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Permission to Diverge:
Gender in Young Adult Dystopian Literature

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Permission to Diverge: Gender in Young Adult Dystopian Literature

“Tris is different from Katniss because she has to do a lot more thinking for herself. While outside the actual Hunger Games competition, Katniss does this but during the Games she is following Haymitch's instruction or that of someone else. She is different from Bella because she is able to stand on her own. A huge part of the Twilight storyline is the love triangle between Bella, Edward and Jacob. Often when either of the boys leaves, Bella breaks down and can't do anything for herself. Tris has a relationship with Four, but does not depend on him for everything in her life. Tris is different from Hazel because she is in a way responsible for the lives of an entire people through her actions [...] I think that Tris is someone I would like to be friends with in real life.”

— Eleanor Smith, my fourteen-year-old sister who inspired this project, comparing Tris from *Divergent* to Katniss from *The Hunger Games*, Bella from *Twilight*, and Hazel from *The Fault in Our Stars*:

Teenagers are an increasingly popular focus for the publishing community. Riding on the coattails of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, authors and publishers alike are increasingly entering the race to produce the next young adult best seller. As of January 1, 2014, the entire Harry Potter franchise was worth over \$24 billion dollars, offering quite the prize for the person who can produce the next hit teen series ("Total Harry Potter franchise revenue"). *The Hunger Games* showed that both young adults and much of the rest of the world are ready for dystopian novels focused on a female heroine. *Catching Fire*, the second book and movie in the *Hunger Games* series, became in 2013 “the first movie with a solo female lead since 1973's *The Exorcist* to become the top-grossing film of the year” (Barry 1). There is much to back up the idea that young adult literature is the next big thing, and that it may be moving in a direction that empowers young women with strong female main characters and untraditional storylines.

Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series has taken its place in the young adult dystopia craze. As of April 12, 2014, *Divergent* was fourth on the Amazon Best Sellers list and had been in the top 100 for 439 days (“Amazon best sellers”). *Divergent* became a major motion picture in 2014,

bringing in \$56 million in sales its opening weekend (Barnes 1). While this pales in comparison to the \$156 million brought in by the first *Hunger Games* movie in its initial weekend, it is still a strong showing for a young adult film. The second film in the *Divergent* series, *Insurgent*, is slated to be released in 2015 and *Allegiant* in 2016 (“Divergent” International Movie Database). While not *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent* is reaching a wide readership, including its targeted young adult audience, giving the series a significant impact on the ideas and thoughts of this subset of the population.

The protagonist of the *Divergent* series is a teenage girl named Beatrice Prior. The story begins as Beatrice turns sixteen in a futuristic Chicago where children choose which of five societal groups (called factions), each based on a different character trait, they want to remain in for the rest of their life. Beatrice chooses Dauntless over Abnegation, in which she was raised, and changes her name to Tris. In Dauntless she meets and begins a romantic relationship with Four, or Tobias, another Abnegation transfer whose abusive father is one of the leaders of the city and whose mother is the leader of the factionless, the rejected homeless who rise up against the factions later in the trilogy. Tris also discovers that she is one of the Divergent, people with aptitudes for multiple factions who have the ability to resist the mind control serums used to induce fear, test people, and, ultimately, to turn the Dauntless into a mindless army of soldiers working for the Erudite, a different faction. Tris and other Divergent individuals work against the attack, but she loses both her parents and some friends to death in the process. As the city’s political order devolves, Tris, Four, and others escape to the outside world, where they discover that Chicago is actually one of several isolated experiment cities the government is using to try to recreate genetically pure citizens after much of the population was damaged in the Purity War, in which individuals had balancing traits, such as selflessness, courage, or love, taken out to make

room for opposing traits. The genetically pure, of which divergence is a symptom, have taken a superior position to the genetically damaged in the outside world, and Tris, Four, and Tris' brother Caleb must work to stop an uprising of the genetically damaged within the government center outside Chicago while also stopping David, the head of the government facility, from wiping the memories of the entire city of Chicago. The city is saved, but Tris is shot and dies, and the ending of *Allegiant* is told in Four's voice as he mourns Tris' passing. Like much fantasy fiction, *Divergent*, *Allegiant*, and *Insurgent* address issues beyond the surface level conflicts addressed in the plot. The creation of alternate universes allows subtle critical commentary on topics such as gender and identity, conveyed through the construction of the setting. The series questions the very essence of conformity in our society, while exploring the struggle between family, friends, and romance that many of its target readership demographic are beginning to face in their own lives.

Dystopia and Fantasy as Subversive

Dystopian literature provides an alternate universe in which the characters act out every aspect of their identity, from gender to age to sexuality, in a manner wholly different from reality. By upending the reality of the real world, the dystopian setting opens up possibilities for the characters to have identities that would not be able to exist in our universe. Anne Balay examines gender bending in children's fantasy fiction:

A growing body of children's literature engages the question of how to do gender. This may not seem surprising, since kids' narratives have long been used to delight and instruct by teaching and reinforcing gender norms. However, fantasy fiction has become increasingly concerned with gender role violation, usually in the form of a girl who passes as a boy. (Balay 6)

Balay could be referring, of course, to characters such as those in Tamora Pierce's *Alanna* (1983), including the title character that lives as her twin brother in order to fulfill her dream of becoming a knight. Within the fantasy setting of Pierce's works, Alanna can play out the role of her male sibling as she lifts herself up from the status of Other, the subordinate class in society that is defined not by its own existence, but by its deviation from the majority (de Beauvoir xviii). In experiencing the lives of these subversive young females, readers can experience a level of freedom from oppression and freedom to play with gender not possible in the real world. The punishment for transgressing a female identity is much smaller, or even nonexistent, in fantasy fiction, in contrast to reality where the punishment is very real.

