

**THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY
BAHCESEHIR UNIVERSITY**

**THE SUBVERSIVE ANTI-HERO TREND IN
POSTMODERN TELEVISION: HOW SUBVERSIVE
ARE THEY, REALLY?**

M.S. Thesis

ELİF İNCE

İSTANBUL, 2013

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**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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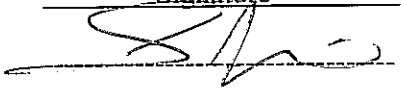
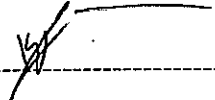

This is to certify that we have read this thesis and we find it fully adequate in
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İstanbul, 2013

Elif İnce

ABSTRACT

THE SUBVERSIVE ANTI-HERO TREND IN POST-MODERN TV: HOW SUBVERSIVE ARE THEY, REALLY?

Elif İnce

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Television programming has witnessed a proliferation of anti-heroes in the past twenty years across all kinds of genres. Among them a certain type stands out, namely a lovable criminal characterized by shady moral judgment and fragmented self. It is possible to trace the evolution of the anti-hero back to the traditional hero, and to argue that the anti-hero is mostly a product of the postmodern world which challenges our own understanding of morality and of good and evil.

By closely looking at some of the characters of recent television series, this study attempts to study what the common characteristics of loveable criminals are, how they are presented, and the reason why viewers are drawn to them. What this thesis hopes to show is that while anti-heroes mostly subverts our understanding of how a good person should be and define what good and evil are according to small, specific narratives, they still carry a more traditional world view about good and evil; and this is the actual reason viewers are drawn to them.

Keywords: Postmodern Television, Antiheroes, Loveable Criminals

ÖZET

POSTMODERN TELEVİZYON DİZİLERİNDE ANTI-KAHRAMAN TRENDİ

Elif İnce

Film ve Televizyon

Tez Danışmanı: Prof. Selim Eyüboğlu

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Geçtiğimiz yirmi yılda, her türden Amerikan televizyon dizisinde anti-kahramanların artışta olduğu gözlemlenmektedir. Bunların içinde özellikle bir tipte anti-kahraman göze çarpmaktadır; suç teşkil eden işlerle uğraştığı halde seyirci tarafından sevilen, etik değerleri ve kararları sallantıda olan, kişiliği parçalanmış bir karakterdir bu. Onun gelişimini anlamak için geleneksel kahraman tipini incelemek gerekir, zira anti-kahraman, geleneksel kahramandan yola çıkan ancak kendi doğru/ yanlış anlayışımızı çoğu zaman sorgulamamıza sebep olan postmodern dünyanın değişimine uğramış bir tiptir.

Bu tez, son yıllarda popüler olmuş bazı dizilere ve onların başkarakterine bakarak sevilen anti-kahramanların ortak özelliklerini, bu karakterleri nasıl sunulduklarını ve seyircinin onları niye sevdiğini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu tez ayrıca şunu kanıtlamayı ummaktadır ki, anti-kahramanlar, iyi bir insanın nasıl olması gerektiği ve neyin doğru, neyin yanlış olduğu konusundaki genel geçer inanışları çoğu zaman yıkmakla birlikte, aslında pek çok yönden de geleneksel bir kahramanın özellikleri ile ahlak ve adalet anlayışını taşımaktadır. Onları çekici, sevilesi ve ilginç yapan da aslında bu özellikleridir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Postmodern Televizyon, Antikahraman, Sevilen Suçlular

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1. INTRODUCTION

Television used to be such a harmless place up until the 1990s, with popular American sitcoms such as *The Cosby Show*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cheers*, detective/ police and action dramas such as *The A Team*, *Knight Rider* and *Moonlighting* or prime time soaps such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, where intentions and motivations of characters were pretty much out in the open and where everyone was either good or evil without too much grey areas in between.

For the past two decades, however, American television -responsible for the production of not only a local but also global popular culture- television has witnessed a proliferation of anti-heroes across genres. From sitcoms to animations, from crime dramas to action series, there is a multitude of characters with questionable morality, pathetic outlook, cruel attitude and dumb behavior which we just love to watch. Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*), George Costanza (*Seinfeld*), Gregory House (*House, M.D.*), Patricia Hewes (*Damages*), Barney Stinson (*How I Met Your Mother*), Al Bundy (*Married with Children*) and Don Draper (*Mad Men*) are a few of these characters that spring to mind. For all their unlovable features, they are nonetheless such realistically created individuals with such diverse motivations that millions of viewers across the globe cannot help but be in awe of them, enjoy their company, or wish them well even when they do not behave themselves. This, we have to admit, is quite peculiar.

Perhaps the best way to explain this is through the postmodern condition. An ambiguous phenomenon in itself, postmodernity is directly reflected in the recycled personalities with ambiguous but somewhat redeemable moral values of popular TV anti-heroes. The postmodernist anti-hero stands in opposition against the modern concept of the hero and fascinates the viewers through more realistic depiction of the contemporary individual, who welcome the subversion of the good vs. evil dichotomy. He is presented as a rich, multi-layered character that's neither a villain, nor a saint-like hero figure, who is worthy of our time, attention, interest and affection.

In my thesis, I will examine four anti-heroes from popular TV shows, namely, Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Dexter Morgan from the eponymous series *Dexter*, Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos* and Walter White from *Breaking Bad*. Each of these are stylistically and narratively postmodern shows with postmodern leading characters. The fact that each of these four characters win our sympathies raises questions about ourselves: Why are we rooting for a gangster? How is it that we end up liking a serial killer? Or a vampire? The strongest postmodern element in these shows are how they blur the line between good and evil, subverting our standard definition for each. However, more importantly, while each of these characters are criminals in their own right, each of them are also made redeemable through different means. We would not root for just any serial killer, Dexter Morgan is the specific one we like, and there is a reason for that. Therefore, what seems subversive and unprecedented on the surface is actually more conventional and familiar when examined on a deeper level.

I am therefore going to argue two things in this thesis: first, that the anti-hero has largely subverted the good and evil dichotomy and presented us with a new framework in which we find ourselves loving cruel and corrupt criminals. The notion loveable criminal is not a new phenomenon, in fact, it's a deeply rooted notion in literature and in cinema that can be traced all the way back to Robin Hood. However, the post-modern antihero is a much more complex and subversive character.

