



# Factional Fractures: A Realistic Dystopia in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*

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## Abstract

*Veronica Roth's Divergent constructs a disturbingly plausible dystopia in which five factions impose strict social control over a deteriorating Chicago, reflecting current trends of authoritarianism and tribalism. Tris Prior's Divergence reveals the oppressive characteristics of the system, highlighting its false sense of choice and its use of fear as a weapon. Through its psychological realism and social commentary, the novel encapsulates modern concerns regarding identity, surveillance, and political extremism. Divergent acts as both a cautionary tale and a reflection, demonstrating how swiftly societal divisions can undermine individuality in our reality.*

**Keywords:** dystopia, societal divisions, psychological realism, divergence, factions

Veronica Roth's *Divergent* depicts a carefully crafted dystopian society in which human identity is systematically governed by a complex faction system that purports to uphold social order but ultimately serves as a mechanism of psychological and physical domination. The narrative unfolds in a futuristic Chicago, divided into five distinct factions - Abnegation, Dauntless, Erudite, Amity, and Candor - each committed to the promotion and enforcement of a singular virtue: selflessness, bravery, intelligence, peace, and honesty, respectively. This inflexible social structure necessitates unwavering loyalty, as highlighted by the recurring phrase "Faction before blood" (Roth 42), which emphasizes the system's preference for ideological conformity

over familial ties or personal identity. This faction system, established to preserve order following an unspecified collapse, enforces stringent conformity, meting out punishment to those who resist or fail to conform. The story centres on Beatrice "Tris" Prior, an apparently ordinary girl who makes a transformative decision at the age of sixteen, only to realize she is Divergent, possessing characteristics of multiple factions, a perilous deviation in a society that demands total loyalty to a single ideology.

As Tris endures the harsh initiation process of her new faction, she reveals the sinister reality behind the system's illusion: a meticulously orchestrated regime of control, manipulation, and violence aimed at stifling individuality. The Erudite elite, led by



the coldly rational Jeanine Matthews, exploit fear and propaganda to rationalize the elimination of Divergents, portraying them as dangers to societal stability.

At the same time, Tris's fight for survival compels her to face moral dilemmas regarding loyalty, identity, and resistance, issues that resonate profoundly with contemporary concerns about authoritarianism, systemic oppression, and the sacrifices involved in rebellion.

In contrast to fantastical, distant futures, Roth's depiction of Chicago presents a deteriorating urban environment, with its remnants serving as a haunting reminder of a civilization that has collapsed, resembling our own. The faction system reflects real-world political extremism, tribalism, and ideological divides, while the oppression of Divergents resonates with both historical and contemporary instances of dissent suppression. Through Tris's journey, Roth poses a chilling inquiry: Is genuine freedom attainable in a society that insists on total conformity?

The faction system presents a façade of providing options via its yearly Choosing Ceremony, concealing what Michel Foucault would identify as "disciplinary mechanisms that function to normalize and classify individuals" (Discipline and Punish 184). This results in a societal framework where any deviation from established behavioural standards is viewed as a perilous divergence.

At the core of Roth's dystopian narrative is the simulation of meritocracy within the faction system, where sixteen-year-olds seemingly choose their lifelong social group. Nevertheless, as illustrated by Tris Prior's journey, this "choice" is significantly limited by psychological evaluations and societal conditioning. The aptitude test given to young individuals claims to uncover their "natural" faction; however, as Tris learns when her results are ambiguous, it primarily serves to uphold the system's dominance: "They want you to think you have a choice...but the test tells them who you really are" (Roth 56). This deceptive sense of autonomy reflects what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes as "the reproduction of social hierarchies through ostensibly neutral institutional practices" (Bourdieu and Passeron 110), where educational and vocational tracking systems in modern societies perpetuate class divisions under the pretense of impartial evaluation.

The Erudite faction's exploitation of information and historical narratives to rationalize their takeover of Abnegation leadership particularly exemplifies Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, in which dominant groups "manufacture consent through control of intellectual and moral direction" (Gramsci 12).

The five factions together form a microcosm of exaggerated social archetypes that both reflect and critique the actual class structures and political extremism present in society. Abnegation's self-denying governance, which mandates that its members avoid mirrors and consume plain food, mirrors elements of both religious asceticism and political austerity measures. Their claimed virtue conceals what Hannah Arendt refers to as "the banality of evil" (Arendt 135) in their participation in systemic oppression.

