

Power, Control, and Identity in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*

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Article Received: 04/07/2026

Article Accepted: 06/08/2026

Published Online: 07/08/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.08.140

Abstract:

This research paper explores the complex themes of societal control, class conflict, and personal identity in Veronica Roth's dystopian novel *Divergent*. By examining the narrative through multiple critical lenses, this paper demonstrates how the fictional society of Chicago functions as a warning about the dangers of totalitarian governments and extreme social categorization. The first section investigates the mechanisms of control used by the ruling classes, drawing upon Marxist theory to understand the faction system as a rigid social class structure. It also analyzes the use of modern surveillance techniques and psychological manipulation to maintain authority over the citizens. The second section focuses on the struggle for individual identity, exploring how the concept of divergence is treated as a cognitive disability by the medical establishment within the novel. Furthermore, the paper discusses the ongoing debate between nature and nurture, highlighting how the protagonist must navigate her genetic traits and her environmental upbringing to discover her true self. This paper argues that the *Divergent* series serves as a powerful reflection of modern real world anxieties regarding freedom, privacy, and human rights.

Keywords: Dystopia, Surveillance, Marxism, Disability, Identity, Psychology, Nature, Nurture.

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a massive increase in the popularity of post-apocalyptic and dystopian fiction, especially within the young adult literature category. Novels set in ruined, futuristic worlds have captivated readers by presenting nightmarish scenarios where contemporary issues like environmental degradation, authoritarian governance, and the loss of personal freedom are taken to their absolute extremes. A dystopian story typically features a society that acts as the primary antagonist, actively working against the desires and freedoms of the protagonist. In these oppressive environments, citizens often suffer from a loss of civil liberties and live under constant

surveillance or strict laws that dictate their daily lives. Veronica Roth's debut novel *Divergent* is a prominent example of this contemporary trend, offering a bleak vision of the future that forces readers to question the power structures of their own world.

The story takes place in a futuristic and post-apocalyptic version of Chicago, where the city has fallen into ruin. Well known landmarks have been transformed by time and disaster, with Lake Michigan drying up into a marsh and famous buildings standing as empty skeletons. In an attempt to maintain peace and prevent future wars, the founders of this society divided the population into five distinct factions based on specific human virtues. The Candor faction values honesty, the Abnegation faction values selflessness, the Dauntless faction values bravery, the Amity faction values peace, and the Erudite faction values intelligence. At the age of sixteen, every citizen must take an aptitude test to determine their natural inclination, followed by a choosing ceremony where they must decide which faction they will join for the rest of their lives.

The inspiration behind this rigid societal structure comes from a variety of real world psychological concepts and personal observations. Veronica Roth has noted that her studies in an introductory psychology class greatly influenced the creation of the Dauntless faction, specifically the concept of exposure therapy, which is used to treat anxiety disorders by exposing a person to their feared object. Furthermore, Roth drew inspiration from the famous Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures, which explores how human moral codes can be easily manipulated under the right conditions. The author's personal interest in personality tests, such as the Myers-Briggs test, also contributed to the idea of dividing a population into categorized groups based on their behavioral traits. By combining these psychological concepts, the author created a society that appears stable on the surface but is fundamentally flawed and highly oppressive. This research paper will analyze how the *Divergent* series functions as a critique of modern societal control mechanisms, exploring class conflict and surveillance, while also addressing individual identity through the lenses of disability and the nature versus nurture debate.

Mechanisms of Control: Surveillance and Social Classes

The faction system in *Divergent* is presented to the citizens as a utopian solution to human conflict, but a closer examination reveals it to be a strict method of social and economic control. From a Marxist perspective, the factions function exactly like social classes in a capitalist society, creating a clear divide between the powerful elite and the oppressed working class. In Marxist theory, society is typically divided into the bourgeoisie, who own the wealth and maintain control, and the proletariat, who perform the labor and are often exploited. Researchers argue that the Erudite and Abnegation factions represent the bourgeoisie because they hold the political and economic power within the city. The Abnegation faction controls the government, while the Erudite faction controls the science, technology, and information.

Because the Erudite faction has access to wealth, education, and resources, they develop a sense of arrogance and a deep desire to dominate the other groups. The leader of the Erudite faction, Jeanine Matthews, uses her high intelligence not to help the poor or improve society, but to oppress the weak and consolidate her own power. On the other hand, factions like Amity, Candor, and Dauntless represent the proletariat class. The Amity faction works primarily as farmers, living in simple conditions and performing hard manual labor to provide food for the rest of the city. The Dauntless faction, despite their physical strength and bravery, are utilized merely as tools and security forces for the ruling classes, taking orders from the Erudite leaders. This class division inevitably leads to conflict, as the upper classes attempt to manipulate the system to maintain their dominance over the lower classes. The Erudite faction eventually creates a mind control serum to strip the Dauntless members of their free will, turning them into a brainwashed army designed to attack the Abnegation government. This extreme action highlights how those with economic and technological power will use unethical means to secure their authority and eliminate their political rivals. In addition to class exploitation, the ruling regime maintains its power through constant surveillance and psychological manipulation. The entire city of Chicago is surrounded by a massive fence, and the citizens are monitored by security cameras that track their daily movements. The fear of the unknown outside the fence, combined with the threat of being cast out of society as a factionless person, keeps the population obedient and submissive. The government uses these confining structures to instill a sense of paranoia, ensuring that no one dares to question the rules. This system of control closely mirrors the philosophical concepts developed by modern social theorists regarding discipline and observation.

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* introduces the concept of the Panopticon as a metaphor for modern surveillance and societal control. The Panopticon, originally conceived by Jeremy Bentham, is an architectural model where a central watchtower allows authorities to observe inmates without their knowledge, instilling a sense of constant surveillance. Foucault extends this model beyond prisons, arguing that modern societies employ disciplinary mechanisms to regulate behavior in institutions such as schools, hospitals, and workplaces.