Secondly, in a seemingly contradictory and counter-intuitive way, I will also argue that the reason why we like the anti-hero so much has to do with how traditional (albeit in a different way than the hero) he is. In other words, we don't like him despite his subversions, we like them because they are not so subversive to begin with. The most important example of this is the fact that they each have strict moral codes to abide by; the ones that do not are no longer anti-heroes that we admire but become villains that we despise.

In the first chapter of this study, I shall look at the notions of hero and anti-hero within the realm of mythology and literature. Deeply rooted in thousand-year-old traditions, the essence of the hero's character has stayed more or less the same while changing shape

and form to adapt to changing times. The “anti”ness of the anti-hero has naturally evolved alongside the hero. I shall also explore here what is meant by postmodern and postmodern anti-hero. In the second chapter, I shall discuss how postmodernity has effected TV shows and our understanding of good and evil by constructing independent mini-worlds which do not always operate according to the workings of our own world. Here I shall focus on how the line between good and evil can be blurred and what purpose this serves. And in the final chapter, I shall look at the anti-heroes of the television, and explore the popular trend of loveable criminals, identifying their common characteristics which make us so fond of them while also pointing out their conventionality. I shall especially focus on the contrasting example set by Walter White of *Breaking Bad* to establish where the line between an anti-hero and a villain is drawn. What I hope to achieve is showing that while the postmodern condition has in fact affected our understanding of the world as well as our reception of fictional characters, the archetypal hero has only been slightly transformed into the anti-hero, not wholly subverted.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 THE ARCHETYPAL HERO

Best-selling, highest grossing, most popular works of fiction, such as *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* series follow a similar pattern in their narrative structure. Their characters, settings, plots and overall themes may be very different from each other, but each story is built on the monomyth called the hero's journey. As described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, this monomyth consists of a pattern where the hero begins off in an ordinary world, who then receives a call to adventure. The hero must face numerous tasks or ordeals during this adventure, survive a severe crisis, and return home as a changed man, often with a gift.

Just as there is a pattern to the hero's journey, there's a pattern to the hero's character: it's often a white, motivated male with noble qualities that we can aspire to, such as honesty, courage and integrity. In other words, hero is "the high name we give to those to whom we turn for strength in an effort to find ourselves a motive or in the worse an effort to create in ourselves a conscience." (Gurung 2010, p. 2)

This character denotes the archetypal hero; it's possible to find examples of it across cultures and disciplines. An archetype is defined by Jung as "the ever-recurrent road marker of human experience, images, forms, and patterns, symbols, and rites de passage that transcend any particular culture." (1968, p. 451) As such, the hero can appear in many different forms; the warrior, the emperor, the leader and the saint are a few of these forms that Campbell examines. Regardless of its form, however, the archetypal hero can be traced back thousands of years, to Greek mythological figures, Gods, and demi-gods.

While hero is a ubiquitous archetype, it is also important to point out that there are huge differences between Achilles (*The Iliad*) and Frodo (*Lord of the Rings*), for instance, in terms of appearance, physical prowess, motivation and will power. This wide range that the title "hero" covers is best explained by the Canadian critic Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, where he classifies the hero into 5 categories: 1. If superior

in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being. 2. If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance. 3. If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. 4. If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity. 5. If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the ironic mode. (1957, p. 33-35)

Our common understanding of the hero concept includes the first 3 categories in Frye's list. Margery Hourihan talks about the linearity of the hero's journey as representative of both "purposiveness" and "progress". (2005, p. 47) No matter how many hardships the hero encounters, his goal remains clear, and he always moves forward towards that goal. "Achievement of the goal", Hourihan says, "invests the narrative as a whole with meaning just as the Christian account of salvation implies a universe rendered orderly by God's purpose." (*ibid*)

Although each stage of the hero's journey manifests itself differently in different stories, there is one overarching resemblance in all of them: portrayal of the fight between good and evil. In all of these stories, there's a stark contrast between good and evil, no room for grey areas, and no question about who the audience should be sympathizing with. Hourihan uses the example of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to delineate that the one of the representatives of evil in the story, Orcs, have no inherent complexity about them; that they are profoundly and solely evil. (2005, p. 53) They are so dehumanized that their eventual defeat and annihilation is something to be cherished greatly. In contrast, Frodo Baggins, in his pureness of intention and courageousness, is no more complex than the Orcs. In other words, in *Lord of the Rings*, "no suggestion of the ethical contradictions, impossible dilemmas and complex horrors of actual wars is present." (*ibid*) As such ethical or moral difficulties are largely absent from the monochromatic story line of *Lord of the Rings*. In short, the traditional hero and his journey are inherently modernist concepts on account of their belief in the possibility of an ultimate closure, however difficult it may be to attain.

2.2 THE POSTMODERN ANTIHERO

The last two categories (especially the fifth one) mentioned in Frye's list; however, show a great aberration from the ideal character of the archetypal hero. What's described here is not a hero, *per se*, but its antithesis, an anti-hero. Put simply, it's described as "the person who is given the vocation of failure, a type who is incompetent, unlucky, tactless, clumsy, backhanded and buffoonish." (Gurung 2010, p. 15) The anti-hero lacks all those heroic qualities and admirable motivations of the traditional hero.

However, similar to the way the hero comes in many faces, "anti"ness of the anti-hero also manifests itself in many forms. Anti-heroes created by a modernist approach, are characters marked by indifference and apathy, such as the ones in works such as Albert Camus's *The Stranger* or Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. The characters of these novels reject the idea of a journey altogether as well as ideas such as achievement, progress or salvation. They lack motivation, and are in existential crises arising from the general meaninglessness and absurdity of life.

There's another kind of anti-hero, however, which does not suffer from indifference or apathy, but is motivated, albeit lacking in heroic qualities such as selflessness, sacrifice and integrity. Jessica Page Morell defines an anti-hero as "someone who disturbs the reader with his weaknesses yet is sympathetically portrayed and who magnifies the frailties of humanity. An anti-hero often reflects society's confusion and ambivalence about morality." (2008, p. 44) In other words, an anti-hero is not just a typical villain cast as a protagonist, but a complex bad character with lots of grey areas and redeemable aspects brought on by this greyness in his actions. This is the postmodern anti-hero.