In *Divergent*, the dystopian setting of the series permits even more of this gender play. In the dystopia, everything is already subverted and in upheaval, opening the door to upheaval of the gender norm. This gives Tris permission to redefine what it means to be a girl, instead of passing as a boy in order to gain additional freedoms. Children's fiction offers "a network of ideological positions ... pertaining to "life" and how to "live it"" (James 2). Fantasy specifically is "the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal [...] any departure from consensus reality" (Hume 21). The combination of fantasy and the younger audience gives children's and young adult fantasy fiction a particularly powerful position to encourage different ways of thinking about gender and sexuality, departing from what is normal and teaching acceptance of varying forms of identity and self-expression.

These modern fantasy stories present a new type of female role model, significant because "women and girls learn gender-specific ways of reading and construct and reconstruct specific kinds of interpretive communities, literary practices, and identities" through the literature they interact with on a daily basis (Rogers 142). The girl who assumes certain boyish

behaviors is obviously not a phenomenon limited to recent dystopian novels. Louisa May Alcott's Jo March (*Little Women*) and Harper Lee's Scout Finch (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) are two classic examples of literary tomboys from before the twenty-first century. According to Mary Elliott, "tomboys began to appear regularly in American post-Civil War fiction for women and children" (92). Beyond simply presenting a different kind of femininity, "the novels question the efficacy of the prevailing legal, political, and social values, even if the questioning is done by innuendo rather than by actual assertion of a contrary view" (92). So tomboys are not a new literary occurrence, but there is something different about this new reincarnation of them. Written for a generation that has become desensitized to violence in a way that no other has before, these new tomboys have to be able to keep up with boys in that realm as well. They can defend themselves, and have as little regard for human life as their male counterparts in other series.

Also important, however, are the implications texts like *Divergent* have for the potential queering of the literary space for children. Part of the draw of dystopian literature is the sense of safety it provides, the impossibility of the danger and abnormality that goes on within it. We can dream about the freedom and excitement provided, but always be protected by the story's distance from the real world. Gabrielle Owen, examining the connections between the identity of the child in children's literature and queer theory, writes:

Queer lives are often defined by impossibility, both in ideological ways and in lived, material ways. Impossibility is a condition of existence, something that must be negotiated. *Queer* describes, here, not only gay or lesbian, but ways of being that fall outside of intelligibility, fall outside of definition, outside of what is usually understood as reality. (258)

The same impossibility also arises in the context of dystopian literature, which is unintelligible in its deviation from our reality. With children, the innocent willingness to accept that impossibility, to look outside the norm and see it as normal, provides an area that is ripe for subversion of femininity and masculinity. A dystopian space *is* a potentially queer space, and the younger audience allows for more flexibility of identities and definitions, as children have a more natural willingness to accept difference and queerness than adults.

Tris displays little difficulty adapting to more masculine behaviors, such as aggression, courage, and violence. While she struggles sometimes to learn the actual action, her years of watching the Dauntless tumble out of train cars and run down hills have allowed her to feel comfortable with more masculine behavior. She left Abnegation because she never felt comfortable with the deeds required of that faction, and joined Dauntless because the behaviors required there felt natural. According to Anne Balay, “Within the genre of fantasy fiction, femininity is an effort, while masculinity is natural or inevitable, whatever the gender of the subject” (17). She then elaborates using Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* as an example, “For Coraline, saving souls, capturing talismans, defeating daemons—these are all in a day’s work, while a doll’s tea party requires a conscious effort and serves as a deliberate mechanism” (17). Tris also exhibits extra effort when acting out more feminine behaviors. She consciously chooses to dress in a more feminine manner and resists being helped by other members of her faction (*Divergent* 236). Tris has the ability to consciously choose femininity, but masculinity has more natural ease for her. She can cover behaviors of both genders, but not with the same level of comfort. The varied ways in which Tris acts out her femininity is highly progressive. Her gender is queered by the way she chooses to dress and how she thinks about her actions, and, most importantly, it is not mentioned. Her comfort with her masculinity is assumed, and her transgression of traditional

femininity is in fact not transgressive at all. She lives in a world where a plethora of femininities are accepted as normal, radically different from the modern America where many of the readers live, where only one version of femininity, hegemonic femininity, is allowed.

Factions as Gendered

From the beginning, the world of *Divergent* is a world of contrasts. Tris has grown up in a world divided into factions. Within the city, “Those who blamed aggression [for the world’s evils] formed Amity....Those who blamed ignorance became the Erudite....Those who blamed duplicity created Candor....Those who blamed selfishness made Abnegation....And those who blamed cowardice were the Dauntless” (*Divergent* 42-43). The values of the different factions establish an unintentionally gendered situation in the city. Although there are both men and women in each faction, the behavior of each and the relationships between the factions establish a very rigid system, structured around the male-female binary while also accepting more subversive behaviors from individuals (if the behaviors fit with their faction but not their gender).

