



**THE YA IRON-JAWED ANGEL: THE FEMINIST PARADIGM IN
VERONICA ROTH'S *DIVERGENT* SERIES**



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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, there has been an explosion of fiction targeted at a young audience. These kinds of novels which are a commercial success for both adolescent and adult readers are now commonly known under the banner of YA (Young Adult) literature.

An arguably early example of dystopian literature, Plato's *The Republic*, is dated to around 380 BC. Some other well-known works of dystopian literature are *1984* (1949) by George Orwell, and *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding. During the nineteenth and twentieth century the dystopian genre has become more common, and *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins has received much attention. The *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth is constructed along similar lines.

Divergent is the debut novel of Veronica Roth, written during winter break of her senior year at Northwestern and published in 2011. *Divergent* is the first book in the acclaimed *Divergent* series, followed by sequels *Insurgent* (2012) and *Allegiant* (2013).

A type of dystopian fiction is the representation of a post-apocalyptic feminist dystopia, where women have no rights whatsoever. The novel is set in a place ruled by misogynist laws, where the future of the voiceless “gendered subaltern” is decided by the totalitarian government, as in *Matched* (2010) by Allyson Braithwaite Condie. The so-called sub-genre of “feminist dystopian fiction” began to appear in the mid-twentieth century. Heretofore viewed as a male-dominant genre, dystopian fiction expanded its characteristic social criticism to the consideration of female social issues with the emergence of dystopian narratives from that period known as the “second wave of feminism” (1960s to the present), which focused on gender and sexuality as social constructs.

Notably, much of the discussion of women in dystopian fiction refers to the “classics” and the treatment of current science fiction or dystopian literature is not as prevalent. That which does exist about current literature, though, looks at the relationship between gender and power and the transition into maturity. *Feminine Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* is one of the most recent works about contemporary YA dystopian fiction.

Divergent, though it does not depict a feminist utopia/dystopia, concentrates on its female protagonist, Beatrice, and her resistance to the contemporary social order in her world. The female protagonists of contemporary YA dystopias occupy liminal spaces as they seek to understand their places in the world in which they live, making their societies more egalitarian, more progressive, and ultimately, more free. The seemingly fearless Tris of *Divergent* both recognizes her liminal situation and, over time, uses her position as a means for resistance and rebellion against the social orders that seek to control them.

In the instance of Tris, she learns that reaching adulthood is wholly dependent on her ability to conform to her society’s mandates, which govern virtually every aspect of her life. The female protagonist becomes a subject, at least in part, because she is oppressed by the dystopian regime.

KEYWORDS

dystopia, post-apocalyptic fiction, feminism, female hero, agency.

RESEARCH PAPER

In the last two decades, there has been an explosion of fiction targeted at a young audience. These kinds of novels which are a commercial success for both adolescent and adult readers are now commonly known under the banner of YA (Young Adult) literature.

Nowadays, a significant amount of research is being taken on the popularity of this new-found genre. This genre explores the liminal experiences of adolescence. Karen Coats argues that the constantly changing readership makes it difficult to offer a comprehensive definition of YA literature (322). In spite of the slippery nature of its definition, YA literature is basically defined as literature intended for readers of ages between 12 and 20. This definition does not account for the widespread adult audience. Roberta Seelinger Trites offers the most comprehensive definition:

The basic difference between a children's and an adolescent novel lies not so much in how the protagonist grows – even though the gradations of growth do help us better understand the nature of the genre – but with the very determined way YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding a relationship between society and the individual rather than focusing on the Self and self-discovery as children's literature does. (20)

In recent years, there has been a growing trend in the children's publishing marketplace: the recent explosion of dystopian fiction for young adults. The past decade has seen the publication of more than a dozen post-apocalyptic young adult novels that explore what the future could look like once the sustainable lifestyle of humankind ceases to be sustained.

The word dystopia is derived from the Greek prefix “dys”, meaning bad, and the Greek word “topos”, meaning place; thus the dystopia means “bad place”. The word utopia, made famous by Thomas Moore, is often seen as the opposite of dystopia, and means “no place”. Where a utopia is a place where most would desire to be, or wish that their society one day would develop into, a dystopia is the direct opposite. In a dystopian setting, there are usually many grim elements. Somehow the author wants the reader to understand that something terrible has happened to the world of the book.

