, p. 169). The character construction of Dexter does not only clash on the level of input spaces but also on a higher level in the blending operation. More precisely, there is a sharp contrast between the organizing frames of the literary character and the reader. Before tackling this issue, it is necessary to develop some background knowledge on storyworld possible selves via the notion of the *self-concept*.

The Self-Concept: Self-Schemata and Possible Selves

In the late 1970s, Hazel Rose Markus addressed an important gap in social-psychology: researchers had concluded that the self was able to process meta-information, but they did not propose any structures that could describe this process properly. Hence, Markus (1977) developed the idea that the self-concept is composed of *self-schemata*, which she defined as "cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of self-related information contained in the individual's social experiences" (p. 64). These self-schemata can be linked to specific events in a person's life, e.g. "Yesterday, I did not dare to look my teacher in the eye," or they can encompass general evaluations the individual has about themselves, e.g. "I am an introvert." The latter category emanates from the former due to the brain's ability to analyze and predict patterns. In this way, "self-schemata can be viewed as a reflection of the invariances people have discovered in their own social behavior" (Markus, 1977, p. 64). Self-schemata thus embody our self-perceptions.

Nevertheless, self-schemata are not necessarily permanent structures. In a later article, Markus and Paula Nurius (1986) improved the theory, arguing that the self-concept does not only involve self-schemata but also *possible selves*:

Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a

conceptual link between cognition and motivation. Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats, and they give the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. (p. 954)

These possible selves have not yet been tested against social reality and primarily exist in the individual's mind. Regardless, they execute three important functions: (a) providing a framework for future behavior; (b) providing "a context of additional meaning for the individual's current behavior," (c) providing stimuli for the change of the, more stable, self-schemata (Markus & Nurius, 1986, pp. 955-956). This last function requires some additional explanation: since self-schemata are "core" self-conceptions, the impact of storyworld possible selves is limited to the *working self-concept.* This last term refers to a specific network of self-schemata that is contextually activated, constantly shifting, and more susceptible to change (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 956). The concepts of self-schemata and possible selves have been successfully applied to diverse phenomena, such as identity formation (Dunkel, 2000; Dunkel & Anthis, 2001; Kerpelman & Pittman, 2001), educational success (Oyserman et al., 2002; Rossiter, 2007), motherhood (Lee & Oyserman, 2009; Nurius et al., 2006), and psychotherapy (Bak, 2015; Dunkel, Kelts & Coon, 2006).

Possible Worlds and Deictic Shift Theory

To consider the self-concept in relation to narratives, the relation between reality and fictionality is key. Ruth Ronen (1994) demonstrates that the cooperation between literary theory and philosophy during the late 1980s culminated in an increased interest in "the referential functions of literature" (p. 19). The concept that emerged from this interdisciplinary approach, *possible worlds,* attempts to "explain the truth-condition of propositions which can only be interpreted with reference to a situational model other than the actual" (Martínez, 2018, pp. 33-34). With regards to literature, possible worlds theory is linked with *storyworlds,* which

David Herman (2009) defines as "global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse" (pp. 105-106). Authors are able to build a "blueprint" of a storyworld by using "the semiotic cues available in a given narrative medium," and the readers' task is to interpret these cues to participate in "world-creation" (Herman, 2009, pp. 107-108). In this way, readers can mentally transport themselves into the storyworld

This metaphorical transfer is the main topic of *deictic shift theory*. According to Erwin M. Segal (1995), this theory "argues that the metaphor of the reader getting inside of a story is cognitively valid. The reader often takes a cognitive stance within the world of the narrative and interprets the text from that perspective" (p. 15). When reading a written narrative, the reader builds a storyworld based on textual cues. These cues point the reader towards a *deictic center*, that is, "the desired spatio-temporal location within the story world [*sic*]" (Martínez, 2018, p. 36). Not all linguistic constructions have this effect; solely the ones categorized as *deictics*. David Crystal (1997) describes deictics as "those features of language which refer directly to the personal, temporal or locational characteristics of the situation within which an utterance takes place, whose meaning is relative to that situation; e.g., *now/then, here/there, I/you, this/that* are deictics" (p. 133, emphasis in original). Martínez (2018) believes that deictics help activate SPSs, which, in their turn, are essential in deictic shifting because the reader needs an abstract, mental construct "to move across ontological levels of existence" (p. 38). SPSs act as mediators between the narrator/focalizer or real-life reader and the storyworld, as shown in Figure 2. In this way, the reader's partial immersion can be explained without tampering with the laws of fictionality.

Figure 2

The Interactional Framework of Narratives
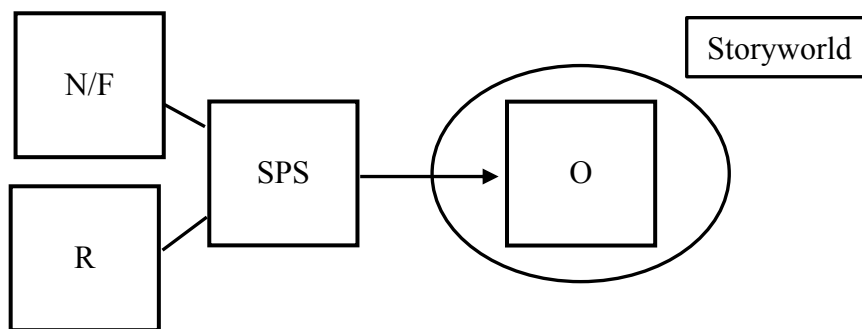
Note. This scheme was based on Martínez (2018, p. 50). Each letter symbolizes an entity: N = narrator, F = focalizer, R = reader, and O = object.

Types of Storyworld Possible Selves

All SPSs ensue from the conceptual blending of two input spaces: the real-life reader and the *perspectivizer* in the storyworld. In narratives, there is always a perspective through which the reader is able to access "the totality of the world- and belief-models embraced by the fictional individuals of the storyworld" (Surkamp, 2005, p. 423). Martínez (2018) distinguishes two perspectivizer SPS categories: focalizer SPS structures, which occur when the narrative is focalized internally, and narrator SPS structures, which occur when one input space is created out of the narrator's character construct (Martínez, 2018, p. 134). Martínez and Sanchez-Pardo (2019) later include another type: the *author SPS*, a construct that emerges when reading autobiographical works. However, these categorizations are purely theoretical: ultimately, the perspectivizer, being the character who dominates the view on the storyworld, is always a focalizer, whether or not they also act as a narrator. Dexter is a prime example: his first-person perspective combines both functions, resulting in one perspectivizer input space for the creation of a SPS.

In order to employ SPSs as a "useful analytical tool for the scientific study of emotional responses to narratives," Martínez (2018) outlines a SPS typology, demonstrating the different relations a SPS can have with readers' self-concepts (p. 123):

- *Self-Schema SPSs* are activated when the reader's construction of the perspectivizer overlaps with one of their self-schemas, e.g. (Dexter as) the loving brother (pp. 125-126).

- *Desired Possible Self SPSs* are activated when the reader's construction of the perspectivizer approaches "a desired image of the self," which "increases motivation" and results in "positive emotions," e.g. (Dexter as) the intelligent scientist (pp. 126-128).

- *Undesired Possible Self SPSs* are activated when the reader's construction of the perspectivizer contains an image that they fear to become, e.g. (Dexter as) the psychopathic killer. These kinds of SPSs mainly evoke negative emotions, but the fictional nature of narratives also provides a safe place to experiment and gain knowledge, stimulating feelings of relief and moral superiority (pp. 128-129).

- *Past Possible Self SPSs* are activated when the reader's construction of the perspectivizer reminds them of something they used to be, e.g. (Dexter as) the orphaned self (pp. 129-132).

- *Past SPSs* "result from past projections of the self into storyworlds, which have been incorporated in the self-concept, and are available for activation by a new narrative experience," e.g. (Dexter as) the hard-boiled detective (pp. 132-133).

Besides the different SPS types, there are several blending network types. As previously discussed, a basic blending operation starts with the combination of two input spaces, which then triggers a generic and a blended space. Another important aspect of this process are the organizing frames of the two input spaces, which are—in the case of *Darkly Dreaming*

Dexter—the individual reader's self-concept and Dexter's character construct. Fauconnier and Turner (2002) describe the different positions these two entities can hold against each other, and they distinguish multiple network types, of which Martínez (2018) cites four. In relation to Jeff Lindsay's novel, only two are applicable. The first one is the so-called *mirror SPS network*, in which both input spaces have identical organizing frames and are easy to reconcile (Martínez, 2018, p. 139). An example would be if readers with an adventurer self-schema or desired possible self would start reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899/2010) and construct Charlie Marlow as an adventurous traveler. The second kind of SPS network is characterized by its *double scope*, which Fauconnier and Turner (2002) define as:

> A double-scope network has inputs with different (and often clashing) organizing frames as well as an organizing frame for the blend that includes parts of each of those frames and has an emergent structure of its own. In such networks, both organizing frames make central contributions to the blend, and their sharp differences offer the possibility of rich clashes. Far from blocking the construction of the network, such clashes offer challenges to the imagination; indeed, the resulting blends can be highly creative. (p. 131)

Martínez (2018) stresses double-scoped networks are usually prompted in cases of "ethical conflict," albeit the reader might start with a mirror SPS network. Accordingly, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* is an interesting case study: the introduction immediately shows that the novel has a murderer as a perspectivizer, but Dexter's gradual revealing of his background forces readers to constantly adjust their SPS projection (pp. 164-165).

The last distinction that should be made in terms of SPSs is between *primary SPSs* and *SPS slipnets*. The former category should be easier to predict because they are based on sociocultural norms, and are activated by most readers. Dexter's primary SPS is provided in

Figure 3. SPS slipnets, by contrast, are as idiosyncratic as the personality of the reader. Even though the activation of SPSs seems to be a complex, unpredictable process, Martínez (2018) expects to detect similar processes in each reader's (de)activation of primary SPSs because of their communal nature. This thesis will now turn to research into moral decision-making and the impact of formal education. This way, it will be investigated whether the findings from moral judgment theory can assist with predicting and/or explaining certain SPSs patterns.

Figure 3

The Primary SPS that Dexter Activates
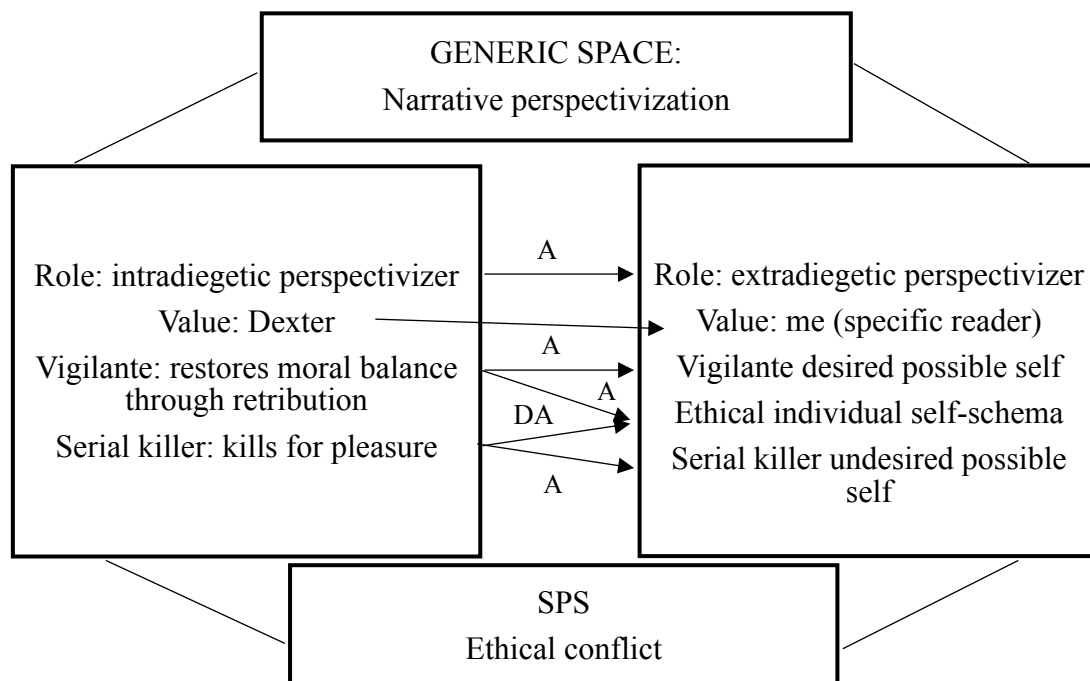
Note. This scheme was based on Martínez (2018, p. 171). *A* denotes activation, while *DA* denotes de-activation.

Neo-Kohlbergian Schema Theory

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lawrence Kohlberg published "two seminal papers," in which he proposed a new psychological approach to moral development. Basing his model on Jean Piaget's conceptual toolkit, Kohlberg described the six moral "stages" that make

up the ethical attitude of an individual (Lapsley, 2006, pp. 37-38). Originally, Piaget's theory was founded on the "distinction between heteronomous and autonomous types of morality," as he believed a child would move to more autonomous forms during adolescence. Kohlberg founded his dissertation on this premise, but he soon realized that the development of moral judgment consisted of more substages than Piaget's "twofold typology" proposed (Tappan et al., 2010, pp. 315, 318).

