Refiguraciones
Queering the Heroine’s Journey: Exploring Fluid Gender Identities in Veronica Roth’s Divergent Series

by Fiona Winnie Wong

Abstract

This article explores the representations of gender portrayed through the female protagonist Tris (Beatrice) Prior in the Divergent series by Veronica Roth. Due to the recent rise in popularity of female protagonists in young adult (YA) literature, it is critical that researchers observe what messages female protagonists, who can act as role models for young adults, are imparting on young readers today. Through feminist queer theory, I critically analyze four topic areas in this series—the setting and genre, constructions of leadership, Tris’ physical appearance, and Tris’ romantic relationship—to show how Tris’ gender relates to both traditional “masculine” and “feminine” gender roles. However, because of her ability to move around the gender spectrum, Tris embraces a fluid gendered identity. I maintain that the series does uphold some conventional ideals of gender, but more importantly Roth shows Tris as a queer character who challenges normative gender ideals and participates in the blurring of gender lines.

Keywords: YA literature, Divergent series, Veronica Roth, feminist queer theory, gender fluidity.
1. Introduction

Research on the effects of gender representation in young adult (YA) literature—texts that “address problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12-18” (Cart, n. p.)—is important as YA books can play a meaningful role in the lives of adolescent readers, who are in the process of finding themselves and creating their own identities in preparation for adulthood. Many readers of YA literature look to texts as mirrors of their own life experiences and “see themselves reflected in [their] pages” (Cart, n. p.).

According to Kortenhaus and Demarest, readers of children’s literature learn how to socialize by reading texts and adapting to examples of different roles and behaviours that usually pertain to a certain sex (219). Thus, young adults who read YA books actively participate in a socialization process where their beliefs and ideas around social issues, such as gender, are influenced by the explicit and implicit messages they receive from texts. Consequently, it is crucial for readers to see and understand the many different messages around gender, conveyed in YA literature, so that they can avoid the danger of “unconsciously digesting harmful and distorted messages” (Jacobs, 23). By developing a critical awareness of gender representations found in YA literature, young adults can decide for themselves what they want to believe in and what roles they want to embody in their own lives.

Brendler, in her article on blurring gender lines in YA readers’ advisory, asserts that an increasing number of YA novels feature “intelligent, capable, athletic heroines” (222) such as Bella from Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight saga and Katniss from Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy. In addition, many successful YA books are translated into various languages so that young adults around the world can read them. Popular books, including the two-series mentioned above, may also be converted into various mediums such as films or plays, garnering a significant amount of global media attention. Because of the increased popularity of and access to these texts, it is critical for educators and readers to decipher how authors write female characters in YA literature. Moreover, Brendler highlights how the readership of YA literature has shifted to attract readers of all sexes, influencing both young men and women in their perception of and ideas around gender (222). Although studying the effects of heteronormativity on male characters
in YA literature is important, especially as texts can be “equally stereotypical and... equally dangerous for boys and men” (Nodelman, 2) as they are for girls and women, my research examines the female protagonist in the Divergent series.

Inevitably, progress has been made with regards to creating and developing strong female heroines within YA literature. However, some scholars, such as Woloshyn et al. believe, “Many female characters, who initially may appear to be strong role models, often remain constrained by patriarchal norms of emphasized femininities in that they eventually are returned to traditional roles” (151). Conversely, other scholars, such as Mitchell, view the female protagonist as a character who “blurs, erases, transcends and challenges traditional representations of gender” (129), questioning the very foundation of gender. While gender is evolving into more of a fluid construct in western society—albeit slowly—gender norms within YA literature are also starting to reflect these changes.

One series that exemplifies the evolution of gender representation is Veronica Roth’s Divergent novels, a dystopian series that depicts a young heroine, Tris (Beatrice) Prior. To prove how Tris embraces a non-normative, queer, and fluid gender identity, I use feminist queer theory to explore four topic areas in the Divergent series: the setting and genre, the constructions of leadership, Tris’ physical appearance, and Tris’ romantic relationship with Four (Tobias) Eaton.

2. Sex, Gender, and YA Literature

As a concept, gender cannot simply be defined, for multiple explanations and views exist on the meaning and use of gender. In Simone de Beauvoir’s book The Second Sex, she provocatively asserts, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (301). In this case, gender can be understood as a choice a person makes, a construct developed out of social and cultural expectations placed on men and women, rather than something that can be understood as biologically inherent. Consequently, differentiating between “gender,” a word that represents women and men based on social factors, and “sex,” which denotes women and men depending on biological features such as hormones, chromosomes and sex organs (Mikkola), has become widely understood and practiced.

