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Level: Bachelor’s
“I’m always a girl”

Studying Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* as a Bildungsroman from a Feminist Perspective

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Introduction

Dystopia is a widely popular and appreciated genre of fiction today, and there are quite a few dystopian novels for young adults being adapted into highly successful movie franchises, such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, and the *Divergent* trilogy by Veronica Roth, to name only two. In *Contemporary Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz address a possible reason for the fascination that readers might have for the dystopian genre in particular: “With its capacity to frighten and warn, dystopian writing engages with pressing global concerns: liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self” (1).

Similarly, in *Worlds Gone Awry: Essays on Dystopian Fiction*, John J. Hahn, C. Clark Triplett, and Ashley G. Anthony briefly explain what might be drawing younger readers in particular to this genre: “Perhaps the themes embodied in dystopian literature provide young people with something more relatable as they struggle in their lives” (2).

Thus, dystopian fiction might touch upon several different topics of concern, such as liberty and self-determination and questions of identity, as mentioned above. These pressing global concerns, together with the problems the average young adult faces, make for relatively relatable and interesting plots for young readers. However, despite the recent rise in popularity of young adult dystopias, Hahn, Triplett and Anthony make an interesting point: “A number of critics argue that although young adult versions of dystopian literature have gained recognition and acceptance in popular culture, themes and contents of works such as the *Divergent* series, *The Maze Runner*, and *The Hunger Games* do not warrant the same level of serious scholarly consideration as do more classical literary works . . .” (5). The lack of attention given to young adult versions of dystopia in the academy might be due to the plausible differences that might be identified between classical dystopian novels and their
young adult equivalents. Hahn, Triplett and Anthony also comment on what critics claim to be the main differences between classical dystopian novels and the young adult dystopian novels that are popular among teenagers today: “... [C]lassical dystopian literature ... provides underlying questions about specific social and political concerns that elicit critical discourse on these issues in contemporary culture. Young adult dystopian literature, on the other hand, tends to appeal to popular adolescent issues such as self-identity, thrill-seeking, and romantic angst” (5).

Hence, it appears that young adult dystopian novels often concern themselves with problems such as fitting in, feelings of anxiety when it comes to love, and struggling with self-identity. Much like Hahn, Triplett and Anthony write, this particular genre does not appear to be studied to the same extent as more classic dystopias, and “[s]cholars as well as popular critics have remarked upon the genre’s presence in the wider field of children’s and young adult literature ... but are just beginning to talk about the aesthetic qualities and political valences of these texts” (Basu, Broad and Hintz, 2). Thus, studying a young adult dystopian novel adds to the research in the field. The themes and issues identified in young adult dystopian fiction are also worth scholarly attention.

In the first installment of the Divergent trilogy, entitled Divergent, sixteen-year-old Beatrice Prior is on the brink of adulthood, living in a city in which society is made up of five different factions: Abnegation, Amity, Candor, Dauntless and Erudite. Being sixteen years old the time has come for her to make the choice every sixteen-year-old in her world has to make, namely she has to decide which one of the factions she truly belongs to. Beatrice was born into Abnegation, but never felt like she belonged there: “When I look at the Abnegation lifestyle as an outsider, I think it’s beautiful ... It’s only when I try to live it myself that I have trouble. It never feels genuine” (Roth 24). Hence, it becomes quite clear that she has been struggling with her identity and where she belongs for a considerable period. Being
presented with the opportunity to choose a faction herself is a new experience for her. This is where Beatrice’s journey and quest for her true identity begins. She chooses to join the Dauntless, notorious for their bravery and fearlessness, and at this point she also changes her name to Tris. She is put to the test on several occasions, while she tries to fit in and find her place in her new faction.

In addition to struggling with her identity, romantic feelings, and trying to conform to the rules of Dauntless and her government, she is subjected to the whole new reality of her world. By being put in new unfamiliar situations Tris will likely transform, as will her way of thinking, and she will begin to question herself, her identity, her community and her government. Growth and maturation are surely not unique themes in young adult fiction, and dystopia is likely no exception to this. Tris is faced with a dilemma concerning her identity and her place in the world, which sparks her quest for her true identity, thus her journey towards adulthood and maturity starts.