The concept of anti-hero is not a recent one. It is possible to trace its emergence back to the publication of *Don Quixote* in the 1600s: while his intentions are honorable and chivalrous, the delusional Alonso Quijano nonetheless lacks in heroic qualities. The anti-hero who embodies moral conflicts and confusions, however, is a more recent occurrence, one that takes place in the period after World War II, specifically. Enumerating events such as "the Vietnam War, and the subsequent peacenik movement, the civil rights

crusade, the wide-scale use of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD and the emergence of hippies” Simmons suggests that “the emergence and proliferation of the anti-heroic form within the 1960s creates an aesthetic rendition that mirrors the countercultural zeitgeist”. (2008, p. 1) While Simmons is focusing specifically on anti-heroes of the 1960s novels, in his thesis titled “Deconstructing the American Mythology: Revisionist Westerns and U.S. History”, Adam Bloch (2006) also points out the effect of the Vietnam War on the emergence of anti-heroes in the Western genre.

The emergence of postmodernism and of the kind of anti-heroes that I’m discussing in this thesis can therefore said to be coincidental. Linda Hutcheon points out the humanism in the works of modernists such as Eliot and Joyce arising from their “desire for stable aesthetic and moral values, even in the face of their realization of the inevitable absence of such universals”. (1988, p. 6) She also points out, however, that “postmodernism differs from this, not in its humanistic contradictions but in the provisionality of its response to them: it refuses to posit any structure or what Lyotard calls, master narrative- such as art or myth- which, for such modernists would have been consolatory.” (*ibid*)

Similarly, the “myth of progress” as represented by the linear, unswerving structure of hero’s journey is yet another meta-narrative just like Christianity and Marxism; and just like them, the history of the twentieth century has made it difficult to sustain belief in it. (Hourihan 2005, p. 48) The anti-heroes of the TV shows in focus here are not disillusioned by any myth of progress, however. And while we as viewer sympathize with much of their motivations, we do not expect them to repent and become exemplary citizens. We fully accept that a sad demise might be right around the corner for them; something we know is not going to happen in more traditional detective stories such as *Castle* or *CSI* series, for instance.

2.3 THE OUTLAW

The idea of anti-hero as a loveable criminal has its roots in the notion of outlaw, which can in turn be traced back to Robin Hood. An amalgam of history and folklore, he appears

in written literature as early as 14th century. Robin Hood is the perfect representative of the lovable criminal, as he only takes from those who deserve to be robbed and gives to those in need. As such, he has become “the classic formulation of the outlaw tradition” (Steckmesser 1966, p.348) where the “outlaw” is idealized through honorable features such as loyalty and courage, and praiseworthy acts such as standing up to evil authority figures and helping the poor. In his article, Kent Steckmesser explores the notion of the outlaw through 3 specific examples, namely Robin Hood, Jesse James and Billy the Kid, and finds that history usually fails to support the folk tales surrounding these names. Often the products of undesirable social and political situations, outlaws assume legendary reputations in the folk tradition, irrespective of how heinous their actual crimes may be, as is the case with Jesse James. The infatuation with outlaws, however, is not totally unfounded:

In Anglo-Saxon tradition, “law” and “justice” are assumed to be one and the same. On occasion, however, the two are divorced. The law becomes the tool of a “gang” which must be overthrown, or it comes to represent a social system in which injustice is the rule. In such situations, the outlaw, though technically a criminal, may become a folk hero by serving the higher cause of justice. Robin Hood, Jesse James, and Billy the Kid are all thought to have emerged from such situations. (1966, p.347)

No matter what the historic reality about these outlaws is, a tendency to applaud the outlaw who fights for the underdog, especially in cases of social injustice, is apparent.

Robert B. Ray examines the outlaw in opposition with the traditional hero within the context of American cinema: “American culture’s traditional dichotomy of individual and community that had generated the most significant pair of competing myths: the outlaw hero and the official hero.” (1985, p.60) One is portrayed as a bold adventurer, explorer, loner who stands for individualism and self-determination; the other, a dignified family man who believes in collective thought and action, instead of taking matters into one’s own hands. “If the outlaw hero’s motto was ‘I don’t know what the law says, but I do know what’s right and wrong,’ the official hero’s was ‘We are a nation of laws, not of men’.” (1985, p. 62).

In Ray’s comparison, however, the hero is still one that does the right thing or what needs to be done, whether by his private standards or by lawful ones. While outlaw *is* a popular

notion in American cinema, the term has a very large scope, not always consisting of loveable criminals who do the right thing. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Natural Born Killers* and *Bonnie and Clyde* are all outlaw stories, but there is nothing loveable about Mickey and Mallory Knox and the killing spree they are on. As for Bonnie and Clyde, the movie depicts their story as romantic one, while in actuality their adventure was a more violent one including civilian deaths. Butch and Sundance, on the other hand, are handsome and loveable robbers indeed, made even more charming by the comedic elements in the movie, however, they are not particularly after doing what's just or right, either.

If we look at the term "outlaw" from a broader perspective, we might get to authority figures, who do not have a problem bending rules to their own liking, such as *Dirty Harry's* Harry Callahan, *Lethal Weapon's* Martin Riggs or *Die Hard's* John McClane. These are powerful men who have a strong sense of justice and who are not afraid to deploy unconventional methods to catch criminals. They are not outlaws, obviously, by the strict sense of the word, but they act on a similar sentiment. They are after doing the right thing, and their unconventionality is easily redeemed by their purpose.

Through their unlawful ways and redeemable characteristics, the postmodern anti-heroes do share traits with the outlaws described above- as I've pointed out earlier, the concept of loveable criminals is not exactly a new one. However, Dexter, for instance, keeps giving us more complex moral dilemmas than John McClane ever can. It is easy to fall for the charms of Butch and Sundance, but how about Walter White, the good-natured family man who turns into a cold-blooded drug lord? While outlaws and loveable criminals have always been a popular topic, postmodern television has turned them into more subversive, more challenging, more ambiguous characters that are difficult to judge.

