



ISSN: 2450-7563 (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: journals.wsiz.edu.pl/sc

Morality in the Times of Dystopia: Sacrifice, Loyalty, and Ethical Choices in the World of *Divergent*

Aisha Khan

To cite this article: Khan, A. (2025) Morality in the Times of Dystopia: Sacrifice, Loyalty, and Ethical Choices in the World of *Divergent*. *Social Communication. Online Journal*, 1(26), p. 52-57.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.57656/sc-2025-0007>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published with
Social Communication



Published online: 22 Dec 2025



Submit your article to this journal



View related articles



UNIVERSITY of INFORMATION
TECHNOLOGY and MANAGEMENT
in Rzeszow, POLAND

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
journals.wsiz.edu.pl/sc

Morality in the Times of Dystopia: Sacrifice, Loyalty, and Ethical Choices in the World of *Divergent*

Aisha Khan  Department of English, Forman Christian College University, Lahore, aishaaxo04@gmail.com
morality, personal sacrifice, ethical choices, loyalty, moral development

ABSTRACT

This study examines the moral dynamics and motivations that drive the characters' decisions to make personal sacrifices and remain loyal in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. It illuminates the depth of their relationships and their unwavering commitment to ethical principles in a dystopian setting. The analysis focuses particularly on the protagonist, Beatrice Prior, tracing the difficult moral choices she faces and the risks she takes for the sake of others. Despite adversity and danger, the characters demonstrate loyalty, selflessness, and a readiness to protect one another, reflecting the human capacity for ethical resilience. To provide a comprehensive understanding of these motivations, the study applies Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which explains how individuals progress through different stages of moral reasoning—pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. By using this theoretical framework, the research examines the characters' moral dilemmas and the reasoning behind their decisions to sacrifice and remain loyal. Through the lens of moral development theory, the study offers insight into the ethical dimensions of sacrifice, loyalty, and moral growth in a dystopian world.

Introduction

The novel, *Divergent*, was authored by Veronica Roth. It was published in 2011 and belongs to the young adult dystopian science fiction genre. The narrative is set in a dystopian future world, Chicago, where an oppressive government and faction leaders control the individuals, the society is divided into five factions – Abnegation, Amity, Condor, Dauntless, and Erudite – each faction embodies a particular value or virtue: selflessness, peace, honesty, bravery, and knowledge, respectively. The narrative revolves around the protagonist Beatrice Prior, also known as Tris, born into the Abnegation faction, which values selflessness. She later discovers she is a divergent, who possesses the ability to think independently and resist the manipulation by faction leaders; therefore, she is more vulnerable to exclusion and persecution by the oppressive government. Tris joins the Dauntless faction and undergoes rigorous training, discovering a sinister and malicious plot being hatched by the Erudite to overthrow the present government. The narrative, in short, focuses on Tris' journey, characterized by sacrifices and selflessness, navigation of complexities and resistance to control to achieve freedom.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology and textual analysis, utilizing a close reading of the text to identify significant events and character interactions that reflect the characters' moral thinking

processes, psychological, and sociological aspects. These aspects shape the characters and their responses to the complex ethical challenges presented in the dystopian context. The study employs the theoretical framework of Moral Development, as postulated by Lawrence Kohlberg, to explore the primary reasons behind the decisions, behaviors, and actions of characters within the context of Moral Development. In particular, the study will focus on how the choices made by the characters align with or deviate from Kohlberg's stages of moral development. The first level, i.e., the Pre-conventional level, comprises stages characterized by obedience and punishment. As per Kohlberg, "this stage takes an egocentric point of view. A person at this stage does not consider the interests of others or recognize they differ from the others and does not relate two points of view" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 445). An individual's main concern is to follow rules to avoid consequences rather than understand the needs and feelings of others. The stage two focuses on individualistic purpose and exchange, notably, the perspective is increasingly individualistic. The Conventional level, comprising stages three and four, pertains to mutual interpersonal expectations, social system and conscience maintenance. Kohlberg opines that an individual at stage three, "is aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations, which take primacy over individual interests." Moreover, at this