Previous research on this particular dystopian novel has been done, and research on Tris Prior as a female protagonist in a dystopian world can be found in essay collections such as the aforementioned *Contemporary Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, as well as in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* edited by Sarah K. Day, Miranda Green-Bartreet and Amy L. Montz.

In Miranda Green-Bartreet’s essay “I’m beginning to know who I am”: The Rebellious Subjectives of Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior”, Green-Bartreet writes that: “. . . young women of novels such as Suzanne Collins’s “Hunger Games” series and Veronica Roth’s “Divergent” series are coming of age in oppressive societies which do not value strong, independent, opinionated young women” (33-34). In her essay she mainly discusses and studies the different acts of rebellion committed by Katniss in *The Hunger Games* and Tris in *Divergent* and how these acts of rebellion might be empowering (34). Kasandra-Louise
Paterson writes the following in her essay, “War and Revolution in Young Adult Dystopian Literature”, about Tris and her peers having to make decision: “This is the point at which the characters are depicted as moving from youth to adulthood.” (170). As the title states, her essay mainly focuses on how war and revolution are depicted in the text and “. . . how YA literature utilises these themes to discuss the concept of agency and autonomy and how this influences and impacts on fans of the novels” (167).

In Sarah K. Day’s essay, “Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels”, Day discusses the adolescent female body in dystopian novels, and the awakening of sexual desire they are likely to experience as a part of the maturation process, as well as how this coincides with the rebellious resistance made by female protagonists (76). The article specifically discusses Tris in terms of her falling in love with her instructor, and how she deals with her own relationship to her body and the feelings of desire (86-87). In their article “We Are All Abnegation Now: Suffering Agency in the Divergent Series”, Jasmine Lee and Jonathan Alexander also write about the body, namely “bodily suffering” (389) and they emphasize that not only the body is harmed in Divergent, but the mind as well (389). Casey Cothran and Robert Prickett write about the new dystopian female protagonist in their article, “Divergent Complexity: Veronica Roth and the New Dystopian Heroine”. The article focuses mostly on the ways in which Tris’s qualities might change the way readers tend to envision the traditional qualities in a woman (26).

Previous research on Divergent has therefore been done, focusing on bodily harm, psychological harm, sexual awakening, desire and how it enables for social defiance, how war and rebellion are used in the novel to examine agency and autonomy, and the ways in which Tris could be considered a new type of dystopian heroine. These essays and articles all mention and generally discuss the concept of growing up, maturing and moving towards
adulthood. However, these themes are not discussed exclusively and in relation to the Bildungsroman. Basu, Broad and Hintz write: “In emphasizing the trials of adolescents, YA dystopias recapitulate the conventions of the classic Bildungsroman, using political strife, environmental disaster, or other forms of turmoil as the catalyst for achieving adulthood” (7). The protagonist in Divergent is a young teenage girl on a quest for her true identity. At the same time she is faced with situations and dilemmas completely new to her, such as desire, torture, questioning herself and her government, and love, which in some cases are a part of the maturation process and growing up, which are central features of the Bildungsroman as a literary subgenre to which Roth’s novel relates.

Sarah Graham describes the bildungsroman as “a novel about a young person facing the challenges of growing up” (1). Tris is sixteen years old and not an adult yet, so she could clearly be considered a young person with her maturation process and her journey of growing up ahead of her. Fiona McCulloch writes the following about the Bildungsroman for younger readers: “Literature for children often concerns itself with a journey or quest which the young hero or heroine must undertake in order to advance themselves and, often simultaneously, their society. The journey, of course, is a symbolic manifestation of the child’s Bildung process of maturation, encouraging them to shift beyond their comfort zone and step into the unfamiliar or hitherto unknown” (174).