We may accept Robin Hood as a loveable criminal, but once we see that he is perfectly justifiable in his actions, he is transformed into a proper hero and not a questionable or ambiguous one. All of the villains he encounters are stock figures who are almost aimlessly evil, and all the townsmen he meets are good-natured folk. Without once

considering the possibility that he may be robbing the hardworking ant to help the undeserving grasshopper, we idolize the character of Robin Hood and the like.

The loveable criminal trend may take its cue from the outlaw tradition, but it certainly puts a spin on it, not only through the complex moral dilemmas these characters pose; but also through the way the characters are handled. A standard outlaw, such as the ones mentioned above, is in fact expected to be a strong, authoritative, possibly violent character that can handle a weapon. The criminals discussed in this thesis do not fit this type. Tony Soprano may be a gangster, but the tone of the show is set in a very non-standard way when the first episode begins with Tony in his psychiatrist's office. He is not only morally ambiguous in his actions; but he is in doubt of himself. As such, he becomes the parody of a real gangster. Dexter may seem to fit the outlaw type; he's strong, competent and can definitely handle his weapon, but he is also very loveable, charming and kind. Spike is the king of witty sarcasm and is not at all scary, despite once having been known as William the Bloody. And finally, Walter White does not even come close to what one imagines an outlaw to be, neither by profession, nor by appearance. Then, the novelty introduced by these characters is the ordinary and capricious way they are portrayed. This is where the real moral ambiguity of the postmodern loveable criminals lie; they are presented as three dimensional characters with real life problems and they do not present us with an easy way out as we try to make up our minds about them.

2.4 THE POSTMODERN TIMES

Unfortunately, 'postmodern' is a term bon à tout faire. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like. Further, there seems to be an attempt to make it increasingly retroactive: first it was apparently applied to certain writers or artists active in the last twenty years, then gradually it reached the beginning of the century, then still further back. And this reverse procedure continues; soon the postmodern category will include Homer. (Hutcheon 1988, p. 42)

This quote by Umberto Eco captures perfectly the elusiveness of postmodernism that escapes definitions. In fact, almost all sources on postmodernity devote a lengthy explanation to its inexplicability. This is largely due to the fact that it has become an all-encompassing notion, applied to as diverse disciplines as arts, philosophy, cinema,

literature and architecture, as well as its problematic relationship to modernism. It is interpreted both as a period and a condition; it is celebrated as much as it is dissented and seen as a thing of the past as well as something still relevant. “The novelist and critic Gilbert Adair notes in the *Postmodernist Always Rings Twice*, few isms have provoked as much perplexity and suspicion as postmodernism.” (Spencer 2001, p.143)

Its philosophical elusiveness aside, postmodern works of fiction (be it works of literature, cinema or TV) can be distinguished by common elements such as intertextuality, irony, playfulness, pastiche, and parody, which serve to produce fragmentary, recycled texts representative of our times, which are characterized, in general, by loss of meaning, loss of belief in totalitarian truths and loss of originality.

Notwithstanding these common instruments, Lloyd Spencer (2001) explains that “Postmodernism is much less a programme or intellectual framework than it is a mood or *Stimmung*- the *Zeitgeist*, a feeling in the air [that is] characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty.” In the pilot episode of *Sopranos*, Tony Soprano reveals his feelings of discontent about the ways of the world to his psychiatrist Dr. Melfi:

The morning I got sick, I'd been thinking, it's good to be in something from the ground floor up. I came too late for that and I know it. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over. I think about my father. He never reached the heights like me. But in a lot ways, he had it better. He had his people; they had their standards; they had pride. Today what have we got?

“Pilot”, 1-01

Through his expression of dissatisfaction, what Tony is unknowingly describing is the postmodern condition. In my thesis, I would like to focus on this ambivalence and ambiguity of the postmodern world and its pluralist and relativist nature. The postmodern condition has given rise to a multitude of TV shows, especially in the last two decades, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter* and *Sopranos*, where a new kind of anti-hero has emerged and largely replaced the traditional idea of the hero as understood as representative of “good” in the traditional “good vs. evil” story. This new kind of anti-hero simultaneously embodies the notions of good and evil and needs to fight inner demons as much as outer foes. His quest, in contrast to the hero’s traditional journey, becomes a quest for identity, a struggle for existence in which he constantly redefines himself. Standing in stark contrast against the unchanging personality of stock

characters, the postmodern antihero is shaped by the constant battle between his individual desires and social conventions. I would like to focus on the immensely popular aforementioned TV shows as their plots are replete with notions of crime, guilt, heroism, vigilantism, as well as goodness and evil, and demonstrate how they subvert the millennia old dichotomy of good vs. evil.

Behind the postmodern idea of pluralism is Jean-François Lyotard, who has famously defined postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives”. (1984, p. xxiv) This incredulity and skepticism was especially brought on by the horrors of the two World Wars. Grand, legitimatizing narratives such as Marxism or Christianity, as well as belief in rational thought, enlightenment, progress, emancipation, shortly all those concepts associated with modernism no longer held. (Baker 2000, p. 65) “Postmodernity, Lyotard argues, prefers ‘little narratives’, those which do not attempt to present an overarching ‘Truth’ but offer a qualified, limited ‘truth’; one relative to a particular situation.” (Nicol 2009, p. 12)

As such, the slide from the idealized heroism to anti-heroism in Northrop Frye’s list, or the fall from the modernist hero to the postmodernist anti-hero is best explained through the changing times. Rita Gurung points out the massive breakdown of religious, social and moral values and securities as well as the rise of alienation, hedonism, inhumanity, despair, authoritarianism. (2010, p. vi) In such an environment, it only makes sense that the vile charm of a dirty cop with a conscience should appeal to our own fragmented conscience more than, say, a perfectly lovable Dr. Huxtable (*The Cosby Show*). “Thus the archetypal figure of the postmodern anti-hero represents our contemporary confusion, despair and the anguish of time, space and destiny.” (*ibid*)

2.5 POSTMODERN TV

The last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of postmodern TV shows; from animated series and comedies filled with dysfunctional characters, intertextual references and parody such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Seinfeld* and *The Office* to dramas such as *Twin Peaks*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *X Files* where blurring of genres brings

elements as diverse as horror and comedy together. A constant playfulness marks all of these shows, by which elements of mass and pop culture are constantly referenced; clichés are subverted and made fun of; texts within texts are created. As such, these postmodern shows constantly recycle and reinvent themselves, creating an ambivalence and ambiguity –or in the case of *Seinfeld*, famously described as “a show about nothing” a lack- of meaning.