Judith Butler, a leading poststructuralist scholar and researcher in gender studies, has greatly changed discussions of feminism with her innovative arguments on sex and gender. Butler’s research deconstructs the discourses of feminism, that have dominated the academic conversation for so many years, as she criticizes how feminists insert themselves into the discussion of gender with the use of binary categories. Butler maintains, “[T]he presumed universality and unity of
the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representa-tional discourse in which it functions,” (Gender trouble, 4) so by labelling and categorizing ourselves into the stereotypical binaries of male and female, we have participated in the “unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations” (Gender trouble, 5).

To combat traditional notions of sex and gender, Butler uses Foucault’s idea of discourse, a term defined as “historically contingent cultural systems of knowledge, belief, and power” (Bucholtz, 45), to explain how the body functions as a “site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves” (Butler, “Foucault and the Paradox”, 601). Therefore, gender and sex are merely products of social structures constructed and upheld by current discourses in society. Butler maintains that we must view sex as an “ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time” (Bodies that Matter, 1) and gender as performative, an enactment of processes in which people continually participate through a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Gender trouble, 33).

One approach highly influenced by Butler's studies on sex, gender, and sexuality, is feminist queer theory, a lens that combines feminist approaches and queer theory by bringing “both a queer orientation to feminist theory and a feminist orientation to queer theory” (Marinucci, 105). Traditionally, scholars have been known to examine literature through feminist approaches to demonstrate and problematize the representation of stereotypical and unequal gender dynamics by “break[ing] down the public/private split and the binaries of masculinity/femininity, mind/body, reason/feeling and begin to discover a language of politics which might articulate a radically different vision of gender and society” (Rice and Waugh, 144).

Feminist approaches have also supported the examination of the dangers of traditional gender representations as they perpetuate repressive, patriarchal ideas. For instance, Silver’s article on gender, sexuality, and the family in Meyers’ Twilight trilogy shows that the gender ideologies presented in the series are “ultimately and unapologetically patriarchal” (122) as the female protagonist Bella participates in varying conventional gendered actions and constantly requires the help of the male protagonist to save “the perpetually clumsy and unlucky Bella again and again” (125). In addition, using feminist approaches has allowed scholars to examine how characters in YA literature often take on roles that may seem to challenge gendered norms; however, ultimately many of these characters still follow heteronormative ideals (Woloshyn, et al.).
On the other hand, queer theory is a relatively newer approach that aims to “look at traditional categories and gleefully mak[e] ‘trouble’ for them” (Rabinowitz, 19) by finding any instabilities in structures of sex, gender, and sexuality. Queer theory is an unrestricted form of criticism, accepting of all reading approaches that disclose gender options without imposing expectations on how gender should be executed (23). Using queer theory allows for a more complete and fluid picture of gender, helping scholars to dismantle the binaries of masculinity and femininity that “often leave behind the space in between—the neithers, the boths, the incoherencies” (20).

Queer theory has been a popular approach for researchers studying LGBTQ YA literature because these texts blatantly work to problematize “acceptable” and “normal” ideas of gender, sex, and sexuality; however, queer theory has been just as effective in helping researchers seek examples that challenge normative assumptions in non-LGBTQ texts. For instance, while using a feminist lens, Heilman and Donaldson note that Harry Potter books are sexist as female characters are shown as vulnerable and weak, while male characters dominate strong, leading positions throughout the novel. However, by viewing the same texts with a queer lens, Pugh and Wallace find that Rowling’s Harry Potter series, which does not explicitly illustrate gender deviance, “challenges regressive constructions of gender and sexuality” (260) and provides many instances of non-normativity. In addition, queer theory has also been used as a tool to examine gender as performative. For instance, Mitchell utilizes queer theory to argue how Katniss from Collin’s The Hunger Games adapts to situations around her by performing certain gender roles that are more advantageous to her chances of survival. Mitchell’s queer examination of The Hunger Games illustrates gender as a set of specific behaviours enacted and adopted as needed, rather than a natural and essential part of a person’s biological sex.