Dauntless's militaristic culture, characterized by initiation rituals that include controlled drowning and simulated suicide leaps, embodies the motto "Jump first, fear later" (Roth 87), reflecting current concerns regarding the militarization of police forces and the psychological conditioning of soldiers. Military historian Dave Grossman notes, "The creation of effective warriors requires both the suppression of individual moral hesitation and the cultivation of group loyalty above all else" (Grossman 149), a process that is vividly illustrated in Four's memories of his Dauntless initiation: "They break you down until you don't know who you are anymore, then rebuild you into what they want" (Roth 203).

Erudite's technocratic elitism, exemplified by Jeanine Matthews's frigid rationalism, acts as a warning of what philosopher Theodor Adorno cautioned against as "the tyranny of instrumental reason" (Adorno 45), wherein empirical knowledge is separated from ethical considerations. Their creation of simulation serums to dominate Dauntless soldiers and eliminate Divergents mirrors contemporary fears regarding technological authoritarianism, ranging from surveillance capitalism to AI-driven social credit systems.

Amity's pastoral pacifism, although initially seeming harmless, unveils its own type of coercion through the pharmacological enforcement of emotional balance, with their "peace serum" producing what Herbert Marcuse would describe as "repressive tolerance" (Marcuse 81) - a superficial



peace sustained through the chemical suppression of dissent. Candor's judicial absolutism, which demands total transparency during truth serum interrogations, embodies current discussions surrounding privacy versus security, with their stark courtroom dramas foreshadowing what Shoshana Zuboff refers to as "the age of surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 15) in which personal data transforms into both a commodity and a weapon.

This stratification of factions leads to "the intersection of social circles" (Simmel 141), where individuals are simplified to singular aspects of their identity. The oppressive characteristics of the system are most clearly revealed in its treatment of Divergents—those exceptional individuals who exhibit capabilities across multiple factions and thus resist straightforward classification. Tris's realization of her Divergence incites immediate fear: "They tell you Divergence is dangerous...but they don't tell you why" (Roth 112). This intentional ambiguity reflects real-world power dynamics noted by Foucault, where "the undefined threat becomes more effective than specific prohibitions" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 101). The systematic eradication of Divergents mirrors both historical and modern-day persecution of individuals who challenge social classifications, ranging from the witch hunts of the Renaissance to contemporary practices of conversion therapy.

The most catastrophic effect of the faction system is its elimination of psychological and behavioural intricacy, thereby limiting human potential to strictly defined roles. This is vividly illustrated in the simulations employed to evaluate and manage faction members, which neuroscientist Antonio Damasio would identify as "the neural basis of reduced consciousness" (Damasio 167), where environmental stimuli provoke pre-established reactions without engaging higher cognitive functions.

The factionless underclass epitomizes the most severe manifestation of the system - individuals classified as unfit for any faction, thereby deprived of fundamental rights and dignity. Their plight serves as a critique of what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as "wasted lives" (Bauman 12) in the context of late modernity, highlighting groups rendered unnecessary by prevailing economic and social frameworks. Tris's initial horror at the factionless, stating, "They're like ghosts" (Roth 210), eventually

transforms into an acknowledgment of their common humanity, reflecting historical changes in the perception of poverty from a moral deficiency to a consequence of systemic issues. The factionless camps, characterized by their rudimentary shelters and foraged supplies, bring to mind Mike Davis's concept of a "planet of slums" (Davis 19), which is an unavoidable outcome of divided societies.

Roth's dystopian narrative derives its disquieting strength from its basis in observable social dynamics rather than on speculative technologies. The internal logic of the faction system mirrors what sociologist Max Weber referred to as "the routinization of charisma" (Weber 246), wherein revolutionary ideals solidify into bureaucratic structures. This transformation is evident in Abnegation's shift from post-war reformers to stagnant bureaucrats, as well as in Dauntless's change from brave protectors to brutal enforcers. Political scientist James Scott notes, "The high-modernist impulse to reorder society according to rational principles invariably produces its own irrationalities" (Scott 89), a trend illustrated by the faction system's increasing violence in its quest for stability.

The novel's climax, where Erudite employs Dauntless as mind-controlled soldiers to slaughter Abnegation, encapsulates the convergence of ideology, technology, and violence that defines modern state terror. Historian Timothy Snyder's assertion that "the Holocaust required not just hatred but bureaucracy" (Snyder 121) finds a fictional parallel in Jeanine's methodical orchestration of genocide through serum algorithms and factional divisions. This sequence particularly resonates with current anxieties regarding automated warfare and drone strikes, where, as philosopher Grégoire Chamayou observes, "technological mediation enables violence while obscuring moral responsibility" (Chamayou 67). In a time characterized by algorithmically reinforced echo chambers and identity politics, Roth's portrayal of a society splintered by its own categorical imperatives serves more as a diagnosis than a mere warning.