One common characteristic of these shows is how they each construct their own universes with unique set of principles; the worlds narrated in these shows do not necessarily operate like ours. In *Buffy*, for instance, despite the horrific deaths, supernatural events and all other kinds of weirdness which have become daily encounters, the students or the citizens of Sunnydale do not seem to be bothered much by these events. The absence of law enforcement in the aftermath of much of these events is also a fact that is readily observable but nonetheless dismissible as the audience accepts these to be the laws of Sunnydale universe.

Aside from style and plot, the ambiguity of these shows is most heavily manifest in the protagonists themselves. Especially in the shows that I propose to focus on, the characters have become increasingly ambiguous in their understanding of morals.

The anti-heroes that I am focusing on in this work are of a particular kind. They are best described as lovable criminals; those charming crooks and killers that although we know full well belong in jail, we still want them to get away with what they’re doing. Among them are *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s Spike, Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos*, Walter White of *Breaking Bad* and *Dexter*’s eponymous character Dexter Morgan. Each of these four characters are perfect examples of the postmodern anti-hero with fragment identities, their own moral code, understanding of good and evil and redeemable qualities. The reason I’ve chosen to keep my discussion limited to lovable criminals, however, is due to the fact that a criminal being lovable is a much more telling sign of how the idea of questionable morality is at play, than say, Dr. House’s cocky banter with a terminal patient. The fact that we really don’t want to see Dexter, an actual serial killer, get caught tells more about us than our mediocre sympathies for a womanizing Don Draper.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 THE QUESTION OF GOOD AND EVIL

We are bored with good and evil. We renounce the theme. With the exception of saints and sociopaths, few in this world are anything but a confused and corrupted combination of personal motivations... Ultimately, the story-telling that speaks to our current condition, that grapples with the basic realities and contradictions of our immediate world are the stories that, in the end, have a chance of presenting an argument. (Alvarez 2004, p.9)

Supernatural is not one of the 4 main shows being discussed in this paper, however, its main characters Sam and Dean Winchester provide useful insight as to the moral ambiguity and grey areas between good and evil. *Supernatural* is, much like *Buffy*, one of those shows where the genre is blurred between horror, comedy and fantasy. It adapts a serial/ series mixture where a monster of the week is hunted down each week, while a larger end of season beast is also pursued with a larger mythology at the background. The show starts off with a simple premise: the Winchester brothers are “hunters”, travelling from town to town hunting down demons, monsters, vampires, ghosts, ghouls and other such beings. Against the senseless and pure evilness of these demons, much like the Orcs of *Lord of the Rings*, Winchesters symbolize inherent goodness, so the main fuel of the show is a fight between the forces of “dark” and “light”.

In more than a few instances, however, this monochromatic fight is put to test as beasts not easily classifiable as “evil” present themselves. The brothers get into a serious discussion about what to do with a vampire that has repented and claims to no longer feed on humans. They eventually let her go. Another demon that normally feeds on blood of live flesh has grown a conscious, and disciplined herself only to consume animal blood. When her child becomes sick and can only be cured by human blood, she hunts down criminals that have escaped law forces so as give as little damage as she possibly can, but an unrelenting Dean still hunts her on grounds that she might kill innocents again. And one of the saddest stories of the show is when the brothers need to kill a female werewolf, who Sam’s fallen in love with. She cannot control herself when she’s in wolf mode, has no recollection of the damage she does and she cannot be stopped in any other way. Although she’s not evil per se, she still needs to be exterminated.

All these bring to mind a conversation Dean has with Gordon, a keen hunter that the brothers meet. A self-righteous hunter, Gordon claims that: “It's all black and white. There's no maybe. You find the bad thing, kill it. See, most people spend their lives in shades of gray. Is this right? Is that wrong? Not us.” (‘Bloodlust’ 2-03). Dean seems to agree with his mode of thinking but before long, he begins questioning himself and everything that their father’s taught them. “What if we killed things that didn't deserve killing?” he asks, realizing that not everything is black and white as Gordon thinks.

The underlying idea of doing the right thing is constantly at play in *Supernatural*, as the brothers try to fulfill their duties as hunters. And it is again this idea that governs how we think about good and evil; not as set moral standards, but more often than not as concepts understood in relation to something else. Joanna Ioannidou argues that “when engaging with a fictional narrative, audiences tend to judge characters in relation to the situations these characters experience and in comparison to other characters in the narrative.” (2012). She focuses on *Dexter* in her argument, but her point that we assess characters not according to a universal set of standards, but more in relation to their surroundings is a general concept that applies to the antiheroes in discussion in this paper.

In the episode ‘New Moon Rising’, Buffy faces a dilemma similar to the one Sam and Dean face about whether their kills are justified:

Buffy: You sounded like Mr. Initiative. Demons bad, people good.

Riley: Something wrong with that theorem?

Buffy: There's different degrees of-

Riley: Evil?

Buffy: It's just... Different with different demons. There are creatures - vampires, for example -- that aren't evil at all.

Beth Braun points out the “moral ambiguity that permeates many of the characters” and states that “evil is often less fixed in these shows, with many characters demonstrating both decent and demonic traits and behaviors across episodes or seasons.” (2000, p. 89)

Among the main characters of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are Oz, a werewolf who spends two nights a month locked up in a cage so he doesn't hurt anyone; Anya, once an avenging

demon who is now a normal teenager, and Willow, part computer geek- part powerful witch who at one point steps toward the dark side; and of course Angel, the vampire with a soul, who occasionally becomes a normal vampire, causing trouble for the gang. In other words, “good and evil are ever shifting qualities” in these shows. But as the opening quote of this section suggests, this is also why we like such shows.

I have mentioned earlier how separate universes are constructed in each of the TV shows. This construction also includes how the borders of morality are drawn. Notions of good and evil, in particular, are defined according to the workings of each show separately. Let’s look at similar incidences in different shows and how they are used to portray contradictory definitions.