While numerous articles demonstrate the use of feminist and queer approaches in critically analyzing YA literature, little evidence of the application of feminist queer theory to YA texts exists. Scholars have discussed the interrelations between queer theory and feminist approaches, finding that they can have similar agendas in observing and challenging normative identity categories (Jagose; Marinucci). Uniting feminist and queer theories can combine the strengths of the two approaches, allowing for a more detailed and layered analysis and an embracing of multiplicity in thought.

In this article, I utilize a feminist queer approach to analyze the extent to which Tris, from Roth’s Divergent series, follows queer and/or traditional gender ideologies. Although one of queer theory’s main goals is to demolish gender
structures, western society remains accustomed to discourses of feminine and masculine binaries. Thus, as Marinucci explains, feminist theories will remain relevant until the linguistic and conceptual understanding of feminism is rendered meaningless (109). As a result, feminist queer theory allows for me to use these traditional discourses while giving me flexibility to identify examples of non-normative gender relations.

I explore elements of and characters in the text in relation to traits that align with the polarities of “femininity” and “masculinity” in order to gather any evidence of existence between the two binaries. According to Paechter, the basic definition of “masculinity” and “femininity” can be understood as “ways of being that are found in dominant male [and female] groups in particular social circumstances” (254). For instance, Tyson explains that men and women are stereotypically separated through the following binaries: “men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive” and women as “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (86).

Similarly, Connell’s work on hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, which asserts the idea of “global dominance of men over women” (183), also identifies feminine and masculine traits. In their book on gender construction in popular culture, Milestone and Meyer explain how Connell’s ideas of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity link men to attributes such as physical, mental and social strength and power, being active and ambitious, tough and competitive, assertive and aggressive, and women to being fragile, weak, peaceful, irrational, emotional, compliant, nurturing, empathetic, afraid of confrontations, and associated with moderation and self-denial (19-21).

I realize that using labels such as “femininity” and “masculinity” aid in perpetuating the gap between men and women; nonetheless, I employ these differentiating gender categories in my analysis for the sake of clarity. In addition, I seek examples of gender performativity, which is found in “any aspect of a person that relates to gender in any way…[including] clothing to occupation to emotional habits to physical skills” (Rabinowitz, 21) to discern Tris’ place on the gender spectrum.

3. Analysis of the Divergent Series

Unstable Paradigms: Gender in The Dystopian Genre and Setting of The Divergent Series

The Divergent series falls under the genre of YA dystopia, a type of narrative that includes “wildly fantastic premises” (Basu, et al. 4), giving writers space to create
stories that “deliberately depart...from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal” (Hume, xii). Consequently, when reading dystopian texts, the audience encounters extraordinary situations that stretch outside of traditional boundaries. According to Kennon's studies on gender in contemporary dystopian fiction, “Dystopian stories offer opportunities to explore gender role stereotypes and their reformulation by young people” (40). The dystopian genre creates a setting in which characters are continually faced with situations that require them to challenge or break away from normative gender roles. Unlike other dystopian novels that highlight gender matters, gender is not an explicit issue in the Divergent series. To discover how gender is represented in the Divergent books, one must look for implicit cues of how the characters' gender identities are affected within the setting and genre.

In deciding whether Tris disrupts traditional gender categories and embraces a fluid gender identity, observing how Roth creates the society within the Divergent novels is necessary, as Tris' gender is constructed by her society's mores. In this series, society includes a gender neutral system of five primary factions and the factionless that reinforce differing values. Because Tris is Divergent, an individual whose genetic makeup has been unaltered, she has the ability to be flexible in her thought, allowing her to belong to more than one faction. Although gender does not define a faction's values and no visible power imbalances exist between the sexes, one can discern various markers that indicate how certain factions are indeed implicitly gendered. Therefore, faction members are conditioned to act out conventional ideals of masculinity and femininity, depending on the beliefs of their respective factions.

Roth demonstrates how societal ideals affect one's gender identity through the connections she creates between Tris' personality and the core beliefs of her native faction. The Abnegation faction is comparable to Connell's gender ideologies of emphasized femininity, which are clarified in Milestone and Meyer's research on gender in popular culture (20). Milestone and Meyer explain that women who show signs of emphasized femininity are expected to be “naturally kind and caring, predisposed to looking after men and children” (20). Abnegation's proclivity towards helping others exemplifies this nurturing attitude as they participate in acts such as taking care of the factionless by giving them food and clothing.