stage, “he or she does not consider generalized “system” perspective” (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 446). However, at stage four, differences between societal and interpersonal points of view emerge; therefore, an individual at this stage considers the viewpoints articulated by the system, whereby different roles and rules have been outlined. The last level of moral development is Post-conventional, which consists of stages five and six. The individual, at stage five, takes a prior-to-society perspective, moreover, integrating it with mechanisms of agreement, objective impartiality, contract, and due process. At the last stage, individuals consider the moral viewpoint, thereby, basic moral premises and respect for other individuals prevail.

This research is significant as it examines the intricate psychological and social factors that drove the characters’ actions and motivations. This study, by exploring the selflessness, sacrificial, and ethical nature of the characters, forms an understanding of their moral development and dilemmas within the dystopian context. The application of the moral development framework in dystopian science fiction contributes to understanding the intricacies and challenges prevalent in societies.

Theoretical Framework: Kohlberg’s Moral Development Theory

This study is grounded in Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of Moral Development to understand how a child develops morality and the ability for moral reasoning. Kohlberg’s theory (1981) draws on the works of Jean Piaget and proposes that moral development occurs in six stages, which can be broadly categorized into three levels, i.e., Pre-conventional, Conventional, and Post-conventional levels (Kohlberg). The level one, pre-conventional morality, is composed of two stages, which occur till the age of nine. At this stage, children’s decisions are influenced by adults and the fear of consequences for breaking rules. Level two, conventional morality, focuses on the development of interpersonal relations and maintaining social order. The adolescents internalize the moral standards learnt from society or their role models. Level three, post-conventional morality, the highest level of moral development, is characterized by comprehension of abstract principles of morality, contemplation of the principles of ethics, and abstract reasoning.

Wardana, Muhammad Kiki, and Sumita Roy, in

the study “Ideology and Class Division in Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*”, explore the novel from the perspective of the class division between the factions and their distinct ideologies. This study employs a descriptive approach whereby the events and occurrences of the novel are meticulously broken down for the attainment of data and analysis; moreover, it is grounded in the theory of ideology that was propounded by Raymond Williams. It serves as the core of cultural ideology, which is further explored in the context of the novel and classes. All five factions are embedded with their unique ideologies and self-trait, which dictate the normative behaviour for the individuals, who must therefore adhere to it. The study further contends that bourgeois culture and ideology evidently prevail in society. Notably, in the context of the novel, the faction, Erudite, is the elite, dominant class and the ruling faction, whereas Abnegation are the proletariat, or in other words, the slaves or working classes of the society. It is argued that each of the factions had its own distinct ideologies despite originating from the same founding fathers.

Muir, Mackenzie in the study, “Conform to a Faction or Be Factionless? The Struggle Between Individuality and Conformity in Veronica Roth’s Dystopian Novel, *Divergent*” explores the themes of individuality and conformity, and the nature of conflict between them in the backdrop of post-apocalyptic Chicago, which has been categorized into five factions each faction is characterized by one dominant core value. This study also sheds light on the oppressive governmental actions to enforce and implement the strict societal norms and regulations in order to induce conformity and suppress individuality. Muir in the study highlights the conflict between individuality and conformity by analyzing the character of the protagonist. The study argues that the character of Tris and her journey, characterized by transition embodying divergent traits, unveils the struggle of finding one’s true identity in a conformist society. Muir further argues that symbolism plays a vital role in the narrative, and the colours and material symbols signify the values, identities, and ideologies of the factions. The study contends that these elements demonstrate the oppressive nature of societal norms to enforce conformity and suppress identities; thus, unveiling the detrimental consequences of societal control and curtailment of individuality.