Consequently, Kohlberg developed a new way of thinking about moral reasoning, describing the process as "the progressive elaboration of a sociomoral perspective across three levels of development" (Lapsley, 2006, p. 46). These three levels each had two substages and were named the *preconventional*, *conventional*, and *post-conventional* level, respectively. The evolution between these stages can be summarized as a change of priorities: self-interest is replaced by respect for social/legal conventions, and later by the supremacy of moral principles as a whole (Lapsley, 2006, pp. 46-47). As a measuring tool, Kohlberg created the *Moral Judgment Interview* (MJI): subjects were presented sixteen moral dilemmas and had to orally respond to them (Tappan et al., 2010, p. 317). This method was in accordance with the contemporary paradigm that moral judgment was a form of "conscious and deliberative decision-making" (Narvaez & Bock, 2002, p. 297). Nowadays, this model has lost its prominent position and has been replaced by the neo-Kohlbergian one.

James R. Rest set this change into motion when he developed a written alternative for the MJI, which he called the *Defining Issues Test* (DIT) (Rest, 1979; Thoma, 2006). Essentially, the moral dilemmas were retained, but instead of verbally answering, the subjects were asked to select three prefabricated responses that fit best with their opinion on the problem. Afterwards, they were asked to rate the validity of all responses on a 5-point scale, from least to most important. It was believed that this method would expose subjects' non-verbal, unconscious cognitive processes. The DIT test's reliability has been

proven to be higher than that of the MJI: the new tool provided more evidence to support Kohlberg's theory, and was able to give more detailed analyses of different groups (Narvaez & Bock, 2002, p. 298; Thoma, 2006, pp. 67-68). Since the DIT focused on non-verbal, unconscious processes, neo-Kohlbergian researchers needed to adapt their theoretical framework.

The essential difference between the Kohlbergian model and the neo-Kohlbergian one is the move from stage theory to *schema theory*. Schemas have become key in research on social cognition, as mentioned in the previous section on the self-concept. Self-schemata, for instance, belong to one subgroup of social schemas, denoted as *person schemas*. The other two groups are called *event schemas* and *role schemas*. All of them include "constructions of how the social world works" (Taylor & Crocker, 1981, p. 91). Neo-Kohlbergian moral schemas are partly based on this premise, adopting the perspective that morality is "a *social* construction […] negotiated among individuals, deliberated, and arrived at through agreement" (Rest et al., 1999a, p. 301, emphasis in original). Via studies in which the DIT test was administered, three moral schemas were recognized and defined: the *personal-interest*, *maintaining norms*, and *post-conventional schema* (see Table 1).

Notwithstanding, social schemas are mainly focused "on how general knowledge structures facilitate information processing," whereas Rest et al. (1999a) also wanted to use moral schemas to track ethical development. The developmental aspect of Kohlberg's theory was thus retained: the schemas visualize the way children's idea of moral justice evolves during their adolescence (p. 297). Despite their similar objectives, schemas and stages differ in five ways: (a) development is seen as a changing distribution between schemas; (b) schemas are more concrete; (c) schemas assess "concepts of social institutions and role systems"; (d) schemas are "cross-cultural" rather than "universal"; (e) schemas prioritize "tacit recognition" (Rest et al., 1999a, p. 298). Hence, moral schemas are distinct theoretical constructs.

Table 1

The Three Neo-Kohlbergian Moral Schemas and Their Features

Schema	Features
Personal-interest schema	Arbitrary, impulsive co-operation Self-focused Advantage to self is primary Survival orientation Negotiated co-operation Scope includes others who are known In-group reciprocity Responsibility orientation
Maintaining norms schema	Need for norms Society-wide view Uniform categorical application Partial society-wide reciprocity Duty orientation
Post-conventional schema	Appeal to an ideal Shareable ideals Primacy of moral ideal Full reciprocity Rights orientation

Note. This table was derived from Narvaez & Bock (2002, p. 307).

After reviewing over 20 cross-cultural studies, Rest (1986) confirmed that moral development is directly linked to age, but the explanation behind this correlation remained vague until the beginning of the 1980s. During that time, researchers concluded, "One of the strongest and most consistent correlates of development in moral judgment has been years of formal education, even more so than chronological age per se" (Rest, 1986, pp. 29-33). Results from Rest and Thoma (1985) revealed that the completion of at least 3 years of higher education translated into higher DIT scores, that is, a more developed form of moral reasoning. The scores of subjects who did not attend university or college generally leveled out. It is important to note that formal education cannot predict every individual's score without fault, but it is a reliable indicator (pp. 711-712). Fourteen years later, Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, and Bebeau (1999b) introduced a revised version of the DIT test, which they named *DIT2*. The differences between the two tests are related to their length and validity, but this thesis will not expound on this topic. It suffices to say both instruments confirm the correlation between

formal education and age, as presented in a wide range of studies (see, Cesur & Topçu, 2010; Doyle & O'Flaherty 2013; Rest, 1979; Rest, 1986; Rest et al., 1999a; Rest & Thoma, 1985; Thoma 1986; Wilhelm, 2004).

The axioms of moral judgment theory can be connected with James Phelan's (2013) framework on the role of ethics in narratives. He observes that narrative ethics can be useful in four domains. With regards to *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, three of those are relevant. First, there is *the ethics of the told*, which focuses on the characters and events in the storyworld. In this case, it concerns Dexter's killing sprees and his struggle with justice. When considering the moral schemas at play, Dexter seems to be torn between his personal-interest schema—killing for pleasure—and his post-conventional one—killing criminals to restore the social order. The second domain, *the ethics of the telling*, contemplates "text-internal matters involving implied authors, narrators, and audiences" (Phelan, 2013). In his novel, Lindsay uses a criminal as first-person narrator rather than a hero, and he employs many SPS linguistic anchors and deictics to ensure narrative engagement. The third relevant category, *the ethics of reading/perception*, is not text-internal but rather concerns "issues about audiences and the consequences of their engagements with narratives" (Phelan, 2013). Readers already have certain ethical frames in their mind when they engage with a narrative, and their moral schemas are thus bound to interfere with their character construct of Dexter. At the same time, their construction of Dexter might trigger changes in their self-concept. This is called *backwards feature projection*. This way, the blend can influence the features of both input spaces, initiating idiosyncratic SPSs (Martínez, 2018).

After reviewing the theoretical foundations of neo-Kohlbergian moral development theory and their pertinence to narratives, the second hypothesis can be refined. With regard to real-life readers' ethical stance towards Dexter, it is predicted high school students will involve more arguments that can be categorized in the personal-interest schema and/or maintaining

norms schema. In other words, they will be more likely to either glorify him, based on self-interest, "he kills people who could otherwise hurt me, and all is well as long as I do not become his victim," or condemn him, based on social norms, "murder is against the law." Master's students, conversely, are predicted to struggle with Dexter's ethical status to a higher extent, resulting in the production of more post-conventional schema's that are based on moral regulations: "murder is morally evil, but if one must kill, morally evil individuals are the preferred victims." They are more probable to be motivated by the knowledge that laws are social constructs and that the ethics behind them are more significant.

Methodology

To measure the activation of real-life readers' SPSs and their ethical stance towards Dexter's character, this study was focused on the collection of qualitative data. Initially, the study set out to interview respondents face-to-face, but because of pragmatic reasons—the number of respondents, the COVID-19 crisis, and the length of the transcription process—a digital questionnaire was used. Ultimately, the survey was sent out to 27 people of which 13 were high school students and 14 were enrolled in a master's program. The first ten respondents of each group[2] were included in the analysis in the next chapter. Every subject was identified with a combination of a letter and number: H denotes high school students, and M denotes master's students; the numbers, from one to ten, were assigned randomly. Their responses were then analyzed qualitatively by considering the frequency of certain words and phrases, in addition to coupling them with storyworld possible selves and ethical attitudes. Both intergroup and intragroup variances were examined.

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[2] They had to have answered all of the questions and met all eligibility criteria. Two respondents in the master's group were eliminated because they recognized the story early on. One respondent in the high school group was excluded because her answers did not respect the minimal word count. In total, 23 responses were collected of which 20 were used in the analysis.

Preliminary Questionnaire

The first step was to create a preliminary questionnaire in Qualtrics to select suitable candidates for this study. More precisely, the homogeneity of the participants needed to be ensured. For this reason, the respondent pool contained Flemish students in the Antwerp region who had Dutch as (one of) their native language(s). The selection of the other variables was based on neo-Kohlbergian research into moral development. First, gender needed to be considered. Stephen J. Thoma's meta-study (1986) found no significant relationship between gender and moral development. By comparison, Sevim Cesur and Mustafa Sami Topçu (2010) noticed that women had moderately higher DIT scores, supporting findings of other studies (Bebeau, 2002; Wilhelm, 2004). To avoid any form of interference, this study only included female respondents. Second, the education level of the respondents needed to be at the two limits of the critical period, as discussed in the literature review (Rest and Thoma, 1985). Correspondingly, one group encompassed third-grade[3] high school students, and the other group were master's students. Previous research established there were no significant relationships between moral development and the student's institute, school, or trajectory (Doyle & O'Flaherty, 2013; King & Mayhew, 2002; Livingstone et al., 2006; Wilhelm, 2004). The only exceptions were psychology and philosophy students, who were excluded from participating in this study (Cesur & Topçu, 2010).

Finally, the literary and cultural background of the respondents was tested. The ideal respondent would have no issues with reading Dutch texts and would like to read crime fiction or had no bias against the genre. Subsequently, the questionnaire contained a question about the respondent's language proficiency and a matrix table with various literary genres, in which they had to select their attitude towards each genre. Similarly, there was another matrix table that contained several American and Flemish series; a respondent should

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[3] In Belgium, the "third grade" refers to the last 2 years of high school, i.e. the 5th and 6th year.

not—or barely—be familiar with the *Dexter* tv series in order to get selected for the next phase. These measures were taken to avoid aschematic or prejudiced readers from participating. Other factors, i.e. religion and parental educational background, were also considered, but seeing that the literature on these topics varied widely[4], this data was solely collected as a backup—in case some trends would be inexplicable. The preliminary survey was distributed to 35 possible respondents, and with a response rate of 86%, 27 respondents were selected for the next phase.

Written Questionnaire on *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*

Respondents were asked to complete a digital questionnaire via Qualtrics for which they had a week. They were informed that the estimated time of completion was set at 75 minutes, and they were asked to retreat to a calm environment where they would not be disrupted and had a reliable internet connection. Moreover, the survey had to be completed in one sitting, to avoid incomplete responses, and there was no back button, to avoid interference from later questions. After reading the conditions of the study, they were required to agree to the digital informed consent form of which they would receive a copy via e-mail. A coupon was allotted after the data collection was completed. The survey consisted of two parts, both in Dutch. In the first part, respondents were asked to read the cover text of the novel and answer some questions about their expectations and preferences. In the next part, each respondent was asked to read the excerpts and answer the questions. The selected passages were retrieved from the novel's official Dutch translation *Dexters duistere dromen* (Lindsay, 2009; see Appendix). Since some of the respondents were vaguely familiar with the tv series, the characters' names

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[4] The influence of religion and parental education on DIT scores is widely contested. Studies of the former have trouble with analyzing religion in one concrete way and accounting for individual and geographical disparities (Chang-Ho et al., 2009; Ho, 2009; Tatum et al., 2013; Wilhelm, 2004). In case of parental education, there might be an indirect link between parent's education and upbringing style, but since this factor is mainly relevant during the respondent's childhood, it could be considered an inherent part of the initial DIT score (Cesur & Topçu, 2010; Lopez et al., 2001; Shen et al., 2013).

might have activated certain associations. For this reason, their names were changed in the extracts[5]. After reading the text carefully, the respondents were asked to complete the exercises of which a condensed version can be found in Figure 6.

A second element of the study that should be discussed is the form of the questions. Previous research has determined that open-ended questions are preferable for analyzing self-schemata and possible selves (Dunkel & Kerpelman, 2006). The first empirical study of SPSs by Martínez and Herman (2020), which is on the verge of being accepted by the journal *Language and Literature*, confirmed the legitimacy of this method. As a result, most questions in the survey were provided in this form. However, it was necessary to include some closed and mixed questions to guide the respondent towards the goals of this study, namely identifying SPSs and giving their ethical opinion on the protagonist. Another advantage of the various question formats, such as the Net Promotor Score and fill-in-the-blanks questions, was that they lightened the mental effort. This also benefited the researcher since it improved the quality of the answers (Van Peer et al., 2007, pp. 109-110). Lastly, the questionnaire's design and content followed the guidelines for qualitative research provided by Willie Van Peer et al. (2007) and was checked via multiple rounds of pilot studies.

Figure 6

A Shortened Version of the Written Questionnaire, Translated from Dutch

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PART 1: AFTER READING THE COVER TEXT
Exercise 1: identifying possible causes for aschematic/prejudiced responses
1.1 On a scale of one to ten, how likely are you to read this book in your spare time? Explain.
1.2 To which genre do you think this book belongs?

Exercise 2: identifying self-schemas and possible selves
Complete the sentences:
2.1 Later I would like to…
2.2 Later I want to avoid to…
2.3 In 5 years, I am…
2.4 In 5 years, the world is…

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[5] Dexter became Robert, Deborah became Emma, Harry became Henry, and LaGuerta became García.