3.2 DEXTER MORGAN VS. TONY SOPRANO

In the opening episode of *Dexter*’s first season, Dexter Morgan’s first victim is Mike Donovan, child abuser and killer. It is no coincidence that Dexter’s first prey should be guilty of such a crime. Crimes of passion or revenge killings may, in certain circumstances, be justified to a certain extent but there can never be an excuse for child abuse. As such, Mike Donovan constitutes the perfect crime for Dexter, whose primary instinct is to feed his killing urges but who nonetheless wishes to punish killers in the process. Hence, once we accept who Dexter is and what motivates him, we begin celebrating his deeds. If he is a killer of killers, then he should *definitely* kill a child abuser/ killer.

In *Sopranos*, Tony Soprano is portrayed as the ruthless mafia boss, loyal friend, loving father and caring (albeit cheating) husband. The series begins, however, with him seeking therapy to make sense of his growing sense of uneasiness and anxiety. No establishing shots, as it were, are used for grounding him as any of the above identities; the pilot episode simply begins at the office of his psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi. What begins as an attempt to get a quick answer (on Tony’s part) about why he fainted at a family function evolves into an effort to reach a deeper understanding of his identity, his motives, how

his past and family have shaped him. An evolving sense of what is right and what is wrong accompanies this quest as Dr. Melfi delves deeper into Tony's psyche.

Halfway through the first season, the issue of child molesting comes up, in a different context than in *Dexter*, however. When Ally, a friend of Tony's daughter, slits her wrists, it eventually becomes known that the local football coach has raped her. The mob unanimously wishes to kill him, obviously. A conversation between Artie, a friend of Tony's, and Artie's wife delineates the delicate issues involved here:

Charmaine: Something going on Artie? Your mobster friend gonna do something crazy?

Artie: If I had any balls I'd do it myself.

Charmaine: Arthur, you do have balls, that's why you're not like him.

Artie: You can't tell me that coach Hauser doesn't deserve it. Who's worse, Tony Soprano, or that child molesting fuck?

“Boca”, 1-09

Later, however, Artie has a change of heart and asks Tony to “do the right thing”: not kill the coach and report him to the authorities instead. Together with Dr. Melfi's influence, Tony actually withdraws the hit order on the coach, and subsequently appears to be relieved for doing the right thing. The question that remains, however, is why it would be wrong for a mafia boss, who doesn't have problem killing people, to kill the perpetrator in this incidence.

Later in the series, Tony reveals his firm belief about him not deserving to go to hell for the things he's done. According to him, only the worst people deserve Hell, “the twisted and demented psychos who kill for pleasure, the cannibals, the degenerate bastards who molest and torture babies and kids, the Hitlers, the Pol Pots.” (“From Where to Eternity”, 2-09) He, on the other hand, likens his business to a war, and himself to a soldier, and draws the conclusion that soldiers kill other soldiers, hardly a crime punishable by Hell. Tony's *business* does not involve killing civilians, his business does not entail vigilantism, and therefore although it would have given him pleasure, killing the coach would have been wrong in his universe. And hence, while we applaud Dexter for taking care of a child molester, we congratulate Tony for not doing the same.

3.3 DR. MELFI AS A REDEEMING FACTOR IN *SOPRANOS*

Catherine Johnson argues that *Sopranos* is “densely plotted, focusing on exploring the complexities and contradictions of its characters’ moral landscape, and never allowing its audience to take an easy position in relation to the storylines and characters.” (Abbott 2010, p. 149) One way this complexity is explored is through the presence of Dr. Jennifer Melfi, Tony Soprano’s psychiatrist. The fact that the series begin in her office with Tony as the patient, and that a good portion of the show is dedicated to Tony’s therapy sessions provides us with a side of him that we would normally not see: a vulnerable, softer version him. The way Tony opens up to Dr. Melfi gives us the more human side of Tony, which is one of the reasons we like him, despite his shortcomings.

In a discussion Dr. Melfi has with her ex-husband Richard about Tony Soprano, Richard asserts that Tony is evil: “Call him a patient. The man is a criminal Jennifer. And after a while you’re going to get past psychotherapy and its cheesy moral relativism and finally get to good and evil... and he’s evil.” Dr. Melfi’s general contention against this argument, however, is that he doesn’t know Tony Soprano. The Soprano Richard knows is based on media coverage of him. We know Tony more intimately, however, and so does Dr. Melfi. She provides for a neutral and confidential zone where Tony can open up, helping us see the man behind the gangster. This relationship that lasts all throughout the season is a significant factor that changes our view of Tony. His vulnerability and contradictory character are his main redeeming qualities.

3.4 DEBRA AS A REDEEMING FACTOR IN *DEXTER*

Dexter’s stepsister Debra is one of the few people he loves and cares about. The feeling is mutual; Debra has looked up to her older brother since she was a little girl, and even now, after she’s become a bold detective, she still counts very much on Dexter. The sociopath that he is, Dexter has naturally kept his secret from his sister and Debra has no idea about Dexter’s dark urges and killing sprees. Dexter often thinks about what would happen if she finds out, and he is quite confident that having a serial killer as a brother is not something Debra would condone. (Howard 2010, p. 101)

Meanwhile, we have the luxury of rooting for Dexter in the privacy of our homes, enjoying the vigilante justice that he so capably distributes. At the end of Season 1, Dexter daydreams about a parade held in his honor, where the friendly crowd cheers and shouts “You sliced him up real good”, “Way to take out the trash- Thanks, buddy” and “Alright Dexter, protecting our children!” (Howard 2010, p.188) This is not too far off from the mentality of the viewer who enjoys Dexter’s deeds, while knowing that the “moral” thing to do is having faith in the justice system and allowing authorities to take care of criminals. Even if viewers like to think of themselves as civilized people who would take the high road in real life, who would not attempt lynching a criminal, let’s say, or who would renounce someone that lynched a criminal, they can still enjoy some form of hypothetical vigilante justice. Being a relentless officer of the law, however, Debra does not have that luxury. She has to abide by the law at all times.

Dexter’s worst nightmare becomes true when Debra stumbles upon one of kills. She finds herself in a dilemma, where she can neither condone Dexter, nor arrest him. She tries to cope with this new information the best she can; treating Dexter’s murderous urge as an addiction that he can quit via therapy, and showing as much support as humanly possible. But things change after a young girl loses her life because Debra fails to arrest a particularly dangerous and demented sexual offender. When Dexter captures this offender, kills him and lets Debra know of his achievement, Debra can no longer assume her previously self-righteous attitude. She is happy that Dexter has killed him; she is relieved; she is horrified that she is relieved; and she asks Dexter: “What does this make me?”, to which he answers “It makes you human”.