Mustolih, Amirrudin, and Charimah Ningrum

in the study, "The Comparative Literature Analysis of Collins' Novel *The Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth's Novel *Divergent*" wherein, the main characters from the respective novels, Katniss and Tris are analyzed through the feminist approach. This study aims to shed light on the feminist values embodied by the characters in the novel, by exploring the similarities and differences in the characters' motivations, actions, and roles in the backdrop of the social conditions. The characters Katniss and Tris from the novels *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are battling with the prevailing social injustice throughout the course of the novels. The study finds both of the female protagonists to be very prominent in their struggle against social injustice; both characters, through their actions, embody feminist values and traits. The study also suggests the undertones of feminist ideology are evident through the actions, thoughts, gestures, behaviours – both implicit and explicit – of the protagonists. The study establishes that Tris, the protagonist of Roth's novel, personifies feminist ideals, as she does not fear confronting the perpetrators of injustice in society.

Eugene Mathes, in the study "An Evolutionary Perspective on Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development", verifies that moral development and social evolution progress simultaneously. Notably, at stages one and two, the primary reason to behave morally is to avoid punishment and receive rewards; at these stages, moral behaviour is externally determined. Subsequently, at stage three, moral behaviour obligates individuals to care for their family similar to the morality of hunter gatherer societies; at stage four, morality entails obeying the authorities, conforming with the prevalent norms, laws and legal system; at stage five, morality encompasses reasoning, aligned with democratic rules; finally, at stage six, morality entails that individuals should adhere to the universal ethical principles. These hypotheses, for each stage of moral development, were tested by asking the participants about their inclination to invest in self, children, parents, friends, and strangers. Accordingly, the study established that Kohlberg's stages of moral development are intertwined with social evolution; the findings revealed stage one and two are meant to protect self-interest, stage three is aligned with hunter gatherer social structure and morality focusing on investing in close relations; stage four resonates the sentiments of nationalism; stage five, correlated with

nationalistic perspective rather than being international; whereas, stage six embodied support for international social structure. The study, therefore, contends that moral development and social evolution evolved simultaneously. However, they have been influenced by the abstract nature of ideologies and cultural factors.

Moral Choices and Ethical Growth in *Divergent*

The notion of morality refers to the sense of right and wrong; the distinction between right and wrong is developed over time, and the theme of morality, along with its associated traits of selflessness and sacrifice, reverberates in the narrative. The characters in the novel make sacrifices for others, depicting selflessness, which is the motivation or driving force behind their actions, and is intertwined with the notion of morality and moral development. The motivations behind the actions of the protagonist and other characters in the novel are primarily influenced by their experiences, the dystopian nature of their existence, and their affiliation with their respective faction. Tris' journey in the novel is rooted in her desire to protect those around her and embody the values of selflessness. Her actions later in the novel personify this behavior, depicting the strong influence of Abnegation traits and values on her actions. The Abnegation values have been described in the narrative in these, "At the Abnegation table, we sit quietly and wait. Faction customs dictate even idle behavior and supersede individual preference" (Roth, 2011, p. 13), the narrative further reads, "I doubt all the Erudite want to study all the time, or that every Condor enjoys a lively debate, but they can't defy the norms of their factions any more than I can" (Roth, 2011, p. 13). Although Tris's decision to leave Abnegation and join Dauntless is seen as a rebellious act, it is still a significant sacrifice, as it involves leaving behind her family, marking the beginning of her moral development. Tris demonstrates selflessness at various occasions in the novel, for instance, when Tris takes Al's place in front of the knives, her actions are praised by her peers for displaying toughness and neglecting the fact that her actions were intended to protect Al instead of demonstrating toughness. The narrative also establishes that the most impressive and brave portrayal of strength is embodied in selflessness, grounded in the desire to help others, which is an Abnegation value.