PART II: AFTER READING THE SELECTED PASSAGES
Exercise 3: identifying SPSs
3.1 How would you describe the atmosphere of the story?
3.2 Summarize your first impression of the main character.
3.3 Which emotions does the story activate and why?

Exercise 4: identifying SPSs and ethical judgments
4.1 Write down five to eight words that summarize Robert for you. For each word, add whether this is a positive/neutral/negative feature and provide examples from the text.
4.2 Write down two nouns that describe Robert the most.

Exercise 5: identifying SPSs and ethical judgments
5.1 Re-read the introduction. Did the writing style suck you into the story? Explain.
5.2 Re-read lines 64-68. What do you think the priest says to Robert and why?
5.3 How important is Henry's role in Robert's development?

Exercise 6: identifying SPSs
Complete the sentences:
6.1 I would not like to have Robert as a friend because…
6.2 I would like to have Robert as a friend because…

Exercise 7: identifying the story's impact on readers' SPSs
Complete the sentences (with relation to yourself):
7.1 In the future, our society is…
7.2 In the future, I hope…
7.3 In the future, I fear…

Exercise 8: identifying ethical judgments
8.1 On a scale of one to ten, how trustworthy is the narrator? Explain.
8.2 On a scale of one to ten, how morally good or evil is the main character? Explain.

Exercise 9: identifying SPSs
9.1 Did you gain any new insights about yourself while reading the story?
9.2 Did you recognize the story? If yes, from which source?

Most questions were aimed at the activation of SPSs and moral judgments about the main character. The goal of exercise four, for instance, was to discover which of Dexter's features were most prominent. The second sub-question specifically asked for nouns since pre-testing showed respondents tended to only use adjectives in the first question. It was hypothesized that the respondents would pick the two concepts that were at the forefront of their mind, which could be an indication of the two input spaces that were activated in their minds during the Dexter's character construction. Along the same lines, exercise five provided more interpretative questions in order to look for indications of certain frames of references

and/or SPSs. Question 5.1 explicitly refers to the introduction of the story because this passage received much attention from Martínez. She forecasted that the use of deictics will draw the reader into the story (2018, p. 164). The other two sub-questions asked the readers to fill in certain gaps in the story, drawing on their interpretation of the storyworld.

Empirical Analysis: Results and Discussion

To begin, it should be noted that the selection of extracts is simultaneously a considerable strength and weakness of this study. On the one hand, it was not feasible to provide 20 respondents with a copy of the novel and ask them to read it in its entirety. Some respondents might have refrained from participating due to this substantial time investment. On the other hand, it was impossible to catch the complexity of the novel in the seven-page document displayed to the participants. Nevertheless, the researcher conducted a pilot study to ensure the best possible selection of paragraphs. More precisely, as many aspects of Dexter's life were shown within the shortest possible time frame; the scenes involved Dexter with his family and colleagues, during his murder sprees, and during his police investigations. Therefore, the following results are believed to be valid for the entire novel.

The first part of the questionnaire was designed to gain an insight into the respondents' general background, literary knowledge, and preferences. Question 1.1 indicated that both groups were interested in the novel: group M's average score centered around 6.1, whereas group H ended up with a slightly higher average score of 6.7. In each group, there were three respondents (30%, $N=6$) who gave a score of 5 or less out of 10, balancing each other out. Question 1.2 then showed that all subjects were able to identify the genre of the text as crime fiction and/or a thriller. As a result, they were expected to activate their generic knowledge, which was predicted to have an impact on their responses in the second part of the survey.

Before reading the excerpts, the respondents needed to answer four self-evaluative questions in exercise two. These fill-in-the-blank forms were inserted to assess the self-schemata and possible selves that preoccupied their minds at the time. The answers to questions 2.1 and 2.3—meant to activate desired possible selves—showed one clear trend in both groups: 90% of the respondents (N=18) mentioned professional goals. Even the members of group H often linked their intention to get a higher education with a specific job. Other frequently mentioned aspects were independence[6] (35%, N=7), happiness (25%, N=5), and travelling (15%, N=3). Interestingly, interpersonal relationships were only mentioned by one respondent (5%), whereas interpersonal and social skills were mentioned by 30% (N=6)—of which 25% (N=5) in group H—when asked about what they fear in question 2.2.

Apart from socially related undesired possible selves, three respondents of each group (30%, N=6) dreaded more existential concerns, such as giving up their dreams or leading a boring life. The four respondents who most feared a disturbed work-life balance (20%) can also be included in this category. Lastly, question 2.4 inquired about their perspective on the future of our society. Here, 35% (N=7) could be described as world improvers, that is, those who believe that the future can turn out well. On the other hand, three master's students (15%) had a more pessimistic outlook, claiming that the state of the world will only decline. Five respondents (25%) believed that people should start to focus more on sustainability and the fight against climate change. Ultimately, it can be said that both high school and master's students have similar hopes, fears, and concerns. In part two of the questionnaire, the respondents' reactions to the story were collected for analysis.

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[6] Some respondents explicitly formulated a desire to be fully independent; others focused on the ownership of property.

The Activation of SPSs

Self-Schema SPSs

After reading the excerpts, all respondents activated one or more self-schema SPSs, resulting in a total of thirteen different types (see Table 2). The most frequent one is the "ethical" self (100%, *N*=20), followed by the "world improver" self (95%: *N*=19), the "scientist" self (40%, *N*=8), the "existential searching" self (15%, *N*=3), and the "detective" self (10%, *N*=2). As expected, the story also evoked several idiosyncratic self-schemas: the "distanced" self, the "insecure" self, the "asexual" self, the "camper" self, the "hedonist" self, the "introvert" self, the "sensitive" self, the "suspicious" self, and the "optimistic" self. Out of these nine individual self-schemas, seven were presented by the H group. Consequently, the data implies high school students are more likely to construe Dexter as somebody whose "internal topology" matches "one of the specific reader's self-schemas" (Martínez, 2018, p. 125). This assumption is supported by the fact that the two master's students who activated an idiosyncratic SPS did not refer to the story itself when formulating their self-schemas. More precisely, M8 linked her optimism to her dislike for crime fiction, while M6 described her general take on life as hedonistic. The high school students, by comparison, were more tempted to attribute certain characteristics to Dexter that were not mentioned by the author, for instance, H3 interpreted Dexter as asexual, and H8 noted that he seemed to be an introvert (Q4.1).

In the literature review, it was already discussed that most respondents were likely to activate the "ethical" self-schema SPS. The exact nature of this "ethical" self, however, can be contested since neo-Kohlbergian moral judgment theory illustrated that an individual's ethical attitude can differ widely. Although all respondents activated this SPS, it cannot be ascertained that the features of this self-schema are completely alike. The line between right and wrong for one reader, is not the same as for another reader, just as Dexter's intradiegetic, ethical

perspective might not coincide with that of the extradiegetic reader. Notwithstanding, narratives can function as incentives for self-transformation (Martínez, 2018). A reader can start out with a maintaining norms schema, characterizing Dexter as an evil and cold killer, and finish the story with a shift towards the post-conventional schema, realizing that the law might be imperfect and that Dexter struggles to do the right thing. In that case, not only the reader's self-concept is altered but also their construct of Dexter: it is possible that the serial killer feature is backgrounded and replaced by more positive schemas, temporarily minimizing the ethical conflict. To summarize, the "ethical" self-schema SPS is a hypernym that illustrates the dynamic of SPS projection and the way both input spaces are constantly susceptible to change.

The "world improver" self is another popular SPS type that could be included under the scope of the "ethical" self. *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* seemed to trigger a social consciousness that was less prevalent in the first part of the questionnaire—the number roughly tripled. The "world improver" self was not always directly linked to ethics: eight respondents, for example, mentioned the climate (40%), and two mentioned technology (10%). Nonetheless, the driving force behind these ideas remained the same. Perhaps question 9.1 was too suggestive, forcing the respondents to imagine future society, but the diverging responses to questions 9.2 and 9.3[7] could also mean that ethical considerations provoked the need for perspective-taking on a larger scale.

Another divergence from Martínez's prediction transpired in the domain of Dexter's occupation. Apparently, his profession as a scientist (40%, $N=8$) was much more prominent in the readers' minds than his detective work (10%, $N=2$). This trend was already visible during the pilot studies; at that moment in time, it was theorized that the selection of the passages might have included too many scenes in Dexter's laboratory. As a result, some of these excerpts

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[7] Initially, these two questions set out to arouse self-schemas and possible selves related to the individual, but the majority of the respondents (~75%) construed them to be about society as a whole.

were exchanged for more police-related scenes. It now appears the cause of this discrepancy might have lain in a gap of the theory rather than researcher bias: apparently, real-life readers are more concerned with Dexter's technical skills as a blood spatter analysis than as a detective. Considering that 90% (*N*=18) of the subjects activated a "professional" self in the first part of the questionnaire, it is surprising that only 50% (*N*=10) highlighted Dexter's job in their self-schemas. The next section might explain this trend: Dexter's occupation(s) could still emerge in the form of certain desired possible selves SPSs.

Table 2

The Activated Self-Schemas

Self-schema SPS	№	Respondents	Examples
The "ethical" self	20	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10 H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8, H9, H10	"tegenstrijdigheid" (M1: Q4.2) "Het roept afschuw en afkeer bij me op. Dit komt waarschijnlijk omdat het eerste dat je echt leert over het hoofdpersonage is [*sic*] de moord op de dominee." (M8: Q3.3) "Soms werd ik gedegouteerd door de acties van het hoofdpersonage." (M2: Q3.3) "Het verhaal roept gemixte gevoelens bij me op. Langs de ene kant heb je natuurlijk het begin en hoe bloeddorstig hij daar is. Je hebt ook de betere kant waar hij goed werk levert en op een rare manier (de hond doden) zijn mama wilt helpen." (H5: Q3.1)
The "world improver" self	19	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10 H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H7, H8, H9, H10	"[In de toekomst hoop ik] iets zinvols met mijn leven te kunnen doen. Ik hoop in mijn leven iets te kunnen doen wat een positieve impact zal hebben op anderen. Dat moet niet veel zijn, maar toch iets." (M9: Q7.2) "[In de toekomst is onze maatschappij] hopelijk verbeterd op het vlak van racisme en samenhorigheid. Solidariteit, daar gaat het over. Dit is vaak nog te weinig ingebakken bij de Belgen en dit vind ik

			zeer jammer. Ik hoop hier echt verandering in te zien." (H7: Q7.1)
The "scientist" self	8	M2, M3, M4, M7, M9, M10 H1, H10	"een gewone saaie onderzoeker" (M10: Q3.1) "Analist." (M2, M7, M9: Q4.2)
The "existential, searching" self	3	M5, M6, M9	"Hij is wel heel zoekend en alleen en kan zeker steun gebruiken." (H5: Q6.2) "[W]orstelend (met zichzelf), positief: toch is hij zich wel bewust dat hij mensen doodt en beseft hij dat het niet normaal is." (M6: Q4.1)
The "detective" self	2	H4, H6	"Rechercheur." (H4: Q4.2) "Agent." (H6: Q4.2)
The "distanced" self	1	H8	"Hij is beleefd, maar blijft meestal op een afstandje van mensen die hij niet kent." (H8: Q3.2)
The "insecure" self	1	H3	"[O]nzeker, neutraal, het gesprek met Henry wanneer hij 14 jaar oud is." (H3: Q4.1)
The "asexual" self	1	H3	"[A]nders, neutraal, het idee van seks staat hem niet aan, volgens mij is hij aseksueel." (H3: Q4.1)
The "camper" self	1	H6	"[Ik zou Robert wel als vriend willen, omdat] hij van kamperen houdt." (H6: Q6.2)
The "hedonist" self	1	M6	"Daarom geniet ik van elk moment." (M6: Q7.3)
The "introvert" self	1	H8	"Hij lijkt mij introvert, zonder echt mensenschuw te zijn." (H8: Q3.2)
The "sensitive" self	1	H1	"Ik ben juist een heel emotionele persoon. Ik praat graag over mijn gevoelens en luister ook graag naar mijn vrienden hun problemen." (H1: Q6.1)
The "suspicious" self	1	H2	"Dit verhaal is nog maar eens bewijs dat je nooit iemand volledig kent." (H2: Q3.3)
The "optimistic" self	1	M8	"Dat ik vrij goed en optimistisch ingesteld ben en dat dat misschien de reden is waarom ik niet graag naar misdaadseries en thrillers kijk." (M8: Q9.1)

Note. Each row describes one type of SPS with the total number of respondents who activated

it, the specific respondents' labels, and non-exhaustive samples taken from the responses.