As categorization into gender, race, and class is important in the real world, categorization into faction is the most important determiner of identity in the *Divergent* universe. The traits that define each faction can be aligned with the qualities stereotypically valued by different genders, providing a connection between the identities in *Divergent* and identities in the real world. Allan Johnson, sociologist and author of *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy*, identifies the qualities valued by masculinity and masculine culture “as control, strength, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion” (Johnson 7). Dauntless and Erudite both value and encourage behaviors that fall well within these bounds.

The Dauntless, who value courage and aggression above all else, act as the protectors of the city and demand bravery to the point of stupidity from every faction member. As Tris wanders the dark streets with her new fellow faction members, she notices, “part of being Dauntless is being willing to make things more difficult for yourself in order to be self-sufficient. There’s nothing especially brave about wandering dark streets with no flashlight, but we are not supposed to need help, even from light. We are supposed to be capable of anything” (*Divergent* 138). The Dauntless value self-sufficiency to such a degree that endangering oneself is more acceptable than taking any aid. The Erudite obsession with knowledge, an obsessive, cold rationality at the expense of compassion and basic humanity, is also related to the societal idea of hyper-masculine behavior. Candor, the faction that values honesty, does not fall quite as neatly into a gendered category, but the discussions of the bravery required to be honest, and the lack of tact exhibited by Candors when critiquing others, as seen in more masculine communication styles, paint the faction as more masculine than feminine.

Other factions represent explicitly feminine qualities, such as “cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive and other non-linear ways of thinking” (Johnson 7). Abnegation, founded on selflessness and giving to others, embodies many of these feminine qualities. When given a gun for the first time, Tris considers that Abnegation would not approve of it because “guns are used for self-defense, if not violence, and therefore are self-serving” (*Divergent* 78). Abnegation is so selfless that protecting your own body from violence is unacceptable. Finally, Amity, the faction responsible for growing the food for the entire city, is based on love and friendship. The faction is so focused on cooperation that no decision can be made without complete group consensus. Between the factions, the disdain and distrust that

Erudite feels towards Abnegation and even Amity, and the eventual battle that ensues as a result, show a literal conflict between different conceptions of genders. The positioning of the factions, and the way in which they reproduce gender norms, reproduce the patriarchal values of the real world. Even though individuals can act out traits that do not align with their gender within the factions, they reinforce the existing power structures in a larger scale way.

The final group in the city is the factionless. Those who failed to complete initiation into their chosen faction, “they live in poverty, doing the work no one else wants to do” (*Divergent* 25). As the homeless population of the city, they are highly undesirable and looked down on by the faction members. At one point, Tris goes so far as to say that she would rather be dead than factionless (54). Without an identity, unable to ascribe to the qualities required by their chosen faction, the factionless have been rejected by society. They are reluctantly supported by the city and aided in some ways by the Abnegation, but not included. The existence of the factionless is another logic that allows the subversion of traditional gender expression, by Tris and others. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, one finds the expression of a duality—that of the Self and the Other” (de Beauvoir xvi). The existence of the factionless gives the city an Other that is not women, a population to depict as the deviant. They subvert the gendered nature of society in a way that is more unacceptable than being a woman, by being neither masculine nor feminine enough to fit into a faction. This subversion gives Tris and other women more freedom to bend their gender, as they face less scrutiny and are a part of the dominant, accepted group: the group that belongs to factions. The factionless have subverted the social norm as they completely reject the faction system, but acting within the factions is more important in this culture than acting within gender norms.

In *Divergent*, certain aspects of gender are not as restricted to the binary as in most children's literature, or even daily life. The factions act out characteristics usually attributed to one gender, but are filled with members of both. This brings into light questions about the merits of how society demands certain behaviors from each gender, subverting what is accepted as truth by painting an example of what an alternative reality would look like, one where necessity dictates gender performance, not sex. Within Dauntless, the focus of much of the first book, adolescent men and women fight one another for a spot within the faction. While Tris' small stature and lack of fighting experience come up as reasons why she may not succeed in this part of the training, her gender never does. She fights the biggest, most competitive boy in her initiate group, Peter, and while she loses, "The thought of begging Peter for mercy makes [her] taste bile" and she fights back hard (*Divergent* 109). Two of the other female initiates, Molly and Christina, are in fact highly competitive fighters. The biggest boy, Al, loses all his fights.

One's status as Dauntless is in no way gender dependent. The initiates are ranked and judged all together, and Tris' abilities to withstand the mental portion of the training give her more points than the physical portion, where the male initiates do have some advantage (197). She is competitive, and her developing ability to defend herself is something she is proud of. Even the masculine changes, such as muscles and lack of curves, that are coming to her body with the increased physical activity are not shameful or concerning (167). When the initiates compete in a game of capture the flag that has bearing on their rankings, Tris chooses to climb to the top of an old Ferris wheel to find the other group, risking her life to help win the game (141). Even though many of the female characters are able to deviate from traditionally feminine characteristics, there is much less evidence of male characters, even within the feminine factions, exhibiting many feminine characteristics. However, Tris is the main character and the one whose

perspective is seen most often by the reader, and she is not held to feminine behaviors in the least.