It is also important to note that that the Bildung process often differs according to gender. For example, a female protagonist in a Bildungsroman and her maturation process might be more oriented towards finding herself in a romantic relationship, whereas in contemporary Bildungsroman the male protagonist’s journey does not necessarily end when he marries or finds a romantic relationship partner (Joannou 209). There are even more distinguishable differences between the female journey and the male journey of maturation and they will be studied further in this thesis. However, the maturation process for both male
and female is likely to incorporate “... challenging rites of passage, where they overcome some difficulty or barrier or struggle that sets a course through which they navigate along a trajectory that is the ideal route for a Bildungsroman narrative” (McCulloch 174). With the information provided so far, from previous research and by briefly looking at the characteristics of the Bildungsroman, Divergent could conceivably be classified as a Bildungsroman. The main character is a sixteen-year old leaving the safety of her home, searching for her true identity, learning about love, desire, belonging, and the horrors of her government, and it is through these events that her maturational process and journey towards adulthood begins.

The main focus of this thesis is to study if Tris Prior follows the conventions of the female Bildung process, seeing as she is female, and if the novel could be considered feminist. When studying the novel a liberal feminist approach is applied. Liberal feminist theory advocates personal autonomy and self-governance (Baerh), and this branch of feminism specifically puts “emphasis on the individual... stresses the importance of the individual and individual autonomy which are protected by guaranteed rights, economic justice and equality of opportunity” (Madsen 35). Deborah L. Madsen’s Feminist Theory and Literary Practice, Amy R. Baerh’s encyclopedia entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entitled, “Liberal Feminism”, and Sharyn Anleu’s essay “Gendered Bodies: Conformity and Autonomy”, will be used when studying the novel from a feminist perspective. When studying Divergent in relation to the Bildungsroman, the essay collection A History of the Bildungsroman will be used, namely the essays “Bildungsromane for Children and Young Adults” by Fiona McCulloch, and “The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century” by Maroula Joannou. McCulloch focuses primarily on twentieth century novels aimed at a younger audience, The Secret Garden and The Wonderful Wizard of Oz for example, looking at the ways in which the Bildungsroman might be didactic, as well as what
aspects of the genre might come across as limiting (175). Joannou studies nineteenth century novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill of the Floss*, and the focus of her essay is to study the female characters and their journeys. These two essays were chosen considering that they study novels with a female protagonist, enabling for a somewhat more comprehensive study of the female Bildung process, which will be applied to Tris Prior’s journey in *Divergent* to see whether she follows the conventions of the female Bildungsroman. Further, the essay “The German Tradition of the Bildungsroman” by Todd Kontje will be used when trying to identify the prototypical characteristics of the Bildungsroman. Claire Marrone’s article, “Male and Female ‘Bildung’: The ‘Mémoires De Céleste Mogador.’”, will also be used to briefly explain the more traditional trajectories of the Bildungsroman. Although Marrone’s article studies a French memoir, she briefly and concisely writes about the classical conventions that classify a Bildungsroman.

Thus, the main aim of this thesis is to study whether Tris Prior follows the female trajectory of the Bildungsroman and whether the novel could be considered a feminist novel from a liberal feminist perspective.

**The Bildung Process**

A Bildungsroman is a coming-of-age story that depicts a young adolescent’s journey towards adulthood, and the manner in which the journey inspires the characters to go beyond their familiar environments and in so doing, grow and evolve. In her article, Marrone writes about the Bildungsroman, and briefly outlines the conventions and characteristics of the young male hero’s journey in particular. Marrone notes that the plot in a bildungsroman is a story in which the protagonists will “. . . search for meaningful existence and values which will allow for the protagonist’s inner capacities to unfold . . .” (336). In the Bildungsroman, society plays a significant role in the protagonist’s life as Marrone describes it as “. . . the novel’s antagonist and a ‘locus for experience’. . .” (336). Other characters in a Bildungsroman are,
more often than not, serving as “...educators, companions and lovers” (336). So, the male character will leave his home in search of a more purposeful life. On this journey, or quest, he will encounter people who will eventually teach him something about the world and himself. Further, Joannou notes that “[t]he coming-of-age journey in the classical Bildungsroman is based on the assumption of the male self as the universal self” (202). Thus, the male character and his Bildung process have been favored and the male’s journey in particular has been considered the archetypical, traditional Bildung journey.