The unsettling power of the dystopian realm depicted in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* is not derived from fantastical elements of futurism, but rather from its foundation in familiar mechanisms of social control that reflect current authoritarian tactics. Central to the novel's realism is the Erudite faction's



advanced system of governmental surveillance and propaganda, which closely resembles the digital authoritarianism and media manipulation prevalent in the twenty-first century. The systematic management of information channels by Jeanine Matthews exemplifies what philosopher Jason Stanley refers to as “the fascist politics of hierarchy maintained through manufactured narratives” (Stanley 58). This is evident in *Erudite*’s revisionist accounts and disparagement of Abnegation leaders, which parallel the modern phenomenon of “fake news” ecosystems. Furthermore, the faction’s creation of simulation serums to secretly manipulate Dauntless soldiers serves as a biological counterpart to digital surveillance capitalism, which Shoshana Zuboff characterizes as “instrumentarian power that modifies behavior through prediction and modification” (Zuboff 215). This concept is vividly illustrated when Tris uncovers the concealed control room where Erudite technicians oversee brainwashed Dauntless troops: “Rows of screens showed Dauntless soldiers moving like puppets while Erudite scientists adjusted their serum levels” (Roth 327). The clinical accuracy of this operation reflects contemporary anxieties regarding algorithmic governance and neuro-technological warfare, with historian Yuval Noah Harari cautioning that “the next frontier of dictatorship will be brain hacking” (Harari 75).

Tris Prior’s Divergence serves as both a narrative mechanism and a philosophical challenge to imposed conformity, encapsulating what Michel Foucault referred to as “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* 10). Her ability to resist simulation programming signifies not only a biological deviation but also what psychologist Carl Rogers describes as “the fully functioning person’s ability to maintain congruence between experience and self-concept” (Rogers 196). This psychological authenticity elevates Tris above conventional dystopian protagonists; her conflict reflects the experiences of real-world adolescents grappling with stringent social norms, especially when she states, “I don’t want to be just one thing. I can’t be. I want to be brave, and selfless, and smart, and kind, and honest” (Roth 256). This assertion aligns with Erik Erikson’s theory of identity development during adolescence, characterized as “a crisis between role consolidation and identity diffusion” (Erikson 132), indicating

that Roth deliberately designed Divergence as a metaphor for the universal human battle against categorical thinking. The system’s brutal reaction to Divergence—pursuing and eliminating those who exhibit complex identities—draws a stark parallel to contemporary conversion therapies and hate crimes targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, with Judith Butler contending that “the violence against non-normative identities reveals the fragility of the normative order itself” (Butler 21).

The utilization of fear as a weapon in Roth’s Chicago functions through both psychological and institutional mechanisms that closely mirror the political strategies of the twenty-first century. The initiation rituals, characterized by their audacity, employ what sociologist Erving Goffman would identify as “total institution tactics” (Goffman 15), systematically dismantling the self-perception of initiates through orchestrated trauma. The initiation’s simulated suicide leap, which begins with the command: “Jump first, fear later” (Roth 87), reflects military and fraternity hazing methods intended to cultivate group loyalty, akin to what psychologist Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment uncovered regarding “how easily institutional power transforms ordinary people into complicit actors” (Zimbardo 212). On a broader societal scale, *Erudite* creates existential threats to rationalize authoritarian overreach, with Jeanine asserting, “Divergents threaten our entire social order” (Roth 398) - a statement that chillingly resonates with modern political fearmongering concerning immigrants, terrorists, and other fabricated Others. This perspective aligns with anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “the fear of small numbers” (Appadurai 6), wherein marginalized groups are scapegoated for societal fears. The faction wars that arise when this fear is fully weaponized illustrate what political scientist Robert Pape describes as “the strategic logic of coercive violence” (Pape 33), where the targeting of civilians seeks to disrupt social cohesion.

The simulation technology that is pivotal to the narrative of the novel serves as a notably insightful metaphor for contemporary issues surrounding virtual realities and the manipulation of behaviour. The hallucinations induced by *Erudite*’s serum function as a pharmacological precursor to what philosopher Jean Baudrillard referred to as



“simulacra - copies without originals” (Baudrillard 6), prompting inquiries into the essence of consent when perceptions can be chemically modified. This form of technological realism foreshadows current discussions regarding deepfake media and augmented reality, with media scholar Douglas Rushkoff cautioning that “we are entering an era where the very concept of objective reality may become untenable” (Rushkoff 88). Tris’s capacity to identify glitches in the simulation: “The apple doesn’t smell right” (Roth 134) exemplifies what critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno described as “the emancipatory potential of negative thinking” (Horkheimer and Adorno 41) - the ability to recognize contradictions within prevailing systems.