At various points in the novel, Tris is burdened with making ethical choices. Consider this instance from the novel, where Tris encounters Tobias, who is also known as Four, who is under the mind control drug; Tris contemplates whether to kill him or not, eventually deciding to hand her gun over, making it easier for him to kill her. At this point the Abnegation the value of love and care overpower as she doubts killing her friend, "I can't kill him. I am not sure if I love him; not sure if that's why. But I am sure of what he would do if our positions were reversed. I am sure that nothing is worth killing him for" (Roth, 2011, p. 290). Initially, Tris contemplates whether she should kill Tobias, and eventually decides against it; this particular action embodies the caring and sacrificial values. Tris further alludes towards her father's teaching of power in self-sacrifice, "My father says, used to say that there is power in self-sacrifice. I turn the gun in my hands and press it into Tobias's palm" (Roth, 2011, p. 290). Her decision to surrender and sacrifice herself, is a major ethical choice she makes which reflects the influence of her Abnegation roots; the narrative notes, "He pushes the barrel into my forehead. My tears have stopped, and the air feels cold as it touches my cheeks. I reach out and rest my hand on his chest so I can feel his heartbeat" (Roth, 2011, p. 290). Tris's act of bravery and self-sacrifice is a testament to the fact that she internalizes the Abnegation values.

The protagonist, evidently, is driven by the desire to protect others, doing the right thing even if it requires a sacrifice. She has undoubtedly inherited this quality from her parents, who depicted selflessness and sacrificed their lives for Tris' future. During the coup by the Erudite faction to seize control, Tris loses both her parents, Natalie and Andrew Prior, who die defending their community against the attack on Abnegation orchestrated by the Erudite faction; notably, the Dauntless soldiers were used to carry out the attack. Tris' parents personify selflessness, as they willingly opt to stay behind despite being aware of the impending danger, meanwhile, helping others to escape; Tris' safety is owed to their sacrifice. It is pertinent to mention that the loss Tris experiences early on in the novel becomes a catalyst behind her journey, characterized by self-discovery and resistance against an oppressive regime. Her parents' sacrifice, which kept her alive, reinforces the theme of selflessness, a quality later depicted in the actions of the protagonist. Her parents' death impacts

her psychologically, as she engages with the principles of social justice and human rights; debatably, she even finds her principles conflicting with those of the regime; therefore, she undertakes a journey of resistance. Tris' actions and motivations to protect others also showcase an understanding of the moral principles. At this point, it is inevitable to refer towards the sixth stage of post-conventional morality, the highest level, characterized by engagement with the abstract principles of morality. Kohlberg enunciates post-conventional morality as the "perspective of a moral point of view from which social arrangements derive or on which they are grounded. The perspective is rational individual recognizing the nature of morality, basic moral premise of respect for other persons as ends, not means" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 448). Tris embodies the conventional level of moral development whereby the perspective regarding the social arrangements, laws, and regulations is not based on the societal norms, but rather on the moral standpoint of those rules, which leads towards a conflict between social norms and abstract moral principles.

Tris confronts her gravest fears during the course of her training with the Dauntless, who believe fear, synonymous with cowardice, is the core problem with the human race. Therefore, all of the Dauntless members undertook a journey to overcome their fears. The narrative also establishes that fear is a basic part of human nature; however, human existence requires rationalizing those fears. During the training, Tris is injected with hallucinogenic serums referred to as the simulations in the novel; the dauntless members undergo simulations to control their fears amidst chaos. The novel reads, "What's the simulation? Ever hear the phrase face your fears? he says. We're taking that literally. The simulation will teach you to control your emotions in the midst of a frightening situation" (Roth, 2011, p. 142). Tris, under the influence of the serums, encounters her worst fears; however, she eventually copes with them by accepting them as realities. Moreover, she, being a divergent, finds it relatively easy to resist these serums by telling herself, "Simulations aren't real; they pose no real threat to me, so logically, I shouldn't be afraid of them" (Roth, 2011, p. 142). It is evident in the novel that Tris' biggest fear is losing her family; nevertheless, she depicts phenomenal bravery when faced with this nightmarish simulation, as she remarks, "I have done this before—in my fear landscape, with the gun in my