Divergence as Queer

Within the *Divergent* series specifically, an element of the story that has particularly strong ties to queer theory is the existence of divergence as a concept. Divergence is incredibly subversive, rejecting the idea that each citizen must belong to a faction, which defines his or her identity. If the series questions the legitimacy of such categorization, it questions categorization in the non-literary world, such as by gender. Tris discovers she is divergent when she takes the simulation serum to determine which faction she has an affinity for, and gets three instead of one (*Divergent* 22). Although she chooses Dauntless, as the plot evolves she discovers that her divergence protects her from the serum that is ultimately used by Erudite in their attempted takeover of the city. Her divergence, which is a threat to her life throughout much of the series, allows her to save some of her family and friends. After escaping the city, Tris finds out that her divergence is not actually a disability, but a sign that she is genetically pure, as opposed to genetically damaged, and her existence shows that the experiment that is her city is starting to work (*Allegiant* 178). By not truly fitting any faction, she is actually the hero. This act of lifting Tris up to a hero's status for her lack of ability to fit into any faction encourages a more positive view of those who don't neatly fit society's other molds. Throughout the series, Tris struggles to act Dauntless while her other identities and the corresponding thoughts and feelings come to the surface. This struggle, this act of not fitting in, is both queer and celebrated, and this celebration is conveyed to the reader.

Tris was not aware that divergence was even a possibility until she found out she was, just as many queer youth do not consider alternate ways of doing their gender until they feel

tension in their personal lives (*Divergent* 23). Judith Butler writes on the phenomenon of queerness: “To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always *as if you were* human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor” (30). One’s faction identity is the foremost identity within the *Divergent* universe, the definer of worth and humanity. Tris would “rather be dead than empty, like the factionless” (54). Her lack of real identity, as well as her status as something that is not commonly known or accepted, makes Tris unintelligible. Although she later finds out that her true identity is preferable to what the others in her city are, within her culture for much of the series she does not exist (*Allegiant* 178). She has no right to exist. She fights to hide her divergence, and is encouraged to do so by those closest to her (*Divergent* 255). It is shameful and different and dangerous, and she cannot be allowed to exist in her society. She cannot be recognized, until she saves everyone. Then, it is prideful. Her difference can be celebrated and accepted. This way in which her difference makes her into something special deviates from the normal societal message of fit in or get out. However, it takes a heroic act for her difference to take on this special role, so it is not completely legitimized. Only its benefit to everyone else makes her good, a martyr, but difference for difference’s sake still does not achieve acceptance in the *Divergent* universe.

The connection between Tris’ deviance from the norm and a queer identity adds to the overall subversive messages in the series. David Halperin defines queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence” (62). Divergence makes Tris different. It

keeps her from fitting into the neat categories created by each faction. She connects with others who exhibit this trait, just as the queer community forms in response to an unfriendly, heteronormative world. Tris' differences put her in danger, as she discovers when the woman who tests her tells her, "This is different. I don't mean you shouldn't share them now; I mean you should never share them with anyone, *ever*, no matter what happens. Divergence is extremely dangerous" (*Divergent* 22-23). While it is dangerous, Tris' divergence ends up being what saves her, just as a queer identity saves those who do not fit the gender binary in the real world. She is told to keep her divergence a secret in this world that does not understand it, and then ends up in a space where she is told to be proud and introduced into a world "saturated by experiments and observation and learning" (*Allegiant* 196). This space, where her difference is ultimately celebrated and gives her an ability to resist the mind control that brings about the downfall of her fellow citizens, represents a queer futurity of sorts, a new kind of world where differences like this are admired. As the exception to the rule, Tris is threatened by many of the supporting characters but celebrated by the author and other main characters. Her treatment in the outside world, where she is again lifted up to a higher status, legitimizes a non-binary identity as well.

While Tris starts out as queer in the way it is often seen in our society, as shameful and secretive, she is lifted up to a pedestal in the world outside the city. Her genetic purity makes her a more complete, higher state of human, better than those who are not. This undermines the potential celebration and acceptance of difference readers may gain from the early parts of the story. She becomes the norm, loses her deviance. She is no longer subversive. Her queerness is unqueered, and the messages that were being conveyed by a heroine with such a destabilizing identity are lost. It is not completely normative, as her difference is originally celebrated and

legitimized to the reader, but that legitimacy is taken so far as to lose any progressive nature in young adult literature.