In addition, Milestone and Meyer claim that women typically express the feminine trait of moderation (20), an ideal embraced by Abnegation as an “[e]xtravagance [that] is considered self-indulgent and unnecessary” (Roth, Divergent, 66). This observation explains why Abnegation forbids women and men to wear impractical accessories and insists its members eat plain food such as chicken
breasts and peas. Moreover, emphasized femininity dictates that women tend to engage in “self-denial” (Milestone and Meyer, 20), which is an important value in Abnegation. For instance, Tris views her mother as “well-practiced in the art of losing herself” (Divergent, 3), allowing her mother to be selfless in her service to others.

Roth even more clearly exhibits how society impacts one’s personality and beliefs as Tris’ experience as a trainee in Dauntless leaves her with values that align with traditional masculine norms. According to Tyson, being protective is a traditional trait demonstrated by men (86), aligning perfectly with the primary purpose of Dauntless: to guard the city by patrolling the fences that surround it. Moreover, Dauntless values coincide with Connell’s gender ideology of hegemonic masculinity. Undoubtedly, Dauntless is a physically active and aggressive faction. During Tris’ training in Dauntless, Tris develops skills in combat fighting, shooting, and throwing daggers. Moreover, Dauntless’ initiation process is based on the masculine model of competition in which trainees are pitted against each other in tests that assess their abilities.

Another masculine quality emphasized in Dauntless is bravery, which is tested in the fear-simulation stage of the Dauntless initiation. Dauntless trainees, including Tris, are injected with a serum that creates an imaginary scenario in which they must courageously overcome their worst fears. In opposition to Abnegation, Dauntless lies at the other end of the gender spectrum as an extreme example of masculinity.

Since Tris has been nurtured in these two vastly different factions that idealize contrasting codes of behaviour, where she lands on the gender spectrum varies depending on how she is called to perform. Tris experiences inner conflict in choosing her identity as Abnegation or Dauntless. However, instead of choosing one particular faction and acting out its gendered traits, Tris learns to navigate her way between Abnegation and Dauntless. Tris illustrates gender fluidity as she embraces Dauntless’ masculine ideals, while she bravely fights her enemies, yet embodies the Abnegation feminine value of selflessness by endangering her life and ultimately sacrificing it in order to save the lives of her loved ones. Ultimately, Tris herself thinks that “selflessness and bravery aren’t that different” (Roth, Divergent, 396; italics in original), illustrating her acceptance of her diverse gendered identity.

Tris’ gender fluidity is also evidenced through her movement within Erudite, Candor, and Amity. With Dauntless and Abnegation representing the duality of traditional masculine and feminine norms, Tris encounters the gender lines of the other three factions. Erudite, a faction that displays masculine qualities, is filled with highly ambitious people, thirsty for knowledge and well-known for making
decisions based on rational logic, a stereotypical male quality found in Tyson’s research (86). Candor’s “merciless, but honest” (Roth, Insurgent, 119) demeanor and its members’ “strangely flat” (126) way of speaking creates the impression that the Candor faction is cold and emotionless, attributes aligned more closely with the masculine than the feminine.

In contrast, the Amity faction falls in line with Connell’s feminine attributes such as peacefulness and conflict avoidance. For example, when Tris fights her enemy, Peter, at the Amity compound, she is put into a “conflict room” (57) and injected with a peace serum. In fact, the Amity faction is so fearful of conflict and focused on keeping peace within their faction that all of the people in Amity are unknowingly drugged with the peace serum. Although Erudite, Candor, and Amity are not as explicitly gendered as Abnegation and Dauntless are, they do still practice and uphold values that support either the feminine or masculine, and as Tris moves through these three factions, her fluid gender identity is reinforced.

The Queer Leader: Tris

Although men dominate the top of the hierarchy in most political systems in the world (Hoyt, 485), a person’s gender or gendered behaviour does not determine leadership positions in the Divergent series. Instead, leadership roles are based on particular strengths and abilities. Within the six factions, half of the leaders are women. For instance, Jeanine Matthews, the leader of Erudite and Tris’ archenemy, reaches her position of power solely because she has the highest IQ in Erudite, a faction that highly values intelligence. Johanna Reyes has been democratically elected to be the spokesperson for Amity goals and concerns. Evelyn Johnson, leader of the factionless, creates her own position by banding the factionless together to destroy the faction system. These three female leaders have broken the binds of stereotypical female roles that have dictated women be subordinate in a hierarchical patriarchy, thereby providing Tris powerful models of the leadership women can attain in her world.