Desired Possible Self SPSs

All of those surveyed reported the activation of multiple desired possible selves SPSs, with 18 different types (see Table 3). The "vigilante" self (70%, *N*=14), the "intelligent" self (70%, *N*=14), and the "precise" self (50%, *N*=10) made up the top three, closely followed by the "loyal" self (40%: *N*=8). Other shared desired SPS included the "social" (25%, *N*= 5), "emphatic", "patient", "charming" (20%, *N*=4), "honest" (15%, *N*=3), "brave", "funny," and "happy" (10%, *N*=2) self. In addition, there are seven more idiosyncratic desired SPSs. Almost three quarters of the participants (70%, *N*=14) were able to identify and even relate to Dexter's vigilante side. One respondent (M1), who repeatedly insisted on the importance of empathy and perspective-taking, even announced that she would be willing to help selecting his victims:

> as long as we are in this fictional world, I would like to help select which people deserve to die. [dan zou ik misschien, als we dan toch in deze fictiewereld zitten, wel graag mee bepalen welke mensen het verdienen om te sterven.] (Q6.2)

Yet, she stressed this would only apply to life in the storyworld, revealing she was still aware of the ontological borders between reality and fiction, thus supporting insights from possible worlds and deictic shift theory.

Another dominant desired SPS was the "intelligent" self. Dexter's intelligence was explained by the respondents in three separate ways: (a) he was smart enough not to get caught for his murders; (b) he was able to solve murders via logical thinking; (c) he had a large amount of scientific knowledge. Despite their different meanings, all these definitions matched with the input spaces Martínez described: the serial killer and the detective. Correspondingly, it is recommended to include this feature in Dexter's basic blending network. The exact nature of this SPS could be contested since it is probable that intelligence is a feature that the respondents both recognized in themselves—triggering a self-schema—and aimed to obtain—triggering a possible self. Most of their answers were formulated in either a neutral or positive way, but

without asking for more clarification, it was impossible to know in what way this characteristic related to their self-concept. For this reason, it was decided to coalesce all responses into one desired SPS, prioritizing frequency rather than category. This processing problem is both a fallacy of Martínez's classification system and of classification systems in general.

Table 3

The Activated Desired Possible Selves

Desired possible self SPS	Nº	Respondents	Examples
The "vigilante" self	14	M1, M2, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10 H3, H5, H7, H9, H10	"[Ik zou Robert wel als vriend willen hebben, omdat] hij, in tegenstelling tot een doorsnee moordenaar, eigenlijk een weldoener is voor deze wereld. Hij rijmt [*sic*] niet alleen boosdoeners van deze aarde, maar lost daarbij ook nog eens andere misdaden op." (H10: Q6.2) "Ik zou zijn vriend willen zijn om samen te zoeken naar een oplossing. En als die er niet is dan zou ik misschien, als we dan toch in deze fictiewereld zitten, wel graag mee bepalen welke mensen het verdienen om te sterven. (Enkel in de fictiewereld hoor!)" (M1: Q6.2) "Wreker." (H3: Q4.2)
The "intelligent" self	14	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M7, M9, M10 H2, H4, H5, H7, H9, H10	"Hij is klaarblijkelijk slim om zijn moorden zo uit te voeren dat [*sic*] niet gepakt wordt." (M1: Q3.2) "Intelligent, positief, in de zaken die hij onderzoekt ziet hij dingen waar anderen nog niet aan denken." (M3: Q4.1) "[D]oordenkend, positief, [h]ij denkt logisch na over de dood van een slachtoffer en linkt hier mogelijke oorzaken aan." (H4: Q4.1)
The "precise" self	10	M1, M2, M4, M7, M8, M9, M10 H5, H6, H9	"[Ik zou Robert wel als vriend willen, omdat] hij zijn taken zo precies als mogelijk [*sic*] uitvoert. Als je hem dus iets zou vragen zou hij het zo snel mogelijk en zo grondig mogelijk uitvoert. Dit is iets wat ik kan appreciëren aan [*sic*] mensen." (M8: Q6.2)

			"Nauwkeurig, positief, […] hij voert zijn werk 'keurig' uit en zorgt ervoor dat alles tot in de puntjes in orde is." (M1: Q4.1) "Ordelijk, positief." (H9: Q4.1)
The "loyal" self	8	M2, M6, M7, M9, M10 H7, H8, H10	"Ik denk als hij eenmaal iemand kan vertrouwen, dat hij echt alles voor je zou doen." (H7: Q6.2) "[F]amiliegezind, positief, [h]et moment dat zijn zusje hem iets vraagt, staat hij er meteen." (H10: Q4.1)
The "social" self	5	M6, M7 H2, H4, H7	"Vriendelijk, positief, Robert is tegen iedereen enorm joviaal." (M7: Q4.1) "[Ik zou Robert wel als vriend willen hebben, omdat] hij mij echt een leuke kerel lijkt." (H7: Q6.2)
The "emphatic" self	4	M2, M6, M7, M9	"[H]ij zegt dat hij geen gevoelens heeft maar hij heeft het hondje vermoord om zijn zieke adoptiemoeder rust te geven en hij heeft op zijn 14 nog geen mensen vermoord omdat hij niet wil dat zijn adoptieouders teleurgesteld zijn. Misschien heeft hij toch meer gevoel dan hij denkt?"(M2: Q4.1) "Hij houdt enorm veel van zijn gezin, het gezin dat hem heeft opgenomen." (M6: Q6.2)
The "patient" self	4	M9 H2, H6, H10	"[G]eduldig, positief, hij wacht het perfecte moment voor zijn moorden, hoe lang het ook duurt." (H10: Q4.1) "Geduldig, positief, Robert gaat niet overhaast te werk, hij observeert lang genoeg voor hij toeslaat." (M9: Q4.1)
The "charming" self	4	M6, M7 H1, H5	"[Ik zou Robert wel als vriend willen hebben, omdat] hij charmant lijkt." (H5: Q6.2)
The "honest" self	3	H3, H4, H8	"Hij volgens mij wel altijd eerlijk zal zijn en zal zeggen waar het op staat." (H3: Q6.2) "Eerlijk, positief, hij spreekt eerlijk over zijn 'stem' in zijn hoofd met zijn stiefvader." (H4: Q4.1)
The "brave" self	2	M4 H3	"Het is niet geaccepteerd in onze maatschappij wat hij doet, maar het vereist veel moed om zoiets te doen." (M4: Q8.2)

			"Ik hoop ook dat mensen meer zullen opkomen voor hun waarden." (H3: Q7.2)
The "funny" self	2	H2, M6	"Hij heeft gevoel voor humor." (H2: Q6.2)
The "happy" self	2	H5, H6	"[In de toekomst hoop ik] gelukkig te zijn." (H6: Q7.2)
The "accepted" self	1	M5	"Omdat hij zo bepaald is door de zinnen van zijn stiefvader, lijkt het ook dat hij zoekt naar erkenning, aanmoediging en liefde ondanks dat hij het niet voelt." (M5: Q3.2)
The "physically strong" self	1	H2	"Sterk, positief, hij kan de dominee makkelijk overheersen en in elkaar slaan." (H2: Q4.1)
The "clear-sighted self"	1	H3	"Hij ziet alles hoe het is." (H3: Q6.2)
The "professional" self	1	H4	"Hij […] heeft een goede job." (H4: Q6.2)
The "apathic" self	1	H8	"Gevoelloos, positief, dit maakt hem volgens mij extra geschikt voor zijn job, bij het helpen oplossen van moorden." (H8: Q4.1)
The "child-loving" self	1	H7	"[K]indervriend, positief, hij kan er niet tegen wat de dominee met de kinderen heeft gedaan." (H7: Q4.1)

Undesired Possible Self SPSs

In every respondent's mind, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* triggered undesired SPSs, with a total of 22 types (see Table 4). Similar to the "ethical" self-schema SPS, every reader activated the "serial killer" self. The popularity of this SPS is entirely in accordance with Martínez's expectations, seeing that primary SPSs are "likely to be shared by communities of readers due to the socio-cultural pervasiveness of their main matching features" (2018, p. 170). Next in line is the "apathic" self, a type activated by 80% (*N*=16) of the subjects. The third place is reserved for the "regressive world" self (75%, *N*=15), referring to readers' fears for a bleak future. The "unreliable" self follows closely behind with 70% (*N*=14), and the last type that is activated by just over half of the respondents is the "traumatized orphan" self (55%, *N*=11).

In Figure 1 of the literature review, it was shown that the hard-boiled detective is defined by his ability to distance himself from emotions, whereas the serial killer is not able to

feel at all. Martínez (2018) believes Dexter leans towards the former, but this study points towards the latter interpretation. More than three quarters of the readers (80%, *N*=16) activated an undesired "apathic" self, and they maintained that the protagonist is emotionless. Only four master's students (20%) generated a desired "empathic" self when considering Dexter of which three also activated the "apathic" self. Hence, the master's group tended to create more conflicting interpretations about Dexter's emotional state. It should be noted that the readers' interpretations might alter if they read the entire novel, but even so, this issue is still being contested by Dexter scholars as well (Beeler, 2002; Buchbinder & McGuire, 2013; Riches & French, 2002; Santalauria, 2010).

Another peculiar contrast between the desired and undesired possible selves SPSs concerns the "vigilante" self. The majority of the readers coveted vigilance (70%, *N*=14), but one of them also classified this trait in her undesired SPS. In the first part of the questionnaire, H9 wrote that she hoped to become a lawyer and that she wanted the world to be fairer. These values were reflected in her opinion on Dexter's behavior and prompted strong emotions: "It makes me angry because he wants to take matters into his own hands" ["Ik word hier boos van, want hij wil het recht in eigen handen nemen"] (Q3.3). For her, Dexter's sense of justice was simultaneously his most redeeming quality and his downfall: "[I would have liked to have Robert as a friend because] he is fair" [[Ik zou Robert wel als vriend willen hebben, omdat] hij rechtvaardig is. Hij neemt het graag op voor de andere"] (Q6.1). Another high school student (H2) interpreted vigilance in a negative manner as well, arguing that she did not believe in the principle of an eye for an eye (Q9.1). These two subjects thus viewed the "vigilante" self as something to be avoided.

The reliability of Dexter was another point of discussion. A little over two thirds of the respondents generated an undesired "unreliable" self (70%, *N*=14). Respondent M3 had negative feelings about Dexter's double life and reported that "he is an obedient researcher

during the day and a cold-blooded killer at night" ["overdag is hij een brave onderzoeker en 's nachts een kille moordenaar"] (Q4.1). Remarkably, most of the dualities the readers referred to concern his daily job as a researcher versus his nightly killing sprees. Another element was the social aspect: "In my opinion, he has a knack for manipulating the truth and other people" ["Hij is volgens mij goed in het manipuleren van de waarheid en van andere mensen"] (H2: Q6.1). Dexter's alias, as a normal citizen and scientist, was something readers focused on, but this element was not included in Martínez's model. Yet, serial killers are infamous for their sense of normalcy, and so, this characteristic should be included.

The topic of question 8.1 also centered around (un)reliability: respondents were asked to rate Dexter's trustworthiness as a narrator on a 10-point scale, one being unreliable and ten being reliable. Notably, only nine respondents (45%) gave Dexter a score of five or less, and thus it seems readers were able to distinguish Dexter's character from his abilities as a narrator. Respondent H2 is a prime example. She activated an "unreliable" undesired possible self, as exemplified in the previous paragraph. When considering his narratological reliability, conversely, she rated Dexter with an 8 out of 10. The same goes for H3 who rated Dexter with a 9 and argued,

> He narrates what he is going through himself, and since he says he has no real "feelings," he does not have the tendency to tell (unnecessary) lies. Everything is. [Hij vertelt zelf wat hij meemaakt, aangezien hij zegt dat hij geen echte 'gevoelens' heeft, heeft hij ook niet de neiging om (onnodige) leugens te vertellen. Alles is.] (Q8.1)

These disparities show that some respondents were able to distinguish between Dexter's role as a perspectivizer and as a character. The fact that most respondents did not seems to be a quintessential characteristic of first-person narratives:

> First-person narrative is an interesting test bed because it is likely to trigger conflicting expectations and interpretations: on the one hand, a narrator who relates his or her own

experience may seem more approachable than an external narrator […] On the other hand, if the narrator appears unconventional or distant in social and/or ethical terms, he or she may be suspected of unreliability, and therefore the audience may be encouraged to take a more distanced stance towards him or her. (Van Lissa et al., 2016, p. 48)

Martínez (2018) seems to agree with this duality and reflects on the debates within Dexter studies: "Critics in all traditions agree that Dexter is an unreliable narrator, but, in my view, they tend to confuse intradiegetic untrustworthiness with unreliability as a teller" (p. 167). The findings of this empirical analysis seem to support her hypothesis: most real-life readers conflate Dexter's character's construct with his role as a narrator, but there are some respondents who are able to differentiate the two.