Dystopian fiction is about creating an image of the future, which by most would be seen as a horrible world. The factors that make the world dystopian may vary; in some tales it is the environment which is withering away, in others, the government has become corrupt, and quite often it is the society in general which is breaking apart. The conditions vary depending on what the novel is trying to comment on. Dystopian and utopian literature have been used

to criticize or comment on current situations; utopian literature often presents ideas as to how much better the society could be, whereas dystopian fiction presents how bad society could become if the current predicaments do not change.

There are many ways of defining dystopian literature, but at the core, it is a tool that enables viewing contemporary realities from a different perspective. When many factors of a society are changed, the ones that remain the same become more apparent. Dystopian literature can be a critical force against settling for what we have, enabling us to see the faults of our society. The norms which have built up society might actually become what brings it down, and critics argue that dystopian literature can function as the warning finger to awaken society from its slumber.

Exactly how long dystopian fiction has existed is hard to say but an arguably early example of dystopian literature, Plato's *The Republic*, is dated to around 380 BC. Some other well-known works of dystopian literature are *1984* (1949) by George Orwell, and *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding. During the nineteenth and twentieth century the dystopian genre has become more common, and *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins has received much attention. The *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth is constructed along similar lines.

The American short story writer and novelist Veronica Roth was born in New York but was raised primarily in Illinois. She graduated with a degree in creative writing from the Northwestern University, Illinois. *Divergent* was her debut novel, written during winter break of her senior year at Northwestern and published in 2011. *Divergent* is the first book in the acclaimed *Divergent* series, followed by sequels *Insurgent* (2012) and *Allegiant* (2013).

A type of dystopian fiction is the representation of a post-apocalyptic feminist dystopia, where women have no rights whatsoever. The novel is set in a place ruled by misogynist laws, where the future of the voiceless "gendered subaltern" is decided by the totalitarian government, as in *Matched* (2010) by Allyson Braithwaite Condie. The so-called sub-genre of "feminist dystopian fiction" began to appear in the mid-twentieth century. Heretofore viewed as a male-dominant genre, dystopian fiction expanded its characteristic social criticism to the consideration of female social issues with the emergence of dystopian narratives from that period known as the "second wave of feminism" (1960s to the present), which focused on gender and sexuality as social constructs.

Notably, much of the discussion of women in dystopian fiction refers to the "classics" and the treatment of current science fiction or dystopian literature is not as prevalent. That which does exist about current literature, though, looks at the relationship between gender and power and the transition into maturity. *Feminine Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian*

Fiction is one of the most recent works about contemporary YA dystopian fiction. It “focuses on the ways the dystopian mode provides girls with means to challenge the status quo” (4). The editors argue that the contemporary YA dystopian female protagonists “use their [liminal situations and] in-between positions as a means for resistance and rebellion against social orders that seek to control them,” while at the same time “their rebellion plays a role in facilitating individual growth” (3-4). Additionally, with the growing popularity of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* and other modern fantasies (a classification under which YA dystopian fiction belongs), scholars are beginning to pay more attention to female protagonists and discuss them as heroes.

Unfortunately, not many discussions are conducted on the concept of the “female hero”, as opposed to the stereotypical male hero. Women were, for a long time, depicted as passive, invisible and silent creatures without any agency. But, thanks to the publication of Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* series and Roth’s *Divergent*, the reader is introduced to the female hero, such as Tris, who sets out on a quest, unprotected by man, to do battle.

Divergent, though it does not depict a feminist utopia/dystopia, concentrates on its female protagonist, Beatrice, and her resistance to the contemporary social order in her world. In fact, as Day et al put it, “...the desire to resist the limitations of gender and age can be found in many contemporary girl protagonists, particularly in the dystopian novels that are commanding so much attention in the world of young adult literature...” (3). The female protagonists of contemporary YA dystopias occupy liminal spaces as they seek to understand their places in the world in which they live, making their societies more egalitarian, more progressive, and ultimately, more free. The seemingly fearless Tris of *Divergent* both recognizes her liminal situation and, over time, uses her position as a means for resistance and rebellion against the social orders that seek to control them. Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz argue in their book *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* that “as young people stand up and fight the system, they also learn their own limitations” (7).

Hintz and Ostry, in the introduction to their book *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, contend that “children [and young adults] learn about social organization” through dystopian writing (7). In the instance of Tris, she learns that reaching adulthood is wholly dependent on her ability to conform to her society’s mandates, which govern virtually every aspect of her life. If she lived in a society which encouraged young people to embrace their individuality and grow into independent beings, Tris likely would not feel compelled to rebel. It is because her government is so controlling that they are able to

recognize the faults and weaknesses of post-apocalyptic Chicago and eventually, to rebel against them. The female protagonist becomes a subject, at least in part, because she is oppressed by the dystopian regime.