Although Tris is never assigned a leadership role, Tris possesses tremendous power and authority throughout the Divergent series and she utilizes her masculine characteristics to lead others. Roth illustrates Tris as a leader that tends to be “emotionally flat”, a trait that has been “constructed historically as a form of masculinity” (Connell, 181). Throughout the series, Tris experiences a number of trying and traumatizing situations such as getting bullied and sexually assaulted in Dauntless, witnessing both of her parents’ deaths, and experiencing betrayal from her brother. However, even though she faces so many difficulties, Tris does
not let her emotions overtake her need to function. Tris is “not the crying type. Nor [is she] the yelling type” (Roth, Divergent, 402), forsaking any emotional displays in front of her enemies as well as her friends.

To Tris, displaying emotions depicts weakness and her lack of feeling helps her be a productive and active leader. In fact, after Tris witnesses her mother’s death, Tris cuts her hair short as her hair reminds her of her mother and the last time they spent together. By doing so, Tris cuts off her grief and memories of her mother. Moreover, when Tris sees one of her fellow Dauntless members crying during his first night in their new faction, she feels disgust, thinking that people like Al who “[look] so strong shouldn’t act so weak” (74). Tris’ ability to restrain emotion is rewarded with her peers as they see her as “[s]omeone capable and strong” (Insurgent, 265) and fit to be a leader.

In addition to her masculine tendency of being emotionally flat, Tris also prepares and executes her plans based on stereotypical male attributes. When it comes to decision-making, Tris uses her Erudite aptitude to form and rationalize her course of action. Tris often confers with her friends from Erudite because she knows they are intelligent and logical and will “tell [her] how to fix [her flawed plans]” (447). In fact, Four, Tris’ love interest and instructor, commends Tris’ leadership style because she “approaches everything with a question instead of an answer” (Allegiant, 381) so she can consider different possibilities and make informed decisions.

Moreover, Roth paints Tris in a masculine light by emphasizing her bravery, strength, and aggression during her excursions. For example, in Divergent, Tris courageously returns to the Dauntless headquarters to shut down the simulation, even though Dauntless is overrun with traitors who “[do] not intend to negotiate…[and] will kill [her] without question” (463). Tris faces many Dauntless traitors, but she physically eliminates those in her way to complete her mission. Tris’ leadership is strengthened by her ability to plan and fight accordingly with the help of her masculine gendered traits.

Tris’ leadership style includes many masculine traits; however, when looking at the main factors that drive Tris in taking on leadership roles, readers can clearly see that Tris is fueled by traditional feminine ideals. Unlike Evelyn and Jeanine, Tris has no ambition for power. In fact, when given the chance to be one of the three leaders of Dauntless, Tris refuses her nomination. Instead, Tris’ leadership style stems from conventional feminine values of love, compassion, and nurture. For instance, the first time Tris takes on a leadership role is in her mission to save Four and other innocent Abnegation members who were being killed by Dauntless soldiers under a mind-control serum. Many of Tris’ actions are based on
assessing “two bad options [and] pick[ing] the one that saves the people you love and believe in most” (Roth, Allegiant, 388). Indeed, Tris’ desire to save the people she loves is so strong she ultimately sacrifices her own life to prevent a serum from being unleashed, wiping the memories from all the citizens of Chicago and returning them to the faction system. Although Tris never serves as an official leader, she leads when her feminine values are triggered by the people she loves.

The Divergent series is laden with depictions of leaders who come from varying factions that embrace differing values. Some of the leaders are more prone to showing a masculine style of leadership while others act out more feminine values. Nevertheless, it is Roth’s portrayal of the unofficial Divergent leader Tris that catches the attention of readers. Throughout the story, Tris is considered to be genetically pure, an important element in this story because it allows her to be the brave revolutionary leader needed to bring social justice to the people she loves and cares for. As a Divergent individual, Tris is a flexible thinker adept in utilizing her knowledge and skills from Abnegation, Dauntless, and Erudite, blending conventional traits of femininity and masculinity in her leadership. Roth’s emphasis on Tris’ Divergent leadership helps readers understand the benefits and importance of having a queer mixture of feminine and masculine characteristics, as that mix—that divergence—is ultimately what saves this particular dystopian world.