The Smallest Initiate

As literary characters have their physical appearance completely described by the author, almost taking away any interpretation by the reader, what they wear and what they look like has powerful implications for how the readers connects the character with the real world, such as how their gender is perceived. In adolescence, clothing and appearance has an elevated level of importance, so these descriptions are even more prominent in the young adult context. Each faction has a uniform of sorts, which aligns with the faction's values. The evolution of Tris' physical appearance as she moves from Abnegation to Dauntless, combined with her attitude toward her image, gives an interesting perspective into her gender identity as well. In the beginning, as a child of Abnegation, Tris has "gray clothes, the plain hairstyle, and the unassuming demeanor," all intending to "make it easier for [her] to forget [herself], and easier for everyone else to forget [her] too" (*Divergent* 6). The importance that Abnegation places on ignoring one's physical appearance is so high that members are not allowed to look in mirrors more than once every three months. With the dress and rules of Abnegation, Tris has no sexuality. She is supposed to do everything in her power to keep attention turned away from her, focus it on others instead. Her body, as something belonging only to her, has no real relevance in her life as a member of Abnegation. In the *Divergent* universe, self-expression, at least in respect to physical appearance, is defined by your faction affiliation. Especially for teenagers, appearance can be one of the primary ways that an identity is expressed. Tris develops into a gender identity through the evolution of her clothing choices. She chooses an identity, but the

one she chooses, more feminine and more sexual, is not subversive to the reality of femininity in modern America. Instead, it enforces those ideals.

Throughout her initiation process, Tris continues to develop her image and appearance, becoming more feminine and masculine simultaneously. In the beginning, she describes herself as “the smallest initiate” but then, as training progresses, she notices her muscles developing and her body shape changing (*Divergent* 72). She observes the changes one morning:

I step to the side so I stand in front of the mirror. I see muscles I couldn't see before in my arms, legs, and stomach. I pinch my side, where a layer of fat used to hint at curves to come. Nothing. Dauntless initiation has stolen whatever softness my body had. Is that good, or bad? At least I am stronger than I was. (167-168)

Tris acknowledges the necessity of her new, more masculine body type, but is still not completely comfortable with the deviance from traditional femininity that it implies.

Nonetheless, when society's voice makes her question the acceptability of her body's changes, her own voice ignores it, focusing on the utility of her body and its newfound strength. She is a teenage girl rejecting, for a moment, the world's message that she needs to look a certain way, in favor of considering her own power. Around the same time, however, she is dressed in a dress for the first time, her hair let loose, and her eyes outlined in black pencil (86). “You aren't going to be able to make me pretty,” she tells her friend (86). “Who cares about pretty?” Christina replies, “I'm going for noticeable” (87). Within Dauntless, Tris is allowed to explore and modify her appearance in ways she has never been able to before. The treatment of Tris' body, what she puts on it, and how it changes sends mixed messages to readers. Her acceptance of her strength clearly asserts that the body is for doing, and that should be a person's focus when considering what their body is worth. Her transition from a less gendered appearance to a more traditionally

feminine and sexualized one, on the other hand, reinforces ideals about societal ownership of women's and young girls' bodies, as well as putting worth on her small, pretty, and thin body because it fits acceptable norms. The way she is portrayed and how she chooses to dress goes against the queerness that exists in other parts of the stories, and is normative to a degree that it contradicts the subversive and feminist elements that are elsewhere conveyed.

American girls today grow up in a society where the average man is about half a foot taller than the average woman (Fryar, Gu, and Ogden 1). While women are statistically smaller than the men around them, the emphasis on Tris' small stature in *Divergent* is extreme. This size differential keeps women in a subordinate place to men physically as well as societally. At the beginning, she describes herself as having "a narrow face, wide, round eyes, and a long, thin nose—I still look like a little girl" (*Divergent* 2). She later explains that she has to roll all her Abnegation issued pants up because they are too long (4). She is frequently, almost obsessively, portrayed as fragile, even as her experiences learning to shoot guns and fight larger initiates are being discussed. Her diminutive stature is almost as important to her character's development as her divergent identity, or her relationship with Four. She is a little girl going up against adults, despite being of the age to choose her identity for the rest of her life. As she takes down evil, has her first sexual experiences, and saves her city, she is tiny. It is as if her masculine strength is only acceptable when it inhabits a delicate body. In this way, the story undermines its own queerness, by reasserting values that can be seen in any piece of popular media.

In regards to other female characters, Tris' petite size seems to connect her with a sort of moral higher ground, while reaffirming her femininity. Molly, her female enemy within the Dauntless initiates, is nicknamed the Tank, and "has broad shoulders, bronze skin, and a bulbous nose" (*Divergent* 92). Jeanine, the villain and mastermind behind the attempted take down of

Abnegation and the faction system, has “a layer of pudg around her middle” (429). These two women are never described as delicate or birdlike, because doing so would create a problem for the small is good, big is bad dichotomy. Even Tris’ friend Christina, whose height is compared to the evil Molly’s, is thin and pretty (*Divergent*, 51). Just as Tris’ heterosexuality provides a tie back to her true feminine identity, and therefore permission to act more masculine, her petite form gives her permission to be strong. She can fight and shoot and climb because she is little, and therefore delicate. As the small underdog, she is protecting herself from the big bad guys, where if she were larger, she would lose the idea of protection. She can never truly be the aggressor, because she is always at a disadvantage, always fighting back. She is the David and the world is the Goliath, and rooting for the female underdog is acceptable in a way that rooting for the woman at an advantage never will be.