McCulloch’s essay, “Bildungroman for Children and Young Adults”, and Joannou’s essay, “The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century”, are particularly useful when trying to identify what the female Bildung journey consists in. Joannou finds the differences between male and female Bildung journeys, or quests, quite apparent as she writes that, “[i]t is not possible for a woman to venture forth into the unknown if the very act of stepping out onto a public thoroughfare exposes her to the risk of jeopardy to the person, ridicule, loss of reputation, or sexual assault.” (202). Considering that this is not likely to happen to a male character, it clearly shows that there are differences when it comes to what the female protagonist is likely to be subjected to as her quest for her self-identity and her journey towards adulthood begins.

Briefly examining the differences in the male and female Bildungsroman, Todd Kontje notes that the “. . . the public sphere [plays] such a crucial role in the formation of middle-class male identity” (13). Much like Joannou noted, the male protagonist is not likely to be subjected to the same experiences and circumstances as a female character in the public sphere and in the community as they leave their familiar environment. Further, Kontje also emphasizes the differences between the male and female journey stating that: “The basic parameters for male and female development were nevertheless quite different: while the young men typically experience a series of sexual adventures on the way to a marriage that
marks the beginning of a public career, the women remain virgins until they find their Mr Darcy in a plotline that leads to a happy ending of the novel and also the end of any career ambitions” (14). The female protagonist is supposed to have intimate relations with one man, preferably her husband, and strive for a domestic home life and essentially give up her aspirations of a career. On the other hand, the male protagonist might get married, after a while and after being with several women and in the end, he might get a job that provides him with a successful, reliable and long-running career.

On the basis of Kontje’s analysis, it is evident that there are certain considerable gender differences in what characterizes the two Bildung journeys. Liberal feminist theory advocates that there is a “distinction between the public masculine world and the private feminine world” (Madsen 36). This distinction is likely due to the reality of women being limited by their gender and the stereotypes applied to women and that “certain enabling conditions … are insufficiently present in women’s lives” (Baerh). The woman’s goals should be to live a domestic home life, and her world should be limited to the private feminine world, which is clear as the conventions of the two Bildung journeys are identified. Further, the female protagonist’s journey tends to be more psychological, whereas the male journey has a tendency to be a lot more physical and adventurous (Joannou 203). To illustrate this point, Joannou continues by mentioning an example from Virginia Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*. In the novel the female protagonist sets out on a journey to South Africa which eventually results in her death (203). Thus, female characters are at risk of dying if they venture out into the unknown, or go on adventures. On the other hand, McCulloch refers to children’s novels, *The Secret Garden* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in which the female protagonists also set out on physical journeys. However, the female protagonists in these novels do not die, but they rather flourish and grow on their adventures and at their new
destinations. Thus, the female protagonist in the Bildungsroman might not make it all the way on her journey, but it is also possible for her to thrive and prosper.

Before studying Tris’s Bildung process it is useful to summarize the characteristics and conventions of the female Bildungsroman and the female Bildung journey identified above. The female protagonist in the Bildungsroman is often obstructed from the very beginning, because of her gender, and she is often a virgin compared to male characters that can have several sexual encounters before finding themselves in a relationship. Further, the female in the bildungsroman is supposed to meet a boy and fall in love with him, and the boy in question is likely to possess some Mr. Darcy-characteristics and qualities, meaning he is likely to be proud, rude, reserved, stern, and demeaning. After she meets this man her ambitions of having a career of her own are dissolved. Additionally, the female in the Bildungsroman goes through a maturation process that is more psychological, compared to the male character. However, similarities in the two contrasting journeys might be identified. Sarah E. Maier writes in her article, “Portraits of the Girl Child”, that both protagonists in the female and male Bildungsroman are “. . . actively involved in their own development . . . self-reflective and introspective . . . [and] eventually reintegrated into society” (318-319).

In Roth’s novel Tris struggles with her identity and the consequences of the choices she has to make. As these choices loom over her she states: “I will decide the rest of my life; I will decide to stay with my family or abandon them” (Roth 2). Thus, she appears to be hindered and struggling from the very beginning of the novel. Before she is about to make this life altering decision her brother shocks her by choosing to join another faction. This makes Tris feel all the more guilty for wanting to leave her family: “He left me no other option. . . I will be the child that stays; I have to do this for my parents. I have to.” (47). However, at the very last minute she changes her mind and joins the Dauntless instead, and this is where Tris’s journey begins. By leaving her family home she takes the first step
towards independence, even though it is a risk for her as an adolescent woman. Even though Tris faces several threats and risks, she makes a remarkable feminist move which corresponds well with a liberal feminist view: she takes the opportunity to live a life that she herself has chosen (Baerh).