The disintegration of the faction system into violence illustrates political scientist Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 21), highlighting how social organization based on identity inevitably leads to conflict. The night raid conducted by the Erudite-Dauntless alliance on Abnegation residences reflects modern paramilitary violence, featuring uniformed soldiers performing house-to-house searches under false pretenses: “We’re here for your protection” (Roth 355). This scene gains further significance when considered alongside historian Christopher Browning’s examination of how “ordinary men become killers” (Browning xx) through a gradual increase in complicity. Roth’s choice to portray the genocide through Tris’s limited viewpoint—listening to gunshots and screams from a concealed basement—utilizes what literary scholar James Berger refers to as “the aesthetics of trauma representation” (Berger 67), compelling readers to engage their imaginative capacities similarly to how citizens must reconstruct truth from fragmented evidence in censored environments.

The psychological realism of the novel also encompasses its depiction of how marginalized groups internalize their oppression. The self-hatred and despair of the factionless population exemplify what Paulo Freire described as “the culture of silence” (Freire 47) among the dispossessed, while the Dauntless soldiers’ readiness to kill former neighbours illustrates psychologist Stanley Milgram’s observations regarding “agentic shift” (Milgram 132)—the relinquishment of moral agency

to figures of authority. Even Tris demonstrates what psychologist Leon Festinger would term “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger 12) when faced with evidence of her faction’s involvement, initially resisting truths that jeopardize her hard-earned sense of belonging: “I didn’t want Dauntless to be the villains. I needed them to be good” (Roth 378).

Roth’s *Divergent* offers a deep examination of identity development within systemic limitations, with Tris Prior’s experiences acting as a framework to analyze the common adolescent challenges of self-definition in the face of oppressive societal structures. The novel’s portrayal of identity crises goes beyond its dystopian backdrop, reflecting what psychologist Erik Erikson described as the essential struggle of adolescence: “The task of establishing a coherent sense of self while navigating competing social demands” (Erikson 132). Tris’s inner turmoil, “I don’t want to be just one thing. I can’t be” (Roth 256), encapsulates the contemporary issue of identity fragmentation, where, as sociologist Anthony Giddens notes, “the self becomes a reflexive project in late modernity, constantly negotiated rather than given” (Giddens 75). Her *Divergence* symbolizes what psychologist Carl Rogers might refer to as “the fully functioning personality’s resistance to external conditions of worth” (Rogers 196), challenging the faction system’s simplistic categorization that parallels modern labelling through standardized assessments, career pathways, or social media profiling. The psychological harm of this imposed categorization becomes apparent when Tris contemplates her aptitude test results: “They told me I was nothing, that I didn’t belong anywhere” (Roth 112), resonating with the real-life experiences of those who exist outside conventional classifications, from neurodivergent individuals to queer youth—groups that Judith Butler contends “expose the fragility of the categorical systems that seek to contain them” (Butler 21).

The exploration of identity, false autonomy, and resistance in *Divergent* is effective due to its grounding in observable social dynamics. As noted by literary theorist Darko Suvin, “The best science fiction estranges the present to illuminate it” (Suvin 15). Roth’s novel exemplifies this by reflecting contemporary concerns regarding algorithmic categorization, political division, and youth activism through a dystopian lens. When Four tells Tris,





“You’re the one who has to live with your choices” (Roth 187), he encapsulates the existential essence of the novel, that authentic selfhood arises not from systems or revolutions, but from the ongoing practice of ethical self-determination in an unpredictable world.

Divergent creates a dystopian environment that resonates with its audience due to its foundation in familiar realities, both physical and psychological. In contrast to many speculative dystopias that depend on alien settings or futuristic technologies, Roth places her story in a deteriorated yet recognizable Chicago, a decision that effectively connects fiction with the reader’s lived experiences. The skeletal remains of the city’s iconic structures, the crumbling Sears Tower, the inactive L trains, and the dilapidated streets act as persistent reminders of a fallen civilization that reflects our own. This backdrop functions as what geographer Marc Augé describes as a “non-place” (Augé 77), a location devoid of its original significance yet eerily familiar, evoking real-world post-industrial urban decay in cities such as Detroit or Gary, Indiana. Roth’s vivid descriptions: “The metal skeletons of the old buildings look like they’re holding up the sky” (Roth 23) root the fantastical aspects in concrete reality, aligning with Darko Suvin’s concept of science fiction’s “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin 4), where the imagined realm remains sufficiently recognizable to implicate our own.