Tris’ feminine appearance and the constant reassertions of its persistence despite her more traditionally masculine actions undermine the queer message of her identity. If Tris’ appearance fit in less neatly with the gender binary, such as Stieg Larsson’s Lisbeth in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, her identity would send a clearer message about the constructed nature of gendered appearances. As it stands, however, her femininity in looks serves to give her permission to act outside of more acceptable boundaries. Her queerness and inability to fit in are okay because, in our world, she would fit in. She would be pretty and tiny and well liked. She’s only acting the way she is, her appearance tells readers, because she must. She is not *really* masculine or all that different. The tension between the heteronormativity of her appearance and the queer possibilities presented by the state of her mind persists throughout the series, reinforced by her relationship to Four and the vilification of every female character who does not fit into the very thin box created by American society.

While it is very easy to predict whether a female character is good or bad based on her physical size, the same does not stand true for male characters. Both Four and his counterpart, Eric, are large and muscular (*Divergent* 66). One of the main differences described between the two of them is their eyes, where Eric's are described as cold and Four's are "dark blue, a dreaming, sleeping, waiting color" (66, 59). Tris' brother is not as physically dominant, but as a member of Erudite, focused on brainpower, he does not have to be (3). The body type of the male characters has no relationship to what role they will carry out in the story, and Peter, who is undoubtedly evil, is described as attractive many times (55). While Tris is powerful in spite of her body type, the men are powerful because of theirs. Muscles are not hidden, or excused by thinness or a pretty face. It is unapologetic, an expected outcome of their lifestyle regardless of morals and mission.

Tris' small size is often brought up in contrast to Four. When they first meet, Tris "would have fallen face-first onto a wood floor if he had not caught [her]" (*Divergent* 59). As their relationship progresses, Tris explains, "I know that I am birdlike, made narrow and small as if for taking flight, built straight-waisted, fragile. But when he touches me like he can't bear to take his hand away, I don't wish I was any different" (*Insurgent* 49). Not only does the contrast between tiny Tris and muscular Four affirm her delicate identity, it took his desire to make her comfortable with her body type. Her smallness is part of her femininity, part of what makes her desirable, but she needs him to tell her that.

One instance that demonstrates the patriarchal power structures between Tris and Four occurs in the midst of a midnight game of paintball capture-the-flag between members of Dauntless. Tris decides to climb to the top of the rusted Ferris wheel in order to see where the other team is located (*Divergent* 141). Four follows, although he is afraid of heights and when

they reach the top, “crouches and presses his back to the metal support, breathing heavily” (145). They see the other team, but a bar slips out from under Tris and, as she is too small to reach the next one, she is left hanging high in the air (148). Four single-handedly turns the broken wheel, bringing Tris safely to the ground (149). Tris’ bravery and intelligence have made her a hero, but she needs to be saved from her size and strength by a man. She is strong and can fight her own battles, but when necessary, is helpless without her lover. Her size, while it gives her permission to be strong and independent, is also a tool that keeps her weak and dependent on Four. This contradiction reasserts traditional attitudes toward women, as helpless and fragile. Tris can be strong, but only as strong as her body lets her. While the strength and violence of the female characters challenges heteronormative, binary views of gender in American society, Tris’ dependence on a man affirms it, and as the overarching theme in the series it sends a stronger message than any subversion.

Heterosexuality as Permission for Deviance

Throughout the faction changes, drama, and battles that characterize the series, one thing remains consistent: Tris’ intense heterosexual relationship with Tobias, nicknamed Four, the leader of her training group. He is one of the first members of the faction that she meets, as he helps her out of the net when she drops down into Dauntless headquarters for the first time (*Divergent* 60). Later, Tris discovers that, like her, Four is one of the rare Dauntless transfers from Abnegation and earned his nickname because he only demonstrates four fears when in his fear landscape (320). While Tris and Four end up being a powerhouse couple who fight to protect one another with similar intensity, much of their initial connection is based on his need to coddle her as the smallest initiate. When they first begin learning to fight, Four tells Tris to use her knees and elbows when she fights because she does not have the muscle to actually punch

(84). Following this, she describes how, “Suddenly he presses a hand to my stomach. His fingers are so long that, though the heel of his hand touches one side of my rib cage, his fingertips still touch the other side. My heart pounds so hard my chest hurts, and I stare at him, wide-eyed”

(84). The disparity between the girl Tris is learning to be and the girl her budding relationship portrays her as is evident. She is learning to be strong, aggressive, and independent, while in a relationship with a superior that puts her in a position of vulnerability and naiveté.

This contrast also serves a second purpose beyond emphasizing Tris’ vulnerability. Tris, while very feminine as a member of Abnegation in the beginning, starts to portray many traits of the “archetypal boy hero...Courageous, daring, athletic, strong, yet also moral” (Simons 145). She is, in many ways, forsaking her femininity. However, her ties to a relationship with traditional, heterosexual power dynamics provide her character with an anchor to traditional gender roles. She may be living out her masculinity, but her subversion is protected by her relationship, which serves to legitimate her true feminine identity. However she positions herself, it is not as important as how she is positioned in respect to him. It is as if her affirmed heterosexuality gives her permission to act in untraditionally masculine ways. Tris always returns to Four, even as she is saving the day. He is the umbrella over her whole life, following the tendency for relationships in young adult literature to involve the girl completely orienting herself around the boy and his desires.