As stated previously, the female might suffer humiliation, sexual assault and loss of reputation, and sometimes even die, as she ventures out on her journey. Tris is subjected to most of these situations, proving that being a female and physically leaving her familiar environment is a great risk. The fact that she was born Abnegation seems to put her in a vulnerable position at the start of her journey and does not serve her reputation well. She is called a “Stiff”, which is what others call people from Abnegation (56), giving her a reputation of being weak and that she will not last long in her new faction because of it (67), and because of her physical characteristics, which also makes Tris doubt herself and the choice she has made (72). Tris is often humiliated for being born Abnegation by a character named Peter who calls her “Stiff” and taunts her at every possibility (105, 109, 121). Peter also remarks on her looks: “There goes your pretty face,’ hisses Peter. ‘Oh wait. You don’t have one’” (162).

Tris is further humiliated by Peter, and a few others, after she has showered and walks back to their shared dormitory wrapped only in a towel: “‘Didn’t realize you were so skinny, Stiff’ . . . His eyes travel down my body, not in the greedy way that a man looks at a woman, but cruelly, scrutinizing every flaw” (168). Peter continues by yanking the towel off her and as she stands there naked and exposed, they all laugh (169). Tris is further humiliated, and sexually assaulted by Peter, and two other male characters, Drew and Al: “A heavy hand gropes my chest. ‘You sure you’re sixteen, Stiff? Doesn’t feel like you’re more than twelve.’ The other boys laugh.” (279). Tris being subjected and exposed in this way corresponds to
what Joannou writes and clearly demonstrates the risks of being a female protagonist, in a Bildungsroman, and what women might be subjected to on their journeys.

Another aspect of the female in the Bildungsroman is that the female character is a virgin, which is true for Tris. Desire and affection are not familiar feelings for her. She is not used to seeing people being affectionate in public, and when seeing two people kissing she says: “Do they have to be so public?” (82). However, she also wonders what kissing someone would feel like (82-83), which demonstrates a growing sense of wanting to experiment and to feel desired, feelings young adolescents usually experience. Tris’s parents taught her and her brother that there is great power in physical touch, and she has been aware and careful with it ever since (32). This is likely not the case for male characters, seeing as they might share a few intimate moments with different women. Thus, it is not inconsistent for Tris, as a female character, to maintain some distance when it comes to intimacy.

Following the trajectory of the female Bildungsroman Tris falls in love, for the first time, with her instructor Four. These feelings of desire are new to her and she describes that his presence physically does something to her: “My legs are shaking, but I’m not sure why . . . Then I realize what it is . . . Something about him makes me feel like I am about to fall. Or turn to liquid. Or burst into flames” (143). Four appears stern and reserved, which are two well-known Mr. Darcy-characteristics. Tris ironically describes him as being “. . . so approachable . . . Like a bed of nails.” (69). However, Tris also describes him as “honorable” (95), “smart” (135), and “incredible” (336). In the beginning, Tris is under the impression that Four does not like her at all. During a hand-to-hand combat that Tris is fighting Four suddenly leaves the room and Tris thinks to herself: “Apparently this fight isn’t interesting enough for him.” (111). After they share an intimate moment and kiss, Four ignores her the next day: “What did I expect? . . . Maybe he changed his mind about liking me. Maybe he
thought kissing was a mistake” (340). Four acts tough and stern towards Tris, and though he only wants to help her his behaviour comes across as hostile and taunting:

“I keep trying to help you . . . But you refuse to be helped.”

“Oh, right. Your help . . . Stabbing my ear with a knife and taunting me and yelling at me more than you yell at anyone else. It sure is helpful.” (311)

Tris does not consider that it might be because he does not want to see her get hurt, and to help her make it through the tough initiation process. Thus, Four comes across as unapproachable and stern. However, he is also smart, honorable and protective of Tris, as he helps and encourages her more than he does anyone else.