The faction system, despite its extreme implementation, embodies essential truths regarding human social structures and tribalism. Each faction serves as an exaggerated yet strikingly plausible representation of ideologies pushed to their logical limits. Abnegation’s mandated self-denial reflects real-world ascetic religious groups or political systems that prioritize collective sacrifice over individual desires, while Dauntless’s cult of courage resonates with militaristic cultures where “the normalization of violence becomes a rite of passage” (Bourdieu 128). Erudite’s detached rationalism and manipulation of knowledge have parallels in modern technocratic elites who weaponize data, a phenomenon Shoshana Zuboff describes as “surveillance capitalism’s epistemic inequality” (Zuboff 195). Furthermore, Amity’s enforced pacifism through pharmacological means mirrors contemporary discussions regarding the medicalization of dissent, where, as Jonathan

Metzl illustrates, “social control often masquerades as mental health care” (Metzl 56). The credibility of the factions arises from their foundations in observable human behaviour, what psychologist Jonathan Haidt refers to as “the righteous mind’s tendency toward moral absolutism” (Haidt 105) rendering their conflicts appear inevitable rather than artificial.

Central to the novel’s authenticity are the emotionally genuine dilemmas encountered by Tris and other characters. Her conflict between loyalty to family and the quest for self-identity is poignantly expressed when she states, “I feel like someone has hollowed out my chest” (Roth 98), encapsulating universal adolescent experiences of identity development that Erik Erikson theorized as “the psychosocial crisis between belonging and autonomy” (Erikson 132). The Choosing Ceremony’s requirement for sixteen-year-olds to irrevocably choose their life trajectories heightens real-world anxieties surrounding college majors, career decisions, and social affiliations, which sociologist Anthony Giddens refers to as “the burden of late modernity’s endless choices.” The novel’s examination of fear functions on various psychologically valid dimensions: the literal fear simulations experienced by the initiates parallel exposure therapy methods, while the societal apprehension towards Divergents embodies what sociologist Stanley Cohen described as “moral panics about boundary-crossing figures” (Cohen 9). When Four states, “Fear doesn’t shut you down; it wakes you up” (Roth 211), he expresses a neurobiological reality regarding threat response that psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk refers to as “the body keeping the score” (van der Kolk 53), thereby anchoring the novel’s action scenes in somatic realism.

Moreover, the interpersonal relationships significantly contribute to the credibility of the dystopian setting. Tris’s complicated relationship with her parents, especially her mother’s concealed Divergence and ultimate sacrifice, exemplifies what psychologist Alice Miller called “the drama of the gifted child” (Miller 12), where parental secrets influence identity in both constraining and empowering manners. The betrayal by trusted companions such as Will: “His hand shakes as he raises the gun” (Roth 372) reflects empirical studies on situational obedience conducted by Philip



Zimbardo, whose Stanford Prison Experiment revealed how “systems can rapidly transform ordinary people into perpetrators” (Zimbardo 211). Furthermore, the romance between Tris and Four steers clear of dystopian stereotypes by emphasizing mutual trauma bonding and power dynamics: “I might be addicted to the way he looks at me, like I’m worth something” (Roth 184).

Roth’s construction of the world achieves a sense of realism through meticulous attention to institutional specifics that reflect actual bureaucratic frameworks. The algorithmic determinism of the aptitude test: “They say it tells you who you really are” (Roth 56) foreshadows current anxieties regarding AI-driven psychometrics in both educational and occupational contexts. The ghettoization of the factionless underclass mirrors urban sociologist Mike Davis’s insights on “the spatial concentration of social abandonment” (Davis 122), while the policing of faction borders by Dauntless patrols resonates with contemporary discussions surrounding immigration enforcement. Furthermore, the manipulation tactics employed by the Erudite-controlled media: “They show footage of Abnegation leaders stealing food” (Roth 301) have direct parallels in the analysis by media scholars Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, who famously critiqued this as “manufacturing consent” (Herman and Chomsky 1) through propaganda.

In conclusion, the dystopia presented in *Divergent* feels unsettlingly close to reality because it magnifies existing tendencies within our society rather than creating entirely foreign concepts. As literary critic Tom Moylan points out, “The most effective dystopias are those where readers recognize the seeds of the fictional society in their own” (Moylan 142). Roth’s brilliance is evident in illustrating how easily Chicago’s faction system could arise from present-day social divisions, whether they be political polarization, algorithmic sorting, or identity-based tribalism. When Tris comes to the realization that “The factions are just lines we drew in the sand” (Roth 412), she encapsulates the novel’s primary caution: the dystopia is not on the horizon. It is already present, reflected in our daily choices that favour division over connection.

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