If one looks at young adult stories written for boys or not specifically targeted at a gendered audience, the adventure and conflict takes the main stage, with romance playing an often necessary but nevertheless supporting role. While both J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (*Harry Potter*) and Eoin Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* (*Artemis Fowl*) have female love interests, the women are not the reason behind every action. They occur periodically, and may add something to the

emotional subtext in the stories, as opposed to the constant reassertion of romance that happens when the main character in a children's book is a girl. This difference in focus reinforces the idea that young women should be learning to orient their choices around male love interests, while men can pursue a career and a life autonomously of their relationship. Echoed in the "chick flick" movies targeted at an older age group, the constant presence of heterosexual love as the reason for being is educational, priming girls to be as dependent as their literary role models in later life.

In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss is the continuous subject of not one but two men's affections (Collins). In *Alanna*, Alanna also finds herself in a similar situation, stuck in a love triangle that gets as much attention as her adventures and battles (Pierce). In all three series, the relationship is an extremely important part of the plot, getting almost as much discussion as the conflict that requires the main female character to act outside of traditional feminine boundaries. All three characters are given the chance to display traditionally masculine characteristics because they have that most important cultural signifier of femininity: a heterosexual relationship with a stronger male. This relationship provides a backstory that can stay in the mind of the reader as Tris, or Katniss or Alana, assert themselves over male characters. While the dystopian context forces them to become more masculine and develop more aggressive behaviors, when they have a choice, as in their romantic lives, they choose femininity. This choice, which maintains that the characters would rather be feminine than not, validates their gender expression.

Not That Kind of Girl

Veronica Roth never explicitly states whether or not Tris and Four have sexual intercourse. As with much young adult fiction, it is hinted at a few times, and some precursors to

actual intercourse are described in detail, but discussion ends there. In doing this, Roth brings in another common trait of the fantasy heroine. Tris is sexual, and sexually desirable, but not impure. When she is under simulation, one of her fears is having sex with Four so she encounters the situation in her mind, but she pushes his hallucinated image away and says, “I am *not* going to sleep with you in a hallucination” (*Divergent* 394). She is desirable, but refusing to have sex in the hallucination preserves her femininity. The reader gets to understand that he wants her in a heterosexual manner, but does not have to change their perception of her honor. One of the first intimate moments between Tris and Four begins with her telling him she is so afraid of him, “afraid of what [she] wants” (406). She wants to reject the Abnegation mandate to reject physical contact, but retains her feminine nervousness. Just before, Tris tells Four:

“Which is why I know that it’s a little weird that, of all the girls you could have chosen, you chose me. So...if you’re just looking for...um, you know...*that*...”

“What? Sex?” He scowls at me. “You know if that was all I wanted, you probably wouldn’t be the first person I would go to.” (402)

Tris becomes, understandably, angered, so he explains, “What I *meant* was that you aren’t like that. Which I knew when I met you” (402). Tris can’t bring herself to even say sex, and Four recognizes her as bringing something besides a physical relationship to him. She does not lose her desirability, but maintains her innocence. As she affirms her sexuality, and therefore her femininity, she is rejecting her Abnegation rooted prudishness, but also retaining her purity as she slightly pushes back against her awakening sexuality (56). The treatment of Tris’ sexual identity, as well as the details of her romantic relationship, serves to uphold traditional femininity in the face of her more masculine actions. It reaffirms her identity as a woman who fits societal expectations for her womanhood. While her aggression and bravery deviates from this traditional

identity, her sexuality and how it is portrayed limits this, reaffirms the message that children's literature has been sending to girls for ages; you can act out when you're young, but you will settle down and fit in as you grow into adulthood.

The problematic portrayals of Tris' sexuality, and by extension the sexuality of young women in general, go beyond her relationship with Four, setting concerning examples for the series' readers. During her initiation, after they enter the mental portion and Tris starts dominating the rankings, she is taken in the night by some of her fellow male initiates. They attack her and threaten to kill her, but Four swoops in to save her just in time. When they discuss the situation later, Four tells Tris she was punished for acting too strong:

“He wanted you to be the small, quiet girl from Abnegation,” Four says softly. “He hurt you because your strength made him feel weak. No other reason.”

I nod and try to believe him.

“The others won't be as jealous if you show some vulnerability. Even if it isn't real.”

(Divergent 285)

Victim blaming, already a problem for the target age group of the series, pours out of Four's treatment of the situation. Tris tells Four she was not raped, but, “They touched me [...] Not...in the way you're thinking [...] But...almost” (286). Even so, he tells her that the attack happened because of something she did. She is injured, afraid, and the victim in the situation, but is being told to modify her behavior to discourage further attacks. The book legitimizes this sort of behavior for readers, reinforcing society's assertion that assault is often in some way the woman's fault.

Tris does confront her attackers later, taking some power back into our own hands. She tells Peter, the ringleader, “Stay away from me [...] Never come near me again” (*Divergent 300*).

Her internal dialogue, however, does not match this aggression. While talking to him, she thinks, “I am not angry, I am not cold, I am nothing” (300). She is given some freedom to reassert ownership of her own body, but the lack of legitimacy that the author gives to her negative emotions about her attack reinforces the acceptance of victim blaming communicated in her interaction with Four. She let this happen to her, she should take action to keep it from happening again, and, on top of that, she is not allowed to experience the emotions that result from an assault. Here, again, traditional messages about femininity and sexuality are reaffirmed for the readers of *Divergent*.