hand, a voice shouting at me to fire at the people I love" (Roth, 2011, p. 29). Thus, bravery is further evident in Tris' actions when the narrative contrasts the cowardice of the government controlling the soldiers and factions, with Tris' bravery and decision to endanger her own life, depicting selflessness. While the Erudite and Dauntless governments are controlling the individuals from remote areas far away from the actual conflict zones, Tris surrenders the weapon in front of Tobias, who is being controlled by the Erudite mind control drug, endangering her own life. Her selfless action helped Tobias to break through the control of the drug primarily by depicting courage, willpower and strength in the true sense. In contrast, other characters of the novel do not depict these traits. She contemplates her decision of not killing someone in this situation, "I volunteered to die instead, that time, but I can't imagine how that would help me now. But I just know, I know what the right thing to do is" (Roth, 2011, p. 290). Tris demonstrates post-conventional stage morality at this point, as she takes the bravery under the perverse and life-threatening circumstances by deciding to surrender and sacrifice her life rather than killing a loved one.

Although the factions are tools of the oppressive regimes to control the individuals, they instil loyalty to the factions and their fundamental principles and values in the members. The dilemma arises from the conflict between individuality and conformity, stemming from the controlling nature of the government. The nature of loyalty between factions and individuals is not limited to their superficial association with a certain faction or wearing of their symbols and colors. Rather it extends to the individuals' way of thinking and behaving; at this point consider what the novel reads, "Intentions are the only thing they care about. They try to make you think they care about what you do, but they don't. They don't want you to act a certain way" it further reads, "They want you to think a certain way. So, you're easy to understand. So, you won't pose a threat to them" (Roth, 2011, p. 192). The factions do not provide the members any choice; rather, they prescribe standard behavior, values, and rules that must be adhered to by the members of the faction. Consider what the narrative notes in this context: "Every faction conditions its members to think and act a certain way. And most people do it. For most people, it's not hard to learn, to find a pattern of thought that works and stay that way" (Roth, 2011, p.

270). Tris embodies the value of sacrifice and serving others, which she inherits from her Abnegation roots. "Tris was born into the Abnegation faction and spent the first part of her life serving others, wearing grey clothes, and always offering help. She never questioned why she had to be so selfless; she was just told to" (Muir, 2023, p. 31). The affinity with the factions is evident in the conditioning of the individuals; the reiteration of factional values eventually results in a psychological embedding in the minds of the faction members. This is how factions establish control over the individuals and their actions. Muir further notes, "Tris was repeatedly told by her parents to offer her seat up on the bus, help the neighbors... donate any food or change to the poor. With every selfless action, Tris became more and more accustomed to her Abnegation value" (Muir, 2023, p. 31). The individuals remain loyal to their respective factions and adapt their personalities to the prescribed rules by the factions.

The most significant dilemma faced by the characters in the novel is due to the conflict between individuality and conformity in a society characterized with oppressive governmental control, apparently, for their own safety and security, to ensure restoration of peace and stability (Muir, 2023). The protagonist of the novel, Tris, is born in the Abnegation faction, who embody the value of selflessness; however, as the narrative proceeds further, Tris discovers that the factions are merely another instrument enforced on the individuals by the leaders to control and limit their freedom (Muir, 2023). Throughout the course of the novel, the faction leaders attempt to control the society and its individuals; the primary purpose of the system or government, corrupted by power and control, is to accumulate power and maintain control (Muir, 2023). The protagonist, embodying the conflict between individuality and conformity, struggles to find her true values and identity, due to which she is labelled as a divergent. The notion of divergent refers to individuals who demonstrate the ability to correspond with various factions, rather than just one that embodies a certain value (Muir, 2023). The fact that Tris is a divergent exposes her to immense dangers because, "if the leaders find out someone's different and cannot conform to one faction, the individual faces the risk of being murdered" (Muir, 2023, p. 30). Divergent identity, embodying individualistic traits, in defiance of societal norms,

inevitably leads towards significant dangers.