This concept is vividly illustrated in the novel when the protagonist, Beatrice Prior, realizes that the locks on the city gates are placed on the outside, indicating that the fence is meant to keep the citizens trapped inside rather than protecting them from external threats. The surveillance in the novel serves as a powerful warning about the loss of privacy in the modern real world. Today, digital technology and internet browsers track nearly every move a person makes online, creating a modern version of the Panopticon where individuals are constantly monitored by governments and corporations. Just as the citizens of Chicago are tracked and manipulated by their leaders, people in the real world face the growing threat of surveillance capitalism, where personal data is harvested and used to influence behavior without the public's full awareness. Furthermore, real world authorities often create divisions

among the population to distract them from the true sources of power, much like the faction system forces citizens to fight against each other rather than challenging the unseen elites who actually pull the strings. By keeping the public divided and constantly watched, the ruling class ensures that organized resistance remains nearly impossible.

The Struggle for Identity: Disability and Human Nature

While the oppressive government attempts to force every citizen into a single, easily controlled category, the protagonist of the story represents the complexity of human nature that refuses to be contained. During her aptitude test, Beatrice discovers that she is Divergent, meaning she possesses the qualities of multiple factions and cannot be classified into just one group. Because Divergent individuals have flexible minds and can resist the mind control serums created by the Erudite scientists, they are viewed as a severe threat to the social order and are actively hunted down and killed. The treatment of Divergent individuals in the novel provides a profound commentary on how society views and handles physical and cognitive differences.

Within the field of disability studies, there is a strong distinction between the medical model of disability and the social model of disability. The medical model suggests that a disability is a defect within the individual that needs to be diagnosed, cured, or eliminated by doctors and scientists. In the novel, the Erudite scientists use this medical approach to study the brains of Divergent people, treating their unique way of thinking as a dangerous disease. Jeanine Matthews conducts invasive brain scans on Beatrice to determine exactly how the Divergent mind works, reducing her entire personality and identity to a mere biological anomaly. This approach strips the individual of their humanity, turning them into a test subject to be fixed or destroyed.

When people misunderstand individual cognitive difference here represented as divergence they may label that difference a disability, thereby indicating that it is a limited or negative state of being. The fear of a difference that is misunderstood may also lead to society ostracizing the person or group of people who have that difference. Indeed, there are times throughout the trilogy when Tris is isolated and ostracized because of her divergence. Conversely, the social model of disability argues that a person is not disabled by their body or mind, but rather by a society that refuses to accommodate their differences. Under this model, divergence is not a sickness, but simply a natural variation of human genetics, much like having a different eye color or hair color. The novels narrative eventually supports this social model, suggesting that the rigid expectations of the normate society are the actual problem, not the people who fall outside of those narrow definitions. This theme expands in the later books of the series when it is revealed that the entire city of Chicago is an experiment run by the Bureau of Genetic Welfare, an outside organization that labels people as either Genetically Pure or Genetically Damaged. The scientists outside the city discriminate against those they label as damaged, blaming their altered genes for all the violence and greed in the world. However, the rebels in the story fight against this label locked thinking, arguing that

human actions are the result of personal choices and free will, not predetermined genetic codes.

This conflict connects deeply to the classic psychological debate between nature and nurture, which attempts to determine whether human behavior is caused by inherited genes or by the environment in which a person is raised. Ancient philosophers like Plato believed that knowledge and behavior were innate, while Aristotle argued that humans are born with a blank slate and learn entirely through experience. In the modern era, psychologists generally agree that both forces play a significant role in shaping personality. Beatrice Prior experiences this conflict firsthand as she struggles to define her own identity. She was raised in the Abnegation faction, where her parents taught her to be completely selfless and humble. The force of nurture is incredibly strong in her life, and she feels a deep sense of guilt and loyalty toward her family. When she chooses to leave her family and join the Dauntless faction, she attempts to break the habits of her upbringing, comparing the process to pulling a single thread that might cause her entire identity to fall apart.

Despite her efforts to adopt the brave and reckless lifestyle of the Dauntless, Beatrice finds that her Abnegation roots still strongly influence her actions. She realizes that her instinct to protect others is a core part of who she is, demonstrating that her early environment cannot be completely erased. However, her natural inclination toward adventure and courage proves that her innate nature is equally powerful. The novel ultimately suggests that a healthy human identity requires an integration of both nature and nurture. By accepting her divergence, Beatrice embraces the fact that she is a complex individual who can be brave, selfless, and intelligent all at once. She refuses to let the government dictate who she is, proving that personal identity must be forged through individual choice and free will rather than forced societal expectations.

Conclusion

The Divergent series uses its post-apocalyptic setting to explore deep and complex issues regarding how societies are structured and how power is maintained. By dividing the population into factions based on specific virtues, the government creates a rigid class system that benefits the wealthy and intelligent while oppressing the working class. The ruling elite utilize constant surveillance, propaganda, and advanced technology to manipulate the citizens and strip them of their free will, acting as a stark warning about the dangers of authoritarian control and digital surveillance in the modern world. At the same time, the narrative focuses on the internal struggle of the protagonist as she fights to understand her own identity in a world that demands absolute conformity. The treatment of Divergent individuals highlights the harmful effects of labeling people based on their physical or cognitive differences, advocating for a social model of acceptance rather than a medical model of elimination. Furthermore, the story illustrates the complex interaction between nature and nurture, showing that human beings are shaped by both their genetic traits and their family environments, but ultimately possess the free will to choose their own paths.

Through its engaging story and compelling characters, *Divergent* encourages readers to question authority, resist oppressive systems, and embrace the full complexity of human nature.

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