Table 4

The Activated Undesired Possible Selves

Undesired possible self SPS	№	Respondents	Examples
The "serial killer" self	20	M1-M10 H1-H10	"Moordenaar." (M1, M3, M7, M9, H2, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8, H10: Q4.2) "Psychopaat." (M2, M8, H1, H2: Q4.2) "Moordlustig, negatief." (M5: Q4.1)
The "apathic" self	16	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M7, M8, M9 H1, H2, H3, H4, H7, H8, H9, H10	"Hij geen gevoelens heeft en dus ook niet weet wat liefde is. Hij zegt wel dat Emma vriendelijk is maar ze is zijn stiefzus, ze zijn samen opgegroeid sinds hij 4 zou zijn geweest... Ergens vind ik het erg 'fake', hij kan er natuurlijk niet veel aan doen." (H3: Q6.1) "Het hoofdpersonage heeft geen gevoelens en voelt zich alleen even gelukkig als hij iemand heeft vermoord." (M7: Q3.2) "[H]ij me een heel afstandelijke en emotieloze persoon lijkt. Ik ben juist een heel emotionele persoon. Ik praat graag over mijn gevoelens en luister ook graag naar mijn vrienden hun problemen." (H1: Q6.1)

The "regressive world" self	15	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M7, M8, M10 H2, H3, H4, H7, H8, H9, H10	"[In de toekomst vrees ik] dat er enkel meer verdeeldheid zal zijn. Ik vrees dat de aarde helemaal op zal zijn omdat mensen (nog) egoïstischer zijn geworden. Ik vrees dat mensen enkel nog haat voelen en verzuurd zullen zijn. Ik vrees dat de aarde niet lang meer zal meegaan." (M2: Q7.3) "[In de toekomst vrees ik] dat er weinig zal verbeteren ten opzichte van vandaag de dag. Ik vrees dat we met evenveel oorlogen en onmenselijke toestanden te maken zullen blijven krijgen." (H10: Q7.3)
The "unreliable" self	14	M1, M2, M3, M5, M6, M7, M8, M10 H2, H3, H4, H8, H9, H10	"[A]nders, negatief, overdag is hij een brave onderzoeker en 's nachts een kille moordenaar." (M3: Q4.1) "Hij lijkt zich anders te gedragen bij andere mensen dan hoe hij zich echt voelt." (M5: Q3.2) "Hij is volgens mij goed in het manipuleren van de waarheid en van andere mensen en dat zijn niet meteen de eigenschappen die ik zou willen in een vriend." (H2: Q6.1)
The "traumatized orphan" self	11	M1, M6, M7, M9, M10 H1, H3, H4, H5, H7, H10	"Hij heeft de drang om mensen te vermoorden, deze drang zou te verklaren zijn door een gebeurtenis in zijn verleden." (H4: Q3.2) "Het hoofdpersonage heeft op jonge leeftijd iets traumatisch meegemaakt. Hierdoor wil hij moorden." (M6: Q3.2) "Het personage heeft een zwaar trauma opgelopen toen hij jong was en heeft dit nooit verwerkt. Hij is te laat geholpen geweest en dat vind ik wel redelijk zielig." (H7: Q3.2)
The "lonely" self	6	M1, M3, M5, M6 H5, H10	"Het hoofdpersonage is eenzaam, omdat hij weinig dichte familie of vrienden heeft." (M3: Q3.2) "[E]enzaam, negatief/neutraal, Hij heeft, buiten Emma, niemand in zijn leven. Echter omwille van zijn onbekwaamheid om iets te voelen, denk ik dat dit voor

			Robbert [*sic*] zelf niet zo een probleem is (neutraliteit)." (H10: Q4.1)
The "mentally ill" self	5	M8, M10 H1, H4, H10	"Hij lijkt me een mentaal ziek persoon, dat wordt ook duidelijk gemaakt door de flashback naar het gesprek met zijn adoptievader Henry." (M8: Q3.2) "Bipolair." (M10: Q3.2) "Een gebroken man met een twisted mind." (H10: Q3.2)
The "violent" self	5	M2, M3, M9, M10 H2	"[G]ewelddadig, negatief, hij vermoordt de dominee." (M2: Q4.1) "Sadistisch, negatief, 'moorden geeft me een goed gevoel' (regel 73), hij doet mensen pijn en haalt daar plezier uit." (H2: Q4.1)
The "adopted" self	4	M6, M10 H3, H9	"Hij heeft een goede band met zijn adoptiefamilie." (H3: Q3.2) "[H]ij voelt zich nog altijd wat buitengesloten in het gezin waarin hij is opgegroeid sinds hij 4 jaar was: kampeert met je vader. Ook als hij alleen maar je adoptievader is." (M6: Q4.1)
The "possible victim" self	4	M9 H4, H6, H10	"Als ik zou weten dat hij een moordenaar is, zou ik me onveilig voelen." (M9: Q6.1) "Hij erg moordlustig is en ik me niet veilig zou voelen als ik dit wist." (H4: Q6.1)
The "calculating" self	3	M2, M3, M6	"[B]erekend, positief maar ook negatief in zijn toepassing." (M2: Q4.1)
The "Other" self	3	M4, H3, H4	"[W]ereldvreemd/raar, negatief, het idee van seks vindt hij walgelijk maar dit is het meest natuurlijke dat in de mens (een zoogdier) zit." (M4: Q4.1) "Anders, negatief, zijn stiefvader beschrijft hem als anders." (H4: Q4.1)
The "arrogant" self	3	M8, M10 H6	"Omdat hij ook nog eens arrogant overkomt, vind ik het hoofdpersonage niet echt leuk." (M8: Q3.2) "Buiten het hele moordenaar zijn, lijkt hij me ook nog eens vrij arrogant. Ik zou niet echt met hem willen rondhangen." (H6: Q3.2)
The "transient" self	2	M6	"[In de toekomst vrees ik] dat mensen om me heen er mogelijks van de ene op de

		H6	andere dag niet meer kunnen zijn." (M6: Q9.1) "[In de toekomst vrees ik] jong dood te gaan." (H6: Q9.1)
The "vigilante" self	2	H2, H9	"Ik word hier boos van, want hij wil het recht in eigen handen nemen." (H9: Q3.3) "Ik wist al over mezelf dat ik het niet eens kan zijn met het principe 'oog om oog, tand om tand' en dat ik het vermoorden van mensen dus niet oké vind. Dit verhaal is daar een bevestiging van." (H2: Q9.1)
The "unfriendly" self	2	H3, H6	"[N]iet vriendelijk, negatief, hij zegt dat Garcìa een idioot is omdat ze hem mag, hij is niet per se gemeen maar zeker ook niet altijd even vriendelijk." (H3: Q4.1)
The "perfectionist" self	1	M9	"[In de toekomst vrees ik] nog steeds te perfectionistisch te zijn. Ik steek dikwijls teveel [*sic*] tijd in bepaalde (op dit moment: schoolse) zaken. Daardoor durf ik wel eens leukere dingen (afspreken met vrienden, een momentje vrijmaken voor mezelf) aan de kant te schuiven. Ik vrees die slechte gewoonte nooit te zullen afleren." (M9: Q7.3)
The "transfixed" self	1	M2	"Misschien dat ik vastzit in mijn eigen gedachtegang en de manier waarop ik keuzes maak ook niet betrouwbaar is." (M2: Q9.1)
The "accomplice" self	1	H7	"[Ik zou Robert niet als vriend willen hebben, omdat] ik misschien zelf zou geassocieerd worden met de moorden die hij begaat. Ik zou mezelf ook zeer schuldig voelen moest ik weten dat hij dit doet en ik er niks aan verander." (H7: Q6.1)
The "observant" self	1	M7	"[Ik zou Robert niet als vriend willen hebben, omdat…] hij lijkt iemand die ook alle personen rondom hem in de gaten houdt." (M7: Q6.1)
The "addicted" self	1	H6	"[In de toekomst vrees ik] verslaafd te raken aan alcohol." (H6: Q7.3)
The "unhappy" self	1	H5	"[In de toekomst vrees ik] ongelukkig te zijn." (H5: Q7.3)

Past Possible Self SPSs

Only two respondents (10%), both from the high school group, activated a past possible self SPS (see Table 5). For respondent H1, Dexter's position as a scientist reminded her of her earlier ambition to work in a laboratory. It could be argued that her "scientist" self is actually a new kind of SPS: a *past desired possible self SPS*. When she was younger, she aspired to be a scientist—a desired possible self; now, her goals have changed, so she is looking back at a previous version of herself—a past possible self. The other student (H10) reported on another fascinating past possible self SPS, which was denoted the "damaged child" self. She started thinking about the ways her life could have turned out differently if she had had another upbringing. This is an even more complex case since this reader reflects on what could have happened in her past and not what has actually happened. In this way, her SPS could be specified as an *undesired past possible self*. Note the difference in word order with the first new category: here, the focus lies on the negative value instead of the temporal aspect. She could have turned out abnormally as well—an undesired possible self—if her parents had raised her inappropriately—a past possible self. In short, the two activated past possible selves can be considered anomalies that question the perimeters of Martínez's SPS typology.

Table 5

The Activated Past Possible Selves

Past possible self SPS	№	Respondents	Examples
The "scientist" self	1	H1	"[Ik zou Robert wel als vriend willen hebben, omdat] hij in een laboratorium werkt. Ik ben heel lang geïnteresseerd geweest in labowerk tot op het niveau dat ik het zelf later ook wilde gaan doen." (H1: Q6.2)
The "damaged child" self	1	H10	"Ja, op een bepaalde manier ga je toch nadenken over de manier waarop je verleden je helemaal kan veranderen. Ok [*sic*] hoe mensen in je omgeving, vaak je ouders, veel kwaad kunnen doen in de vorm van 'opvoeding.'" (H10: Q9.1)

Past SPSs

Approximately half of the respondents (45%, *N*=9) experienced a connection with one or more past SPSs (see Table 6). Master's students (70%, *N*=14) activated more past SPSs than high school students (20%, *N*=4). Out of the six types, the "superhero comics" past SPS was shared the most among these nine readers (33,3%, *N*=3). Even though M4, M7, and M10 all associated the story with this genre, their explanations differed remarkably. On the one hand, there is M10 who saw Dexter's double life as a parallel with that of Superman—whose everyday alias is Clark Kent. On the other hand, M4 linked Dexter with the Joker, the main antagonist in the Batman comics. These different interpretations are a sign of Dexter's ethical elusiveness; while comics are known for their clear fight between good and evil, in the case of Dexter, the choice is not absolute. M7 then compared *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*'s storyline with the one of the tv series *Arrow* (Nutter et al., 2012-2020), foregrounding the vigilante aspect. This could then be linked to the second most recurrent past SPS: the "Robin Hood" (15%, *N*=3). This association was expected since the cover text uses this reference to describe Dexter.

Despite the fact that the "psychological suspense" and the "serial killer fiction" past SPSs were more frequent, these genre echoes were expected. Instead, it is more interesting to delve into the idiosyncratic past SPSs of M2 and M5. At the beginning of the questionnaire, each respondent was asked to identify the genre of the text, yet M2 was the only one who explicitly repeated her generic awareness in the second part of the survey. Her first impression of the story focused on the dark atmosphere and violent nature of the story, which then evoked the detective novel frame:

> The atmosphere seems dangerous, dark, and it sometimes makes me feel as if I am reading a detective novel. [De sfeer lijkt me gevaarlijk, duister en het geeft me soms het gevoel dat ik een detective roman [*sic*] aan het lezen ben.] (M2: Q3.1)

The story did not affect any other respondents in this way, apart from M5 who had her own interpretation of the genre. She activated a "fantasy fiction" self, explaining that the story had many Gothic and/or Romantic elements combined with more realistic scenes (Q3.1). For her, the introduction immediately exposed Dexter as a vampire:

> a vampire-like atmosphere is portrayed via the full moon, the murderous creature that is inside him, and the howling (reference to a werewolf.) [het schetst een vampierachtige sfeer met de volle maan, het wezen dat in hem zit om te moorden en het gejank (verwijzing naar weerwolf.)] (Q5.1)

Curiously, M5 did not show any affinity with the fantasy genre during the preliminary questionnaire, but she graduated with a master's degree in Linguistics and Literature last year, which might explain her impressions. Respondents M2 and M5 are prime examples of the way self-schemas and possible selves can alter readers' literary experiences.