The defiance of social norms, as per Kohlberg's theory of moral development, embodies the conventional level of morality whereby "a person at this stage separates [their] own interests and points of view from those of authorities and others. He or she is aware everybody has individual interests to pursue and these conflict, so that right is relative" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 445). Tris' individualistic nature is evident as she remarks, "But our minds move in a dozen different directions" (Roth, 2011, p. 270), depicting her inability to conform or align herself with one particular perspective. The novel further reads, "We can't be confined to one way of thinking, and that terrifies our leaders. It means we can't be controlled. And it means that no matter what they do, we will always cause trouble for them" (Roth, 2011, p. 270). She criticizes the leadership, as it has become their necessity to enforce conformity, to accumulate power and control the people; correspondingly, freedom of thinking terrifies the leaders as it threatens their control over the society and the enforced ideological incarceration. The governmental policy of dividing individuals into factions helps to subjugate and control them by conditioning them in conformist way primarily by curbing their individuality (Muir, 2023) the individuals after their division in faction must adhere to their values and rules; this fact has been illustrated in the novel, the narrative contrasts the controlling and oppressive nature of the faction, with, the submissive and conformist nature of individuals to adhere with the prescribed set of rules. The oppressive regime's quest to establish control over the society compels her to resist the Erudite coup.

Conclusion

The journey of characters, particularly Tris, is characterized by sacrifices and selflessness; the narrative, on a broader level, comments on the dynamics of sacrifice and loyalty in the backdrop of a dystopian society and the nature of existence. The study finds the actions and behaviors of characters, particularly Tris, to be driven by their faction's ideology, values, teachings and the subsequent regulations imposed on them by the factional leaders. Moreover, the values of selflessness and sacrifice embodied by the characters reflect their alignment with the different stages of moral development as outlined in the model proposed by Kohlberg. Tris, for instance, by prioritising sacrifice and

selflessness, embodies the third and highest stage of moral development as she engages with abstract and complex notions of morality. The study finds that the source of the moral dilemma in the novel lies in the conflict between individuality and conformity, stemming from the existence of an oppressive and uncontrolled society. The long-term psychological effects of being in a society that restricts personal liberties and how this affects the characters' perception of loyalty and sacrifice could also be examined in this study. Lastly, it examines how the novels' themes relate to contemporary social issues, such as revolt, conformity, and the quest for identity in a society where control is escalating.

References

Cherry, K. (2022, September 13). Levels of developing morality in Kohlberg's theories. Verywell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/kohlbergs-theory-of-moral-development-2795071>

Hall, S. (2001). Foucault: Power, knowledge and discourse. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, & S. Yates (Eds.), *Discourse theory and practice: A reader* (pp. 72–81). Sage.

Kohlberg, L. (1981). The philosophy of moral development: Moral stages and the idea of justice. Harper & Row.

Mathes, E. W. (2021). An evolutionary perspective on Kohlberg's theory of moral development. *Current Psychology*, 40(8), 3908–3921. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00338-8>

Muir, M. (2023). Conform to a faction or be factionless? The struggle between individuality and conformity in Veronica Roth's dystopian novel Divergent. *First Class: A Journal of First-Year Composition*, 2022(1), 7–32.

Rinupriya, K., & Preetha, C. (2024). Unravelling the moral development stages of Sonya Kantor in Veronica Roth's Poster Girl through Kohlberg's moral development theory. *Literary Voice*, (1), 31–39.

Roth, V. (2011). *Divergent*. Katherine Tegen Books.

Wardana, M. K., & Roy, S. (2019). Ideology and class division in Veronica Roth's Divergent. *International Journal of Culture and Art Studies*, 2(1), 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.32734/ijcas.v2i1.659>

Amirrudin, A., Mustolih, A., & Ningrum, C. M. (2022). The comparative literature analysis of Collins' novel The Hunger Games and Veronica Roth's novel Divergent. *ENLIT: International Journal of English Education and Linguistics*, 2(2), 97–109. <https://doi.org/10.21107/enlit.v2i2.15361>