Tris, the protagonist of Veronica Roth's debut novel, struggles to claim her own agency. She has grown up in a world that is ordered and safe. Born Beatrice Prior, Tris lives in a society that provides for its citizens, who are neatly divided into the five factions of Amity, Erudite, Dauntless, Candor, and Abnegation, in which Tris has been raised. Abnegation values a selfless life. At the outset of the novel, Tris gives a description of the rules of her faction: "Our faction allows me [Tris] to stand in front of it [a mirror] on the second day of every third month, the day my mother cuts my hair".

Roth has created a dystopian world in which gendered stereotypes seemingly matter little. Tris is a far cry from the typical teenage girl. Her birth faction of Abnegation discourages vanity and frivolity. As a result, Tris has been conditioned to believe her physical appearance, something with which most teenage girls are preoccupied, is of little importance. She mentions that she looks at her reflection in the mirror "not for the sake of vanity, but out of curiosity" (Roth 1). According to her, the "gray clothes, the plain hairstyle, and the unassuming demeanor of my [Tris's] faction are supposed to make it easier for me to forget myself, and easier for everyone else to forget me too" (6).

Most YA dystopian fictions contain elements of conformity, or extreme equality. The inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic world are forced to be very similar and to conform to the rules and expectations that the government has set forth. Accordingly, the inhabitants of the *Divergent* universe are forced to adhere to the customs of their respective factions. "Faction customs dictate even idle behaviour and supersede individual preference", as Tris comments (9). Faction comes before blood in the world created by Roth.

In the *Divergent* universe, children remain with their parents, completely immersed in their birth factions until the age of sixteen. Then, boys and girls undergo an "aptitude test", which reveals "which of the five factions" they are best suited. Following the test, the teens participate in a "Choosing Ceremony", during which they decide to remain with their birth factions or transfer to a different one (2). This rite of passage offers individuals a false sense that they are independent beings, as they seemingly are able to choose their own futures. In actuality, however, the limited freedom the Choosing Ceremony seemingly offers is an illusion, as is the stability the faction system appears to ensure.

During her aptitude test, Tris learns that she is Divergent; that is, she displays an equal aptitude for three factions: Abnegation, Erudite, and Dauntless. Tris is told Divergence is an

“extremely dangerous” condition, and that she “should never share” the results of her test with anyone (23). “The potential threat to her safety concerns Tris less than the uncertainty about her identity, which she expected the test to end” (Basu 24). The aptitude test was meant to reveal who Tris was and where she belonged. In revealing her Divergence, the aptitude test forces Tris to know herself and her desires in order to choose the faction to which she believes she belongs. The act of choosing is significant primarily because it leads Tris to commit the first significant act of rebellion of the novel: she rebels against her natal faction of Abnegation and joins Dauntless. Her choice also forces her to demonstrate some level of self-awareness as she leaves Abnegation because she believes “I am not selfless enough” (Roth 43).

Tris becomes the typical YA protagonist when she decides to save the Dauntless and Abnegation factions from the machinations of the Erudite. On the Initiation day of the Dauntless faction, Tris goes through her final assessment, a simulation containing each one of her fears that she must conquer, one after another. She is extremely successful and ranks first, becoming an official member of Dauntless. However, she later realizes that in the excitement of the day, the Dauntless leaders injected everyone with a simulation serum that day, calling it a tracking device. She knows they must be lying, and that Erudite will use this serum as a simulation to get Dauntless to fight Abnegation for them.

Finally, she manages to free the Dauntless from mind control. The novel ends by shattering the two factions Tris has close ties with, Dauntless and Abnegation, leaving their erstwhile members basically factionless. Tris has no alternative at this point but to embrace her Divergence, concluding that with “no home, no path, no certainty”, she is “no longer Tris, the selfless, or Tris, the brave” (487). Ultimately, the rebellious acts Tris commits lead her to transform from a girl on fire to a young woman in charge of her own future.

The allure of fiction has always had roots in escapism. Dystopian fiction such as *Divergent* helps the reader to escape to a fictional society darker than that which exists in reality, which is refreshingly different from one of rosy idealism. Post-apocalyptic YA novels such as Roth’s work also have a cathartic effect on the readers – the dull landscape of futuristic Chicago would make one appreciate the society one lives in, even if it is a flawed one.

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