The Martyr

Tris’ death, unexpected by the reader and highly emotional as it is told from both her perspective and the perspective of Four as he mourns her, is a pivotal moment for the series and one that sticks with many who have read it. Kathryn James writes, “representations of death in children’s fiction can provide an unusually clear opportunity to understand some of the ways in which meaning is created and shared within a society. For one, any critical study of a culture’s approaches and responses to death can expose some of the most fundamental features of its social life” (James 2). The treatment of death in young adult literature says a lot about what message the author is trying to send the reader, and what social norms the story is enforcing or subverting. Who lives and who survives sends a clear message to readers about who is worthy of life and who is not, as does the way in which the deaths are portrayed, especially powerful considering these may be some of the first losses their young readers experience.

Tris’ final act shows the many conflicting sides of her performed gender. After stopping David, the leader of the government agency that controls Tris’ hometown, from wiping the memories of the entire city, Tris dies (*Allegiant* 476). The final few chapters of the series are told

in Four's voice, after he is told that Tris "survived the death serum, and set off the memory serum, but she...she was shot. And she didn't survive" and through the epilogue, where he learns to live without her (489, 526). Tris took the place of her brother, who was being sent to stop David's plot as a punishment for participating in the plot to take down the city, because she knows her divergence should protect from the death serum (455). The final act of Tris' life serves to reinforce her divergence and difference, while also reaffirming the gender binary. Her selfless sacrifice of herself for her brother is an act of Abnegation, of feminine self-sacrifice. Her bravery to do so and the actions she takes are Dauntless, masculine courage and aggression. What makes it all possible, though, is her divergence, her ability to transcend factions and identities. Her difference, her queerness, which allowed her to rescue the city and many of those she loved, ultimately led her to her own destruction. Her death serves, like many other elements, to undercut the progressive message of her queerness. While much of the plot lifts this element of her identity up to a higher level, the fact that Tris' gender fluidity is ultimately her *hamartia*—the flaw that seals her fate—paints a cautionary tale for readers. Difference can be deadly if the difference exists in a society that is not ready to receive it.

The final fates of Katniss and Tris contradict the feminist message of their respective tales, as the deaths of their strong female characters (literal or figurative) reassert the necessity for conformity in times of normalcy such as those as we live in today. Both characters are brought back to earth, demoted from their status as super girls to so very human, returned to reality along with their readers' hopes for a different sort of future. In the *Hunger Games* series, Katniss, like Tris, fights back and acts out her masculinity within the dystopian context, but when the dystopia resolves itself Katniss marries Peeta and stays home with their children (*Mockingjay*). The series then suggests that Katniss was only permitted to subvert her femininity

in the context where it is necessary and everything is subverted. The same is true for Tris, but with a sadder result. Katniss is reformed, and Tris is sacrificed. Neither can continue to exist as their more masculine selves with the larger societal conflict is resolved. They have to conform in some way, in order to convey the message that subversion is acceptable only when it is the only option.

There are many ways in which Roth undermines the series' positive portrayal of a world, and heroine, less restricted to the traditional gender binary than young women in our world. Tris is, undoubtedly, a young female character with more strength, independence, and courage than many heroes in modern media. She fights her own battles, does not shy from violence, and is moral to a fault. Her world is one where gender is not the most important marker of a person's identity or predictor of his or her abilities, and a more flexible identity can save the day. There is much to be said for this new type of female hero and the message the author chooses to give young readers through her untraditional gender performance. However, there are many ways in which Roth apologizes for, or justifies, Tris' character by tying her to a stronger male, emphasizing her small size, and finally killing her off as her character cannot exist outside of dystopia. *Divergent* has become wildly popular with many different demographics in America, and the recent release of the major motion picture version of the first book, and upcoming release of movies of the last two, promises to increase its popularity. Often lauded as a feminist series, *Divergent* certainly incorporates some progressive elements. However, the improvement over traditional literature for young women is still a small one, and the positive impact of the series on young women is questionable when the ultimate message tells them that a divergent gender presentation requires a heterosexual relationship and will ultimately need to be given up.

Authors have struggled with how to end stories about transgressive women since they

first began to appear in literature. From Thomas Hardy's *Tess (Tess of the d'Urbervilles)* to Kate Chopin's Edna (*The Awakening*), literary history is rife with strong women that subvert the norm dying, becoming imprisoned, or learning their "rightful place" in society. It is too difficult to imagine a reality where women can act so far outside of acceptable bounds, so the character must be returned as the reader closes the book, and returns to a reality of his or her own. Popular young adult series like *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* face the same issue as their literary predecessors. Both series are held up as feminist and full of strong women, and they are. But girls today do not need examples of how to be strong in a dystopian setting where the day needs to be saved. They need examples of how to be strong and individual when everything is at rights in the world. Role models grant a permission of sorts, a permission to behave a certain way. When those role models are no longer able to be subversive outside a certain context, when they are forced to conform as the setting no longer requires the skills they bring as strong, nontraditional women, they do not send a message about femininity that is any different than that sent by television and advertisements.

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