This is how Debra levels with the viewer and shares our opinion of a well-deserved vigilante justice. We are only viewers, but she accepts this in the diegetic reality of the show. Her acceptance becomes a further redeeming factor for who Dexter is and what he does.

3.5 DEXTER MORGAN VS. WALTER WHITE

In each season of *Dexter*, there are two types of victims: relatively petty criminals that Dexter identifies, pursues and kills within a single episode, and larger beasts that Dexter needs to pursue for a whole season. For the first three seasons, the beasts that fall in the second category have been positioned so that they are in some way representative of Dexter's darkest side which he's been trying to suppress since he was a child: the side that wants to kill without a code, to kill for the sheer pleasure of it. Upon coming across these beasts, he is momentarily tempted to join them, wonders how his life would be if he did, and then does the right thing by destroying them; destroying in the process that dark part that he never allows himself to embrace. "These three adversaries are important to Dexter's strange development as an ethical being," writes Stan Beeler (Howard 2010, p. 227), "unlike the villains that can be found in the Batman or Lone Ranger series, Dexter's opponents test his ethical rather than his physical prowess."

Of these individuals, Lila, Dexter's nemesis in the second season, is especially significant because she doesn't exactly fit Harry's code but deserves to be killed anyhow. Introduced to us as Dexter's wild and sexy Narcotics Anonymous sponsor at first, Lila soon reveals her true identity as a needy and dangerous sociopath. Although for a while Dexter gets romantically involved with her and is tempted to join her life where she acts freely without considering any consequences, things take a different turn when she kidnaps Dexter's children and tries to burn down her house with them in it. She has become such a great liability that we are actually relieved when Dexter hunts her down in Paris and kills her.

In *Breaking Bad*, on the other hand, a very similar situation results in a very different moral outcome. *Breaking Bad*'s basic premise is that Walter White, a father dying of cancer, can justifiably turn to criminal ways in order to support his family. We can easily identify with a person who would do morally questionable deeds (manufacturing illegal drugs, in this case) to look after his family. When Walter, a chemistry teacher by profession, and Jess, his former student and current partner in crime have a falling out; they decide to split their money and go their separate ways. A disagreement about how

to split the money results in Jesse's girlfriend Jane blackmailing Walter, however. She threatens Walter of exposing his identity to his family. When he pays a visit to Jess to talk things over, with no particular hostility in mind, he witnesses Jane choke on her own vomit during a heroin overdose but does nothing to help her. While we realize that Jane was a threat to Walter, letting her die cannot be properly justified on that fact alone. Her death becomes the incident through which Walter passes on to a darker side. Lila's death and Jane's death, while similar on the surface, brings about very dissimilar outcomes and character developments. One main idea encompasses all these situations, however, which is the fact that each character grows, deepens and reaches a different level of complexity with each of these decisions.

3.6 SPIKE THE BUFFOON

While a mixture of concepts such as family and justice provide Dexter and Tony Soprano with redeemable qualities, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* peculiar vampire Spike is made loveable through a different course: comedy. In his article *Spike is for Kicks*, Michele Boyette traces Spike's transformation and argues that: "a figure of modern amorality and random evil, Spike has, however, by degrees, become a figure of fun, a buffoon, and is now becoming a comic hero—or anti-hero. Spike, once very villainous indeed, is now laughable, but not irredeemable, and that is the basis of his peculiar transformation." (Boyette)

Once a gruesome vampire known as William the Bloody, Spike is eventually transformed into a vampire with a soul, deeply infatuated with Buffy, willing to sacrifice himself so as to save his friends, and ultimately the world. Granted, it is only after a chip is installed in his brain that he involuntarily gives up feeding on humans, allies with Buffy and her friends and begins fighting on the side of "good", but that's not why we love him. Before any of that happens, we still know that he's not like other vampires we meet in the show. They're senseless evil creatures that are only there for Buffy to dust them, whereas Spike is a charming, good-looking, witty vampire with surprisingly "human" emotions such as love, lust, jealousy and a sense of humor despite the fact that he has no soul.

Angel, the vampire with a soul, the helper of those in need, and Buffy's only true love, is another very important character on the show, who actually gets a show of his own after the second season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, when compared to Spike, Angel remains almost cartoonish; he is pure evil when he is evil, and too good when he has a soul. He lacks the charisma, the sense of humor and the richness of character in general that make Spike charming and interesting. As such, Spike's transformation is a more meaningful one, whereas Angel appears to be more of a stock character.

3.7 FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES

Looking at the proliferation of anti-heroes in television, it's easy to adduce that changing times call for changing fictional figures. Ihab Hassan, who points out the rapidly disappearing harmony of the world asserts:

The world at our times seems to have vanished, or become a rigid, intractable mass; the anarchy of nihilism and the terror of staticism delimit the extremes between which there seems to be no viable means. Mediation between the world and the self appears no longer possible; there is only surrender and recoil. In his recoil, the hero has become the anti-hero. (1961, p. 327)

As such, the most significant outcome of the recoil Hassan talks about is the fragmentation of identity. Traditional way of seeing a character as a whole is no longer possible; each of the characters I've mentioned above have split personalities, which make sure that we like them in spite of themselves. Spike the vampire is naturally witty and charming; Tony Soprano is a tender father; Dexter is a killer who kills killers and Walter White is the nerd who makes great comeback as a drug dealer, only to look after his family. While these may seem like far off contradictions, Linda Hutcheon says that "Contradiction and a move toward antitotalization characterize postmodernism." (1988, p. 42) *Contradiction and a move toward antitotalization* are also what characterize the postmodern anti-heroes. Earlier I had pointed to the relinquishing of *Truth* and emergence of multiple and relative truths instead. These truths may invariably host contradictions and ambiguities, but that is not to say that there are any binary oppositions in postmodernism. "On the contrary, the elements of these contradictions are usually multiple; the focus is on differences, not single otherness." (Hutcheon 1988, p. 42)

Postmodernism stylistically manifests itself in a similar fashion. Through the blurring of genres, coexistence of high art and low art, pastiche of multiple styles, postmodernist works create a multitude of mixes of colors, not one shade of grey, and definitely not a monochromatic black&white vision. The same goes true for how characters are defined: “Postmodern characterization ... leads to elaboration of ‘characters’ whose existence (rather than essence) is characterized by difference (rather than identity). Postmodern figures are always differing, not just from other characters, but also from their putative ‘selves.’ (Docherty 1991).