The Body is Not What It Seems: Physical Appearance

Roth’s Divergent series highlights how the physical appearance of characters does not necessarily represent the gender roles that they portray. According to Francis and Paechter, one problem that can be found in gender studies is the “invocation of the body (‘sex’) as the ghostly categoriser of gender” (778). This idea suggests that people must act according to certain prescribed gender roles depending on interpretations of their “sex.” Butler also finds the traditional definition of sex and gender problematic as she argues that sex should not be seen as a “construct of [which] gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies” (Bodies that Matter, 2-3).

Roth describes Tris, “the smallest initiate” (Divergent, 72) in Dauntless, through the lens of a feminine body, emphasizing her small stature: “Birdlike, made small as if for taking flight, built straight-waisted and fragile” (Insurgent, 49). However, Tris’ physical appearance does not limit her to following traditional feminine gender roles of being a weak member of the patriarchy. Underneath her slight frame, Tris has “wiry muscles” (Allegiant, 173) in her arms, legs and stomach, allowing
her to fight just as well as any other person—male or female. Tris’ body may appear to be feminine, but her actions prove that her gendered behaviour can be more closely associated with the masculine.

Tris also exemplifies the practice of gender performativity when she uses her feminine appearance to her own benefit. Because Tris looks like a “little girl” (*Divergent; Insurgent*), she knows that people will underestimate her strength. It is evident that Tris does not truly identify with being a “little girl” because she often gets furious at people who regard her as such, like Marcus, Four’s father and leader of Abnegation, who thinks of her as “useless” (*Insurgent*, 244). However, as Jeanine points out, Tris often “choos[es] different ways of referring to [herself] depending on what is convenient” (343). For example, Eric, one of the corrupt leaders of Dauntless, questions Tris’ loyalty towards Dauntless, she tricks him into thinking she is simply a “foolish girl” (*Divergent*, 363) who acts out of line because of a silly crush on Four. Tris uses her ability to perform gender roles traditionally associated with her appearance so that she can “pretend to be vulnerable” (285; italics in original), creating advantageous situations for herself.

The importance of the factions in the *Divergent* series is once again noted when examining Tris’ physical appearance because factions dictate how a person should look, just as society places expectations on how men and women should look in real life. For example, the women and men of Abnegation all wear the same grey clothing and have similar hairstyles to aid them in forgetting themselves so they can serve others selflessly. The Dauntless who primarily embody traditional masculine traits show their fierce attitudes by wearing black clothing and marking their bodies with tattoos and piercings. For instance, Tris’ Dauntless friend Lynn shaves her head so that she “[doesn’t] look so much like a girl” (*Insurgent*, 170), as Dauntless girls are not seen as serious threats. Lynn’s decision to change the way she looks is stemmed by her desire to seem more manly.

Unlike Lynn, Tris does not feel the need to alter her appearance to become a certain gender as she adamantly states, “I will not cut my hair…or dye it a strange color. Or pierce my face” (*Divergent*, 85). In this series, the gendered values of each faction are implicitly reinforced through dictates and expectations regarding appearance and attire; however, Tris once again shows her fluid and queer gender as she retains her conservative Abnegation looks while experimenting with some Dauntless tattoos and clothing. Tris’ appearance does not affect her ability to act in masculine or feminine ways, emphasizing the idea that gender is not related to one’s looks.
The Divergent Couple: Tris and Four

According to Basu *et al.*, “romance is historically a conservative genre and just as often serves to affirm traditional norms” (8). However, Tris and Four’s interactions prove that their romantic relationship is anything but conventional. In Heiss’ study on gender and romantic love roles, Heiss notes that “[r]omantic love is often accused of being an accomplice in men’s traditional dominance over women in intimate relationships” (575). However, it is clear that from the beginning of their relationship, Tris never yields to Four. For instance, after talking back to Four, Tris decidedly challenges him in an uncomfortable staring match as she knows “[l]ooking away is submissive” (Roth, *Divergent*, 69).