Table 6

The Activated Past SPS

Past SPS	№	Respondents	Examples
"Superhero comics" past SPS	3	M4, M7, M10	"Bipolair. Langs de ene kant een koelbloedige rechtvaardige moordenaar. Langs de andere kant een gewone saaie onderzoeker. (supermanachtig)." (M10: Q3.2) "Het is niet volledig hetzelfde maar de verhaallijn lijkt gelijkaardig met series zoals 'Arrow.'" (M7: Q9.2) "Een beetje 'The Joker' achtig [*sic*], waarin je meegaat met het verhaal maar dat je toch die diepe, psychopatische ondertoon heel de tijd voelt. Koude sfeer, er zullen weinig gevoelens/liefde in het verhaal voorkomen." (M4: Q3.1)
"Robin Hood" past SPS	3	M9, M10 H7	"Ja, Robin Hood." (H7: Q9.2) "Instinctief weet je dat moordenaars slecht zijn, maar als ze worden neergezet als een soort Robin Hood die enkel de slechten

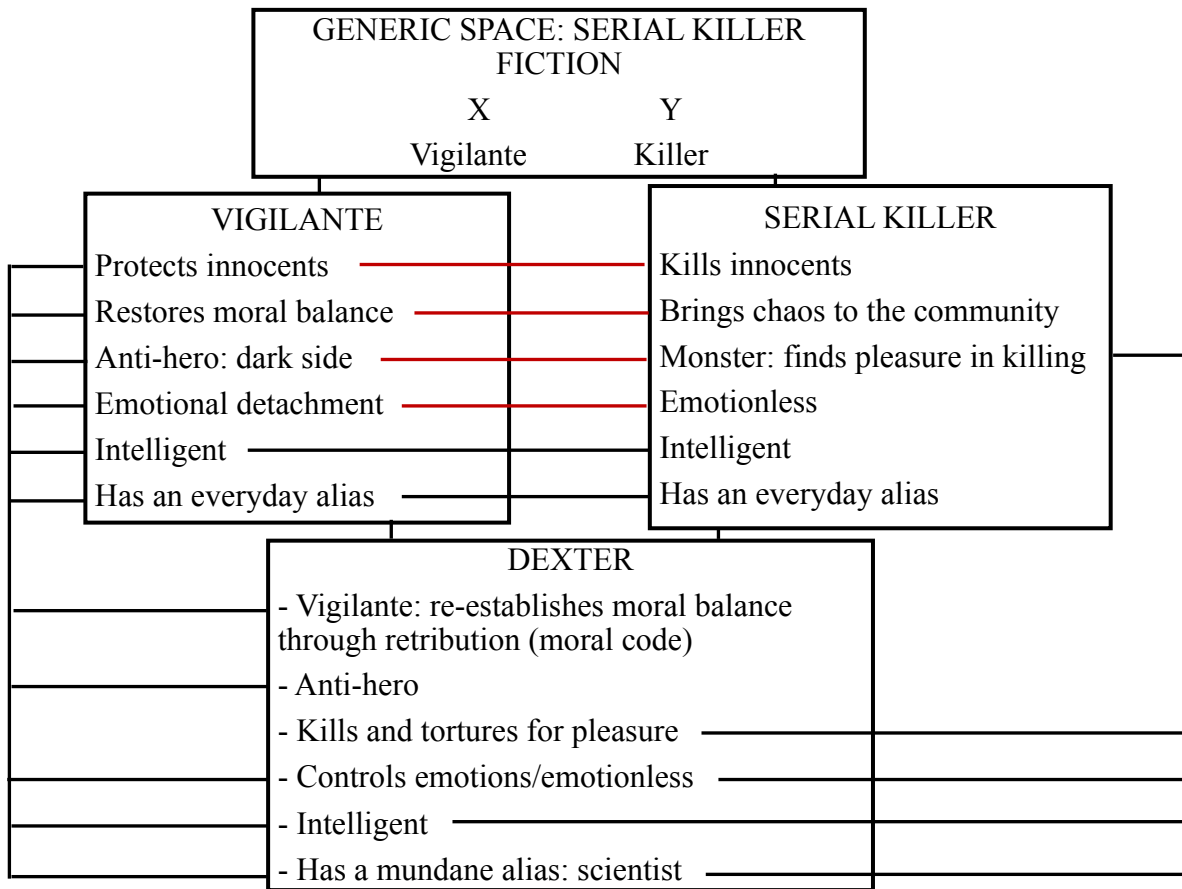|			aanpakt dan wordt het opeens veel moeilijker om je van die persoon te distantiëren.” (M9: Q3.3)
The "psychological thriller" past SPS	2	M7, M9	"Ik denk dat ik al genoeg boeken van hetzelfde genre heb gelezen om niet direct tot nieuwe inzichten te komen. Ik merk dus dezelfde ideeën op die ik meestal heb. Zo probeer ik vaak begrip te krijgen voor de beweegredenen van het hoofdpersonage en probeer ik uit te vissen hoe dit komt." (M7: Q9.1) "Ik had al eens een boek gelezen of film/serie gezien waarbij er ook een twist was tussen de morele goedheid/slechtheid van een bepaald personage, en had daar ook wel dezelfde ideeën over als die ik nu heb opgeschreven." (M9: Q9.1)
The "serial killer fiction" past SPS	2	M6 H5	"Hij niet is wie mensen denken dat hij is. Hij is leuk, grappig, sociaal, charmant en waarschijnlijk ook knap." (M6: Q6.1)
The "fantasy fiction" past SPS	1	M5	"Alludeert naar de Gothic, vampier, romantische sfeer (met de maan, doden en anders zijn). De sfeer is dus zowel realistisch (met de gesprekken en het werk), maar de verbeelding van Robert zorgt er dan weer voor dat het dit donker, romantisch kantje heeft." (M5: Q3.1) "Vampier, ridder" (M5: Q4.2) "Ja, het schetst een vampierachtige sfeer met de volle maan, het wezen dat in hem zit om te moorden en het gejank (verwijzing naar weerwolf). Zo word je echt meegezogen en zie je meteen dat hij niet zo maar een 'moordenaar' is." (M5: Q5.1)
The "detective novel" self	1	M2	"Het heeft een mysterieuze sfeer, maar ook een zeer gewelddadige in sommige fragmenten. De sfeer lijkt me gevaarlijk, duister en het geeft me soms het gevoel dat ik een detective roman aan het lezen ben." (M2: Q3.1)

Provisional Conclusions

Martínez's storyworld possible selves theory has proven to be a successful tool to analyze readers' emotional and cognitive responses to *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*. All of the subjects activated self-schema SPSs, desired possible self SPSs, and undesired possible self SPSs. In terms of numbers, the undesired SPSs outranked the other categories, with a total of 22 different types of which six were SPS slipnets. This was expected when dealing with a serial killer protagonist. Nonetheless, the desired SPSs also ended up with a high number of types (18). As Martínez predicted, many respondents activated a desired "vigilante" self which balanced out the undesired "murderous psychopath" self. Additionally, the story triggered an "ethical" self, resulting in a clash between the readers' morals and those of the protagonist. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, it was not possible to determine the specific effects of any backwards feature projection that may have taken place. Nevertheless, Martínez correctly assumed readers' SPSs would be presented in a double scope network.

According to the results, her predictions regarding Dexter's character construction, need several alterations, which are illustrated in Figure 4. First of all, one of the input spaces does not correspond with real-life reader's interpretations. Only one respondent (5%) activated a "detective" SPS. Consequently, this study suggests to delete the hard-boiled detective label of the first input space and replace it by the vigilante, which was a more frequently activated SPS. Second, two characteristics should be added to both input spaces: intelligence and a mundane alias. These features include elements of Dexter's occupation, whether it is as a blood spatter analyst, researcher, or scientist. Additionally, this duality fits with the previously mentioned "superhero comics" past SPS. When these two changes are applied, Dexter's blend becomes more nuanced and tailored to real-life readers' perceptions.