Everyone wears masks. One cannot be expected to behave the same way around distant acquaintances and close friends. But for ordinary people, these masks more or less resemble one another. In the case of Dexter Morgan, however, there are huge gaps between his personae as loving father, diligent analyst, responsible sibling, and ruthless killer. At one point, this fact becomes too much, even for Dexter, as pointed out by Harry, his father (or his father’s ghost whom Dexter frequently converses with):

Harry: You’re juggling too many people, Dexter.

Dexter: I know. Arthur, Beaudry, Rita, now Batista . . .

Harry: I’m not talking about them. I mean Dexter Morgan. Blood tech. Husband.

Father. Serial killer. And now Kyle Butler, extortionist? Which one are you?

Dexter: (looks into multiple mirrors) All of them.

“Hello, Dexter Morgan,” 4-11

A similar point is raised by Tony Soprano’s wife Carmela who says: “It’s always a multiple choice thing with you Tony. I can’t tell if you’re old fashioned, paranoid or just a fucking asshole.” (“A Hit is a Hit,” 1-10) Walter White, good-natured chemistry teacher, and his alter-ego Heisenberg, diligent and merciless drug lord, is no different. “Perceived as an inventory of identities, none of which gets precedence over the other, the postmodern anti-hero/heroine becomes thus just an instance of fragmentariness and multiplicity of the contemporary world.” (Toma 2010, p. 245) Hence, our anti-heroes are defined, more than anything, by this multiplicity of character.

It is through these contradictions that we like the anti-heroic characters; their split personalities at times enable them to do things we wished we could, and at times it enables

them to redeem their sins. All in all, the postmodern anti-hero is a charismatic one in direct contrast with the apathetic, unmotivated modern anti-hero such as *The Stranger's* Meursault.

Looking at the anti-heroes of the four shows I've mentioned, as well as numerous others, another pattern emerges aside from the identity crisis that they are in. They all seem to be enjoying themselves very much; a fact which is either portrayed on its own, such as Tony Soprano's indulgence in worldly pleasures, from cigars to mistresses or in contrast to its negation, such as Buffy's uptight responsibility against Spike's nonchalant attitude of *jouissance*. Either way, the carefree enjoyment they get out of life is one of the reasons why we, perhaps enviously, like them.

It is also a significant sign, however, that despite their criminal behavior, they operate according to a moral code of their own, which is what makes an anti-hero redeemable. Viewers are willing to look past murder, for instance, if it's committed in the name of vigilante justice. Through many such justifiable acts, these characters subvert our understanding of good and evil. However, anti-heroes are not stock characters or two-dimensional, purely evil villains; their grey areas give them room for improvement. Especially through a strong sense of attachment caused either by a love interest (Spike's affections for Buffy changes him), love of children (Dexter's baby boy has a huge impact on his outlook) or near death experience (getting shot makes Tony Soprano realize his shortcomings) a will to change or to grow is triggered in them.

A closer look at anti-heroes therefore shows us that at the basis of it all, we love anti-heroes not despite their outrageous behavior, but because they are not so outrageous or subversive in the first place. However ruthless they may appear to be, there's a certain line that they do not cross, certain institutions or values that they do not attack. A character behaving in a contradictory manner to this shall better illustrate the validity of the point.

Walter White of *Breaking Bad* starts off as a completely mellow family man and slowly evolves to a drug dealer who is willing to take any risks for his family. Up until this point, he fits the anti-hero persona that we have talked about; whatever his shortcomings, he

makes up for with his intentions. Yet, his evolution does not stop there; he slowly becomes a villain, crossing a line he shouldn't have crossed: poisoning a child as a necessary step in his master plan to take out the drug lord that puts his life at risk. Vince Gilligan, the creator of show, has pointed that he wanted to create a character who was good when the series began, then gradually became evil, in order to see how far he could bend the audience's sympathies before they finally broke. (Kain, 2011) It is not expected of the audience to continue liking an antihero whatever the circumstances; it would not be conscionable to support Walter when his original intention of taking care of his family has transformed into a self-gratifying, narcissistic endeavor, which ironically puts his family at risk. Therefore, *Breaking Bad* is an excellent example in illustrating the not-so-subversive nature of the other shows.

4. CONCLUSION

There is a plethora of American postmodern TV shows across all genres today, marked by a common character: the anti-hero. The tendency is to present the anti-hero in such a way that he is a realistic depiction of the contemporary individual, with his shortcomings as well as his aspirations. He's neither a villain, nor a saint; he embodies both notions but lives outside of the good vs. evil dichotomy. He more often exists in the grey areas in between; engages in morally questionable deeds, but comes off as loveable and sympathetic nonetheless.

I have discussed four such characters from recent television series, all morally questionable at best, all greatly loved by fans: Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*), Spike (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*) and Walter White (*Breaking Bad*). The depth of character and moral dilemma inherent in these anti-heroes mimics real people and real life. This subversion of the good vs. evil dichotomy lies at the basis of the appeal of these characters.

This has a lot to do with the fact that TV shows do not present absolute truths but instead offer us contradictory visions of the world where concepts only make sense when defined against each other. The postmodern condition has in fact affected our understanding of the world as well as our reception of fictional characters, just as we no longer believe in a world where a purely good hero comes and saves the day, we no longer want to see an outlaw character, who is so perfectly justifiable in his morally questionable actions that he inevitably ends up being the good guy. Dexter, in all his murderous un-heroicness, appeals more to us.

That being said, the archetypal hero has only been slightly transformed into the anti-hero, not wholly subverted. We are still drawn to a certain kind of anti-hero, one with particular values and strong beliefs. For all his subversions and shocking characteristics, the loveable anti-hero still traditional in many ways. In other words, we don't like him despite his subversions, we like them because they are not so subversive to begin with. The line between an anti-hero and a villain, is not such a fine line, after all.

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