Furthermore, Four and Tris’s equal status in their relationship is demonstrated when Tris confronts Four about her fear of physical intimacy. Four respects Tris’ feelings and does not pressure her into doing anything for which she is not mentally prepared; instead, he encourages Tris to tell him when and if she is ready for the next step in their physical love life. Although Tris and Four are young, Roth depicts their love in a mature, non-conventional fashion in which the two characters repeatedly “choose” (*Allegiant*, 372) to stay together and love each other. Tris and Four play equal roles in their relationship and their style of love does not support traditional norms of male dominance, which is frequently found in heteronormative relations.

Tris’ rejection of gender norms in her relationship with Four is also found in her refusal to follow the gender-biased narrative in which heroines are expected to “deny [their] independent goal-oriented action outside of love and marriage” (Regis, quoted in *Firestone*, 212). The notion that women are expected to relinquish their careers in order to stay within private realms as homemakers is still a prevalent and practiced idea across many societies and cultures (Giele); however, Tris chooses to abandon this traditional approach and follow her own path. This is well exemplified when Tris rejects Four’s “insist[ance] on [her] staying home” (Roth, *Insurgent*, 248) rather than putting herself in danger by fighting her enemies. Tris also refuses to follow Four in Evelyn’s plan of infiltrating the Erudite headquarters in hopes of taking control of the city. Instead, she listens to her own instincts and “work[s] with the father he despises” (425) because Tris knows that helping Four’s father improves her chances of changing everyone’s lives. Tris fights the gender norm of retreating to the safety of the home and does not relinquish her desire to protect and save those she loves.

Another queer trait found in Tris and Four’s relationship is in the way they switch the stereotypical gender roles of men as rescuers and women as rescued.
Heiss notes the idea that “love leads women to a ‘pathological dependency’ on men” (575), and this is the case in many narratives where female protagonists depend on men to rescue and care for them—from the classic Cinderella story, where the handsome prince saves a poor girl from her wicked fate, to popular YA fictions such as *Twilight* in which the main character Bella is regularly rescued by her lover Edward, from dangerous situations.

Incidents do occur where Tris depends on Four’s help such as Four preventing her near-fatal fall from the Ferris wheel. Conversely, Four relies on Tris on many occasions. For example, when observing Four’s fear simulation landscape, Tris aids Four in confronting and conquering his fear of his abusive father. Both Tris and Four take turns rescuing each other in their relationship, so much so that Four remarks, “I think we’re past keeping track of who has saved whose life” (*Insurgent*, 209). The constant switching of gender roles between Tris and Four supports how both characters practice flexible and fluid gender identities.

### 4. Conclusion

Roth’s characterization of Tris in the *Divergent* series reveals contemporary ideas of gender fluidity while exhibiting conventional ideals of masculinity and femininity. The setting of the society in this series upholds traditional gender traits and roles depending on the faction, thereby influencing the characters of this novel to perform gendered behaviours. However, Tris’ Divergent personality demonstrates her inability to fit in with her society’s gendered norms, and her queerness is shown through her appearance, leadership skills, and love life. Although Tris does not conform to normative gender roles, she does not solidly stand in the middle of the feminine and masculine binary as she moves along the gender spectrum. Tris’ ability to change and perform her gender proves the queer idea that “the very structures and definitions of [sex,] gender and sexuality are rickety” (Rabinowitz, 20).

In her studies on deconstructing the hero in children’s literature, Hourihan maintains that stories are “the most potent means by which perceptions, values and attitudes are transmitted from one generation to the next” (1), and as societies across the world become increasingly open-minded about diverse choices around gender, sex, and sexuality, literature is also working to include and reflect these important changes. In the *Divergent* series, Tris’ mother explains how “[e]very faction conditions its members to think and act a certain way. And most people do it” (*Divergent*, 441-442) because it is easier to conform than to challenge normative beliefs and structures in society. However, Tris’ claim about how people “can’t [and should not] be confined to one way of thinking” (442) rings true.
If young readers participate in discussing and analyzing texts that focus on queer characters, they may begin to understand gender, sex, and sexuality in different ways, lessening the attachments to the gendered language that currently binds men and women into certain discourses and roles. Readers may learn to break away from identifying with gendered stereotypes, allowing for more freedom and choice in the values that they want to embody or adapt in their lives ahead of them. Moreover, the need for people to conform to conventional ways of performing based on gender may diminish. By recognizing fluid and queerly gendered characters in novels, young readers may realize that they do not have to align with just one side of any binary; instead, like Tris, they can fuse the dualities of masculinity and femininity into one identity and embrace their own divergence within.

Bibliography