Figure 4

The Adapted Basic Blending Network for Dexter's Character Construction


```
                    ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
                    │   GENERIC SPACE: SERIAL KILLER   │
                    │            FICTION               │
                    │      X              Y            │
                    │   Vigilante       Killer         │
                    └─────────────────────────────────┘

   ┌──────────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
   │        VIGILANTE         │      │       SERIAL KILLER          │
   │ Protects innocents       │──────│ Kills innocents              │
   │ Restores moral balance   │──────│ Brings chaos to the community│
   │ Anti-hero: dark side     │──────│ Monster: finds pleasure in killing│
   │ Emotional detachment     │──────│ Emotionless                  │
   │ Intelligent              │      │ Intelligent                  │
   │ Has an everyday alias    │      │ Has an everyday alias        │
   └──────────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────────────┘

         ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
         │                  DEXTER                     │
         │ - Vigilante: re-establishes moral balance   │
         │ through retribution (moral code)            │
         │ - Anti-hero                                 │
         │ - Kills and tortures for pleasure           │
         │ - Controls emotions/emotionless             │
         │ - Intelligent                               │
         │ - Has a mundane alias: scientist            │
         └────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Note. The labels and features of Martínez's (2018) input spaces were changed. The black lines highlight their connections, and the red lines highlight their differences.

Ethical Judgments about Dexter

Now that the renewed blend has been established, this thesis will investigate whether formal education made a difference in the respondents' opinions on the protagonist's morality. The questionnaire was in part designed to assess the subjects' ethical stance on Dexter. Via open questions, it was expected that their responses would indirectly indicate their moral perspective on the story. The activation of specific SPSs was another indicator, and some of these could be linked to the neo-Kohlbergian moral schemas. For instance, four respondents (M9, H4, H6, H10) produced an undesired "possible victim" self, arguing they would not want

to befriend Dexter because they were scared he would turn against them. This line of thinking could be connected to the personal interest schema in which subjects judge situations per personal merit. Another example is the "accomplice" self that was activated by H7:

> [I would not like to have Robert as a friend because] I might be associated with the murders he commits. [[Ik zou Robert niet als vriend willen hebben, omdat] ik misschien zelf zou geassocieerd worden met de moorden die hij begaat.] (Q6.1)

She did add that she would have felt guilty for not avoiding other killings, but her choices were still primarily motivated by self-interest, that is, her own safety and a clear conscience. In short, high school students were more inclined to make decisions in accordance with the principles of the personal interest schema.

Now the discussion will turn to one specific question in exercise five: the respondents' theories about the last words of the priest (Q5.2). High school students interpreted the scene either negatively or positively. On the one hand, there were H1, H5, and H9 who seemed to pity the priest and thought he wanted to know his murderer's identity. On other hand, the remaining students interpreted his words as a "thank you," implying Dexter was a benefactor. The master's students, by contrast, were more divided: five of them adopted the gratitude perspective (M3, M5, M7, M9, M10), while only one of them believed the priest wanted revenge (M4), and the remaining four adopted a neutral perspective, contending the words themselves were not important but rather gave Dexter the chance to absolve himself (M1, M2, M6, M8). M1, for instance, wrote:

> Even though it is insinuated that he says something like "thank you," since Robert responds with "you're welcome," I think that it does not matter what the priest said. Maybe Robert did not even really hear it, since he is so into the murderous atmosphere and the fact that he believes he is doing the right thing, that he says "thank you." Maybe he says this during every murder, or maybe he says this to convince himself of the

justification of the murder. [Hoewel er geïnsinueerd [*sic*] wordt dat hij iets als "bedankt" zegt doordat Robert antwoordt met "graag gedaan," denk ik dat het niet uitmaakt wat de dominee heeft gezegd. Misschien heeft Robert het zelfs niet eens verstaan, maar hij zit zo in de sfeer van het moorden en het feit dat hij denkt het goede te doen dat hij "graag gedaan" zegt. Misschien zegt hij het wel bij elke moord, of misschien zegt hij het om voor zichzelf de moord goed te praten.] (Q5.2)

The scene with priest Donovan showed that master's students tended to have more idiosyncratic and ambiguous interpretations than high school students. The majority of the master's students did have a background in linguistics, which could have been an interfering factor.

The penultimate exercise in the questionnaire asked the readers to rate Dexter's morality on a 10-point scale, 1 being evil and 10 being good (see Table 7). In contrast to the previous sections, the difference between the two groups was less significant when confronted with quantitative data. In fact, their average scores laid closely together, and the medians even seemed to point towards a reversal of the initial hypothesis: master's students' appraisal of Dexter was more positive than that of the high school students, whose responses were more ambiguous. After filling in the Likert scale, respondents were asked to motivate their choices, and again, both groups followed a similar line of thought. Consider, for example, the mentality behind the explanations of the four respondents who gave the lowest scores in their respective groups. M2, M8, H2, and H5 maintained that there was no excuse for murder. Within this small group, H5 and M8 condemned Dexter completely:

It is never okay to murder people, even if they "deserve" it because of the crimes they committed. By killing them, you lower yourself to their level. [Het is nooit oké om mensen te vermoorden, ookal [*sic*] "verdienen" ze het door de misdaden die ze zelf gepleegd hebben. Door ze te vermoorden zak je zelf tot hun eigen niveau.] (M8: Q8.2)

By comparison, H2 acknowledged that Dexter believed he was doing the right thing, and M2 added that the trauma in his youth might be the cause of his behavior. The other group members had analogous arguments when considering Dexter, such as his decision to only kill criminals and his role in preventing new murders. Hence, it seemed there was no clear difference between the two group's ethical judgments of Dexter.

Table 7

The Scores that Respondents Provided for Question 8.2, Regarding Dexter's Ethical Status

Respondent	Score	Respondent	Score
M1	5	H1	6
M2	3	H2	2
M3	7	H3	5
M4	6	H4	4
M5	6	H5	2
M6	6	H6	3
M7	6	H7	7
M8	3	H8	5
M9	6	H9	5
M10	5	H10	7
Average	**5,3**	**Average**	**4,6**
Median	**6**	**Median**	**5**

Note. The scores range from 1 to 10, with 1 being evil and 10 being good.

There was, however, another variable that appeared to be linked to the diverging scores: when considering the subjects' scores in relation with their initial emotional responses to the story, a surprising trend emerged. Six out of twenty respondents (30%) reported negative feelings when first reading the story (Q3.3). M8, H5, and H6 mentioned the gruesomeness of the story; M2, M8, and H2 felt uncomfortable; H2 felt fear; H6 was a bit bored; and H9 felt angry and disappointed. These subjects were also the ones who generally rated Dexter as eviler, with scores ranging from two to five. The activation of negative emotions did not seem to sprout from genre preferences or the style of the introduction: in each case, half of the respondents approved of the genre and/or introduction, and the other half did not. A possible reason for their reactions could be found in the strength of their maintaining norms schema.

Their arguments corresponded to the schema's characteristics, i.e. nobody is above the law, and everybody should strictly follow the rules of society. By contrast, the other students—who had more positive or conflicted responses to the story—were presumably more oriented towards the post-conventional schema. They were aware that ethical principles and laws do not always coincide. This interpretation implicates that moral schemas could provide an additional perspective to the analysis of storyworld possible selves in an ethical context, whether or not the factor of formal education is included.

Conclusion

The present study was primarily designed to determine the empirical validity of María-Ángeles Martínez's storyworld possible selves theory (2014; 2018) via an analysis of Jeff Lindsay's novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004). The second purpose of the current study was to determine whether formal education, a decisive variable in neo-Kohlbergian moral judgment theory, had an impact on readers' ethical assessment of the protagonist. Returning to these hypotheses, it is now possible to state that SPSs are a useful tool in the analysis of real-life readers' emotional responses to narratives. More specifically, Martínez's conceptualization of the blending processes was largely correct. The respondents activated a double-scope network in which their SPSs were constantly shifting from the "ethical" self-schema SPS to the undesired "psychopathic murderer" SPS. Notwithstanding, the desired SPS did not take the shape of the hard-boiled detective but rather of the "vigilante" self. Therefore, this thesis suggests to reconfigure the labels of the input spaces concerned with Dexter's character construction. Furthermore, certain characteristics, such as intelligence and a cloak of normality, were foregrounded by the readers, showing that these should also be included in the input spaces' features.

The second major finding was that there does not seem to be a direct correlation between respondents' level of formal education and their ethical attitude towards Dexter. Although there were some small differences between the two group's conceptualizations of the main character, their answers illustrated that their perceptions were closely connected, confirming the observations in part one of the questionnaire. Nevertheless, neo-Kohlbergian theory on moral judgment might still be able to offer insights into the differences in readers' ethical attitudes. Instead of focusing on specific variables, the three moral schemas could be used to connect otherwise seemingly idiosyncratic interpretations. Moreover, moral judgment theory might offer a framework for examining the interaction between readers' moral attitude and their construction of the perspectivizer's world view. This study already established that high school students have a larger proportion of personal interest schemata, whereas the maintaining norms and post-conventional schemata were distributed more equally among the groups. Whilst this study thus did not confirm the second hypothesis, it did substantiate the relevance of moral judgment theory to the analysis of SPSs.

This is the first time a study has analyzed real-life reader's storyworld possible selves in reaction to a novel, enhancing our understanding of literary immersion. The key strengths of this study are its qualitative nature, solid methodology, and its relatively high number of respondents. Correspondingly, the results of the analysis support Martínez's concept of storyworld possible selves in not only Lindsay's novel but also the genre of crime fiction as a whole. Although only a small majority of the respondents identified a "detective" self, it is probably a consequence of the author's subversion of genre expectations. Since serial killer crime fiction is a specific subgenre in which the criminal is accentuated, the absence of a "detective" SPS makes sense. In this way, it is shown that the concept of storyworld possible selves can be applied to crime fiction in all its forms.

While the study has successfully demonstrated that SPSs are empirically viable, it has certain limitations in terms of validity. First, there is the issue of extrapolation. With a small and homogeneous sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to the entire reading public, e.g. male, middle-aged crime fiction enthusiasts. Other population groups could have had disparate reactions to the story. Secondly, the analysis of qualitative data is inherently subjective and selective, which can result in a certain degree of researcher bias. The selection and categorization of SPSs, for example, is always influenced by the researcher's perceptions and interpretations of the respondents' answers. This is part of a larger issue, namely the danger of theories and categorizations in general: by working top-down data might be distorted to fit the framework.

To conclude, this research has generated many questions in need of further investigation. Essentially, a larger number of empirical studies are needed to estimate the usability of storyworld possible selves in relation to other genres and populations. The theory could also benefit from a bottom-up design, for instance, by including more SPS subcategories, e.g. the undesired past possible self SPS. Additionally, more work needs to be done to establish a legitimate method that can be used to set up a multitude of experiments. A suggestion would be to combine written questionnaires with an oral facet to eliminate researcher bias and improve accuracy. The researcher bias in the data analysis could then be minimized by allowing a second, independent researcher to interpret the data. After a basic body of research has been created, other theories and tools, such as neo-Kohlbergian moral judgment schemas, could be implemented to elucidate certain trends.

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Appendix

The excerpts from Dexters duistere dromen *(2009) that the respondents had to read, including* *some of the rule numbers between brackets. Each full line represents a new scene.*

Maan. Glorieuze maan. Volle, ronde, rode maan die de nacht tot dag maakt, die het land dompelt in beeldschoon licht en die vreugde, vreugde, vreugde brengt. En die nog veel meer brengt: de luidkeelse roep van de tropische nacht, de zachte, schorre stem van de wind die de haartjes op je armen overeind blaast, het holle gejank van de sterren en het tandenknarsende gekreun van het licht dat weerkaatst op het water.

Allemaal geluiden die de behoefte deden ontwaken. O, het symfonische gekrijs van duizend verloren stemmen, de schreeuw van de behoefte binnenin, het wezen, de zwijgende observator, het stille, kille ding, het ding dat lachte, de maandanser. De ik die ik niet was, het ding dat me plaagde, me uitlachte en me riep met zijn honger. Met de behoefte. En de behoefte was nu heel sterk, heel beheerst maar ook kil, kruipend, krakend en er helemaal klaar voor, beresterk maar toch afwachtend en loerend, waardoor ook ik werd gedwongen (15) om te blijven afwachten en loeren.

Ik had de dominee nu vijf weken geobserveerd en wachtte nog altijd af. De behoefte had me net zolang geplaagd en getreiterd totdat ik de volgende ging zoeken, een nieuw slachtoffer, totdat ik deze geestelijke ging zoeken. Ik wist al drie weken dat hij de volgende was en dat wij, (20) hij en ik samen, in de macht van de Zwarte Ruiter waren. En in die drie weken had ik me verzet tegen de druk, de toenemende behoefte die in me opwelde als een vloedgolf die brullend op het strand sloeg, zich niet meer terugtrok en met elke seconde alleen maar sterker werd. Maar het was ook tijd om voorzichtig te zijn, tijd om zeker te zijn. Niet om zeker te zijn van de dominee, nee, van hem was ik al lang zeker. Tijd om er zeker van te zijn dat het goed gedaan (25) kon worden, netjes, keurig afgewerkt en zonder rommel achter te

laten. Ik kon me niet veroorloven om gepakt te worden, niet meer. Ik had te hard en te lang gewerkt om de juiste formule te vinden en mijn prettige leventje te beschermen.

En bovendien was het veel te leuk om er nu nog mee op te houden. En daarom was ik altijd (30) voorzichtig. Altijd netjes. Altijd goed voorbereid zodat het echt goed gedaan kon worden. En als alles goed was, nam ik nog wat extra tijd om daar helemaal zeker van te zijn. Dit was Henry's aanpak - God zegene hem - de verziende, volmaakte politieman, mijn stiefvader. Wees altijd zeker van je zaak, wees zorgvuldig en precies, had hij gezegd, en ik was er nu al een week honderd procent zeker van dat alles goed was op een manier die ook Henry goedgekeurd zou (35) hebben. En toen ik die avond van mijn werk kwam, wist ik dat het zover was. Dit was de avond. Deze avond was anders. Deze avond zou het gebeuren, moest het gebeuren. Precies zoals het daarvoor was gebeurd. Precies zoals het opnieuw zou gebeuren, en opnieuw...

En op deze avond zou het de geestelijke gebeuren. Hij heette dominee Donovan. Hij gaf (40) muziekles aan de kinderen van St. Anthony's weeshuis in Homestead, Florida. De kinderen waren gek op hem. En natuurlijk was hij gek op de kinderen... nou, dat was hij zeker.

'Doe je ogen open, dominee Donovan,' zei ik. 'Alsjeblieft,' zei hij op een zeurende, snikkende toon die enorm op mijn zenuwen werkte. Het had niet mogen gebeuren, want ik was de (45) ijskoude die alles in de hand had, maar toen hij naar de ravage op de vloer keek en begon te janken, werd dat te veel voor me en schopte ik zijn benen onder zijn lijf vandaan. Ik gaf een harde ruk aan de vislijn, klemde mijn rechterhand om zijn nek en beukte zijn gezicht een paar keer tegen de vuile vloerplanken. Zijn neus begon te bloeden en dat maakte me nog bozer. 'Doe ze open,' zei ik. 'Doe je ogen open. Doe ze nu open en kijk!' Ik pakte hem bij zijn haar en (50) trok zijn hoofd omhoog. 'Je moet doen wat ik zeg,' zei ik. 'Kijk of ik snij je oogleden eraf.' Dat klonk heel overtuigend. Dus gehoorzaamde hij en deed hij wat hem gezegd was. Hij keek.

Het waren er zeven, zeven kleine lijken, zeven vuile weeskinderen die waren neergelegd op plastic douchegordijnen om het netjes te houden en omdat die niet doorlekten. Zeven rechte (55) lijnen die naar de andere kant van de kamer wezen. Die naar dominee Donovan wezen.

'Wie ben je?' fluisterde dominee Donovan. 'Ik ben het begin en het einde,' zei ik. 'Ik ben de antischepper. Aangenaam kennis te maken, eerwaarde.' Ik had de injectiespuit al in mijn hand en de naald ging soepel zijn nek in, zoals het hoorde. Zijn verstrakte spieren boden een lichte (60) weerstand, maar de geestelijke zelf niet. Ik drukte op de zuiger, leegde de spuit en vulde de geestelijke met pure, snelle kalmte. Al na een paar seconden begon zijn hoofd te tollen en draaide zijn gezicht mijn kant op.

En net voordat ik aan het echte werk wilde beginnen, deed dominee Donovan zijn ogen open (65) en keek hij me aan. Er was geen angst meer in te zien; dat gebeurt soms. Hij keek me recht aan en zijn lippen bewogen. 'Wat?' vroeg ik, en ik boog me een stukje voorover. 'Ik kan je niet verstaan.' Ik hoorde hem ademhalen, een trage, vredige ademhaling, en voordat hij zijn ogen dichtdeed, zei hij het nog een keer. 'Graag gedaan,' zei ik, en toen ging ik aan het werk.

Tegen halfvijf in de ochtend was de geestelijke keurig opgeruimd. Ik voelde me een stuk beter. Ik voelde me naderhand altijd beter. Moorden geeft me een goed gevoel. Het haalt de knopen uit het duistere brein van de brave Robert. Het is een zoete bevrijding, een noodzakelijk (75) openzetten van al die stoompijpjes binnen in me. Ik geniet van mijn werk en het spijt me als u dat niet leuk vindt. O, het spijt me zelfs heel erg. Maar het is niet anders. En het zijn natuurlijk ook niet zomaar moorden. Ze moeten op de juiste manier, op het juiste moment en op het juiste slachtoffer worden gepleegd, wat niet alleen knap ingewikkeld kan zijn maar ook strikt noodzakelijk is. En best vermoeiend ook. Dus was ik moe, maar de

spanning van de afgelopen (80) week was verdwenen, de kille stem van de Zwarte Ruiter was tot zwijgen gebracht en ik kon weer mezelf zijn. De grappige, charmante, uiterlijk zo gelukkige maar vanbinnen morsdode Robert. Niet langer Robert met het mes, Robert de Wreker. Niet tot aan de volgende keer.

Wat mij heeft gemaakt tot wat ik ben - wat dat ook was - zorgde ervoor dat ik me vanbinnen (85) hol en leeg voelde, niet in staat om iets anders te voelen. Als ik het zo zeg, lijkt dat niet al te veel voor te stellen. Ik ben er redelijk zeker van dat de meeste mensen in hun dagelijkse contacten met andere mensen een groot deel van hun gevoelens en emoties spelen. Nou, ik speelde ze dus allemaal. Ik was daar heel goed in en de gevoelens waren er gewoon niet. Maar ik hou van kinderen. Ik kon hen zelf nooit hebben want het idee van seks stond me ronduit (90) tegen. Stelt u zich uzelf voor terwijl u dat soort dingen doet. Hoe kunt u? Waar is uw gevoel voor waardigheid gebleven? Maar kinderen... kinderen zijn bijzonder. Dominee Donovan moest sterven. Dat verdiende hij. Ik had me aan Henry's code en aan die van de Zwarte Ruiter gehouden.

Om kwart over zeven was ik weer helemaal schoon. Ik dronk een kop koffie, at een bord cornflakes en ging op weg naar mijn werk. Het gebouw waar ik werk is zo'n groot modern ding, (100) wit en met veel glas, vlak bij het vliegveld. Mijn laboratorium is op de eerste verdieping, aan de achterkant. Naast het lab is mijn kantoor. Het rode lampje van het antwoordapparaat knipperde toen ik binnenkwam. Een ingesproken bericht is voor mij geen dagelijkse kost. Om de een of andere reden zijn er op deze wereld maar heel weinig mensen die tijdens werkuren iets willen zeggen tegen een analist van bloedspatpatronen. Een van de weinige mensen die (105) wel iets tegen me wilde zeggen, was Emma Moore, mijn stiefzusje. Ze werkte bij de politie, net als haar vader had gedaan.

Het bericht was van haar. Ik drukte op de knop, hoorde blikkerige tejano-muziek en daarna Emma's stem. 'Robert, alsjeblieft, zodra je binnenkomt... Ik ben op een plaats delict op (110) Tamiami Trail, in het Cacique motel.' Er viel een stilte. Ik hoorde dat ze haar hand over het spreekgedeelte van de hoorn legde en iets tegen iemand zei. Daarna volgde er weer een golf Mexicaanse muziek en was ze weer aan de lijn. 'Kun je hiernaartoe komen? Nu meteen? Alsjeblieft, Rob?' Ze hing op.

(115) Ik heb geen ouders en geen familie. Tenminste, voor zover ik weet. Want ergens op de wereld moeten mensen rondlopen met hetzelfde genetische materiaal als ik. Daar ben ik van overtuigd. Ik benijd hen niet. Ik heb hen in ieder geval nog nooit ontmoet. Ik ben ook nooit naar hen op zoek geweest en zij blijkbaar ook niet naar mij. Ik ben geadopteerd en grootgebracht door Henry en Donna Moore, de ouders van Emma. En als we in aanmerking (120) nemen wat er van me is geworden, hebben ze fantastisch werk gedaan, vindt u ook niet? Ze zijn inmiddels allebei overleden. Dus is Em op deze wereld de enige persoon die het nog een stinkdierenscheet kan schelen of ik leef of niet. Om redenen die ik niet kan benoemen, denk ik zelfs dat ze er de voorkeur aan geeft dat ik leef. Ik vind dat aardig van haar en als ik in staat zou zijn gevoelens te hebben, zouden die voor Em zijn.

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En het was weer een prachtige, zonnige, warme dag. Iedereen die die ochtend een jasje had (130) aangetrokken, zocht nu naar een haakje om het aan op te hangen. Helaas waren die er niet op dit smerige, verlaten parkeerterrein. Er stonden vijf of zes auto's en verder was er alleen de container. Het groepje rechercheurs in pak die altijd op plaatsen delict rondhangen, om zich te laten zien, druk uit te oefenen op de technische recherche of zich er zelf van te overtuigen wat er gaande was, kwamen handen tekort, want ze hadden nu koffie, broodjes (135) en hun jasje, die ze nergens kwijt konden.

De jongens van de technische recherche droegen geen pakken. Lichtgewicht bowlinghemden met twee borstzakken waren meer hun stijl. Ik had er zelf ook een aan. Met een patroon van tamtamspelers en palmbomen tegen een lichtgroene achtergrond. Stijlvol en praktisch.

Toen ik het groepje bij het café naderde, was García iemand aan het ondervragen in snelle mitrailleursalvo's Spaans. De man die door García onder vuur werd genomen, was klein en gedrongen, donker met indiaanse gelaatstrekken, en hij was zichtbaar onder de indruk van García's dialect, de toon van haar stem en haar politiepenning. Ze sloot het gesprek af met (145) een paar dreigementen en stuurde de man weg. 'Stomme indiaan,' mopperde ze toen hij buiten gehoorsafstand was. 'Niet iedereen is hetzelfde, inspecteur,' zei ik. 'Zelfs campesinos niet.' Ze draaide zich om en liet haar blik langzaam over me heen gaan terwijl ik me afvroeg waarom ze dat deed. Was ze vergeten hoe ik eruitzag? Maar uiteindelijk verscheen er een brede glimlach op haar gezicht. Ze mocht me echt, de idioot. 'Hola, Robert. Wat doe jij hier?' (150) 'Ik hoorde dat jij hier was en kon me gewoon niet beheersen. Alsjeblieft, inspecteur, wanneer gaan we trouwen?' Ze giechelde. De andere rechercheurs binnen gehoorsafstand wisselden een blik met elkaar en keken toen de andere kant op. 'Ik koop nooit schoenen voordat ik ze heb gepast,' zei García. 'Hoe goed ze er ook uitzien.' En hoewel ik ervan overtuigd was dat ze dat meende, verklaarde het nog niet waarom ze haar tong langs haar tanden liet gaan terwijl (155) ze het zei.

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(160) Er bestaat geen mooiere sterrenhemel dan die van Zuid-Florida als je veertien jaar oud bent en daar kampeert met je vader. Ook als hij alleen maar je adoptievader is. En zelfs als de indrukwekkende aanblik van al die sterren slechts een lichte tevredenheid in je teweegbrengt, aangezien er van emoties geen sprake kan zijn. Want je voelt het niet. Dat is een deel van de reden dat je hier bent.

'Je bent anders, Robert' zegt hij. Ik maak mijn blik los van de sterren. Op de zanderige open plek werpt de laatste gloed van het vuur flauwe schaduwen om zich heen. Sommige daarvan bewegen over Henry's gezicht. Hij kijkt me op een vreemde manier aan, met een blik die ik nog niet eerder heb gezien. Vastbesloten, ongelukkig en een beetje wezenloos. 'Wat bedoel (170) je, papa?' Hij wendt zijn blik af. 'De Billups hebben me verteld dat Buddy is verdwenen,' zegt hij.

'Dat luidruchtige mormel. Hij blafte de hele nacht. Mama kon er niet van slapen.'

En mama had haar slaap hard nodig. Ze leed aan kanker en had niet lang meer te leven, dus ze moest veel rusten, en dat kon ze niet als dat ellendige rothondje aan de overkant dag en (175) nacht blafte naar elk blaadje dat van de bomen viel.

'Hoor je een stem in je hoofd?' wil hij weten. 'Iets of iemand die tegen je zegt wat je moet doen, en dat je het daarom doet?'

'Eh...' zeg ik, met de welbespraaktheid van een veertienjarige.

(180) 'Nee, niet echt.'

'Vertel het me maar,' zegt Henry.

182 Ik wou dat de maan er was, die lekkere dikke ronde maan, iets groters om naar te kijken. Ik pak nog een handje dennennaalden en knijp ze fijn. Mijn gezicht gloeit alsof hij me vraagt hem over mijn seksdromen te vertellen. Wat op een bepaalde manier... 'Ik, eh... je weet wel, voel (185) iets,' zeg ik. 'Binnen in me. Iets wat me in de gaten houdt en me... eh, uitlacht, misschien? Maar het is niet echt een stem. Alleen...' Weer een welbespraakt schouderophalen. Maar Henry schijnt te begrijpen wat ik bedoel.

'En dat iets dwingt je om dingen dood te maken?'

Hoog boven ons schuift langzaam een vliegtuig voorbij. 'Eh... nee, het dwingt me niet,' zeg ik. (190) 'Maar het zorgt er wel voor dat het een goed idee lijkt.'

'Heb je ook al eens iets anders dood willen maken? Iets wat groter is dan een hond?'

Ik probeer antwoord te geven maar er komt geen geluid uit mijn mond. Ik schraap mijn keel.

'Ja,' zeg ik.

'Een mens?'

(195) 'Niemand in het bijzonder, papa. Alleen...' Ik haal mijn schouders weer op.

'Waarom heb je het niet gedaan?'

'Omdat... omdat ik dacht dat jij dat niet leuk zou vinden. Jij en mama.'

'En dat heeft je ervan weerhouden?'

'Eh... ja. Ik wilde niet dat je... eh, boos op me werd? Dat je... je weet wel... teleurgesteld in me (200) zou zijn?'

Ik kijk opzij naar Henry.

Hij zwijgt en blijft me even aankijken. Ik begin me onbehaaglijk te voelen. 'Wat herinner je je van vroeger?' vraagt hij. 'Je weet wel, van voordat je bij ons kwam?' Die vraag doet nog steeds (205) pijn, hoewel ik niet precies weet waarom. Ik was pas vier. 'Niks,' zeg ik. 'Mooi zo,' zegt hij. 'Niemand hoort dat soort dingen te onthouden.' En zolang als hij zal leven is dit het enige wat hij er ooit over zal zeggen. 'Maar ook al herinner je je niks, Rob, het heeft toch iets met je gedaan. Het heeft je gemaakt tot wat je nu bent. Ik heb er met een paar mensen over gepraat.' En totaal onverwacht werpt hij me een half, bijna verlegen Henry-glimlachje toe. 'Ik heb dit (210) verwacht. Wat jou is overkomen toen je klein was, heeft je gevormd tot wat je nu bent. Ik heb geprobeerd het glad te strijken maar...' Hij haalde zijn schouders op. 'Het was te sterk en te veel. Het heeft je in een te vroeg stadium te pakken gekregen en dat krijg je er niet zomaar weer uit. Het zorgt ervoor dat je wilt moorden. En daar kun jij niets aan doen. Je kunt dat niet veranderen. Maar...' zegt hij, en dan wendt hij zijn blik weer af, kijkt hij naar iets wat ik niet (215) kan zien. 'Maar je kunt het wel sturen. Je kunt het beheersen. Je kunt kiezen...' Hij koos zijn woorden nu heel zorgvuldig, zorgvuldiger dan ik ooit had meegemaakt. '... kiezen wat... of wie je vermoordt.' Daarna wierp hij me een glimlach toe die heel anders

dan anders was, heel vaag en zo droog als de as van het vuur dat bijna gedoofd was. 'Er zijn genoeg mensen die het verdienen, Rob...' En met die laatste woorden zou hij mijn hele leven vormgeven, alles, wie ik (220) was en wat ik zou doen.

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(225) Ik pakte de prop en gooide die in de prullenmand naast mijn bureau. Ik had deze ochtend werk te doen. Echt officieel gerechtelijk labwerk. Ik moest een lang rapport schrijven, de bijbehorende foto's uitzoeken en bewijs aan het dossier toevoegen. Het was routinewerk, een dubbele moord die waarschijnlijk nooit voor de rechter zou komen, maar ik ben er graag zeker van dat alles wat in mijn handen komt, keurig georganiseerd wordt opgeborgen.

Bovendien was dit wel een interessante zaak. Het bloedspatpatroon was heel moeilijk te lezen want er was sprake van slagaderlijke bloedingen, twee slachtoffers die zo te zien in het rond hadden gelopen en een zijwaarts spatpatroon dat bijna zeker door een kettingzaag was veroorzaakt, zodat het praktisch onmogelijk was om vast te stellen waar de dader had gestaan. (235) Om de hele kamer te doen had ik gebruik moeten maken van twee flessen Luminol, de chemische stof die zelfs de kleinste bloedspatjes zichtbaar maakt en die met twaalf dollar per fles uiterst duur is.

Om vast te stellen uit welke hoek het bloed op de vloer en de muren was gespat, had ik zelfs (240) touwtjes door de kamer moeten spannen, een techniek zo oud dat die aan alchemie deed denken. De spatpatronen waren indrukwekkend, wild en levendig, en ze zaten overal: op de muren, het meubilair, de tv, de handdoeken, de beddensprei, de gordijnen... een verbijsterende orgie van rondvliegend bloed. Zelfs in Miami zou je toch denken dat iemand iets gehoord moest hebben. Twee mensen waren levend in stukken gezaagd met een kettingzaag, in een mooie, dure hotelkamer, en de buren hadden gewoon het geluid van de tv wat harder gezet.

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(250) (*Nieuwe context: een moordenaar laat zijn slachtoffers achter zonder bloed in hun lichaam. Robert & Emma bespreken hun volgende stap.*)

'Een koelwagen,' zei ik hardop.

Ik deed mijn ogen open. Emma zat te worstelen met een mondvol roerei voordat ze iets kon (255) zeggen. 'Wat?'

'O, het is maar een idee. Ik heb helaas niets om het te onderbouwen. Maar het zou logisch zijn, nietwaar?'

'Wat zou logisch zijn?' vroeg ze.

Ik keek naar mijn bord, fronste mijn wenkbrauwen en probeerde me voor te stellen hoe het (260) in elkaar zat. 'Hij wil een koude omgeving, om de bloedstroom te vertragen en omdat het eh... schoner is.'

'Als jij dat zegt.'

'Ja, dat zeg ik. En het moet een smalle ruimte zijn...'

'Waarom moet dat? Smal? Waar komt dat verdomme nu weer vandaan?'

(265) Ik deed alsof ik haar laatste vraag niet had gehoord. 'Een koelwagen voldoet aan al die eisen en is bovendien mobiel, wat het voor hem een stuk gemakkelijker maakt om naderhand de vuilniszakken te dumpen.' Emma nam een hap van haar bagel en kauwde enige tijd terwijl ze nadacht. 'Dus,' zei ze uiteindelijk, en ze slikte, 'het kan zijn dat de moordenaar over zo'n wagen kan beschikken? Of dat hij er zelf een heeft?'

(270) 'Hm, wie weet? Behalve dat de moord van gisteravond de eerste is waarbij sporen van kou zijn aangetroffen.'

Emma knikte. 'Dus hij is op pad gegaan en heeft een koelwagen gekocht.'

'Dat denk ik niet. Hij is nog aan het experimenteren. Het was een plotselinge ingeving om kou te proberen, vermoed ik.'

(275) Ze knikte weer. 'Maar het zou natuurlijk veel te mooi zijn wanneer hij voor zijn werk of zoiets in zo'n soort wagen reed, he?'

Ik schonk haar mijn vrolijke haaienglimlach. 'Ah, je bent vanochtend heel scherp, Em. Nee, ik denk dat onze vriend veel te slim is om zich op die manier te verraden.' Emma nam een slokje koffie, zette haar kopje neer en leunde achterover. 'Dus we zijn op zoek (280) naar een gestolen koelwagen,' zei ze tenslotte.