Despite seeming to follow the trajectory of the female Bildungsroman to some extent, it could be argued that Tris also follows the male’s physical journey. She leaves her home, heading to a place she has never been before, she learns and takes part in many different physically challenging activities during initiation, arguably an adventurous and different journey for Tris and what she has previously experienced. However, as McCulloch writes, this physical journey is also applicable to some young adult and children’s novels containing female protagonists that, much like Tris, do very well at their new destinations despite having left all familiarity behind. Tris begins her journey by jumping on and off a moving train (51, 55). She is then the first to jump off a roof landing in a net in the Dauntless compound (58). She learns how to fight (84), she climbs a ferris-wheel (142), she gets beaten up in a fight (110-111), she learns how to shoot a gun (78), and to throw knives (158). These are all quite physical activities, and as she learns, she grows physically. Muscle begins to show (168) and she eventually dares to stand up for herself and by her strength and newfound skills she wins her first fight (174).
As previously mentioned, Marrone writes that society serves as the antagonist on the male hero’s journey. Similar to other young adult dystopias, society in Tris’s world aims to fully control and govern its citizens, and by being Divergent Tris becomes a threat. Her divergence means that “[she] can’t be confined to one way of thinking . . . It means that [she] can’t be controlled” (442). So, by not being able to be who she truly is, because it “terrifies [her] leaders” (442), the government could be argued to serve as the novel’s antagonist, because it is obstructing Tris on her journey and also serves as an element Tris has to fight, overcome and perhaps even learn from. Marrone also describes society as a locus for experience for the male character in a Bildungsroman. The structure and the rules of Tris’s society is what eventually makes her question the life she is currently living, society’s distinctive aptitude tests is what reveals Tris is Divergent, and this forces her to make a decision. Green-Bartreet describes this choice as crucial in Tris’s journey: “It reveals that Tris has never been encouraged to see herself as an independent individual, as she is unprepared to not choose a faction” (44). By not choosing a faction Tris would have been made factionless, and as she describes it herself: “To live factionless is not just to live in poverty and discomfort; it is to live divorced from society, separated from the most important thing in life: community” (Roth 20). It appears that belonging somewhere is very important to Tris. Living factionless is out of the question for her, and she is unprepared not to choose a faction, and belonging is one of the aims of the Bildung process (McCulloch 174).

Tris appears to be following the female Bildung journey considering she is exposed to, and experiences, most of the situations that Joannou mentions might happen to women and girls on their journeys. However, Tris appears to follow the male trajectory and conventions of the Bildungsroman as well, with reference to her notable physical growth, and the physical challenging activities she takes part in. So, Tris’s journey could arguably be distinguished by the conventions identified in both the male and the female Bildung process.
Gender Stereotypes and Femininity

There are differences between the male and female journey towards maturation, and the differences in these journeys are largely due to the gender of the main characters. Individual, or personal, autonomy in *Divergent* has been discussed by Kassandra-Louise Paterson, who describes autonomy “as the ability to act with ‘self-government’ and freedom of choice” (167), which coincides with what both Madsen and Baehr describe as the core of what liberal feminist theory aims to advocate. Tris takes her first step towards individual autonomy as she decides to leave her family in search for her self-identity, even though it creates great conflict in her. The doubt and guilt Tris feels is, according to Cothran and Prickett, “echo[ing] feminist critiques of traditional cultural narratives that define women as nurturing, generous, and altruistic” (27). Tris explicitly says that “The goal of my life isn’t just … to be happy” (Roth 128). Thus, by Tris actually leaving her home and everything familiar behind, despite feeling guilty, she takes the first step towards becoming an individual person, and not part of a collective, and the first step towards choosing her own life, which is very much a part of liberal feminism (Baehr).

Feminist theory studies “the unique experience of women in history; the notion of female consciousness; the definitions of gender that limit and oppress; and the cause of women’s liberation from those restrictions” (Madsen [ix]). Cothran’s and Prickett’s article, “Divergent Complexity: Veronica Roth and the New Dystopian Heroine”, argues that Tris Prior, as a female dystopian protagonist, might encourage younger readers to think differently about women and the norms and stereotypes that they ascribe to them, perhaps without even thinking. Cothran and Prickett write the following about the contemporary dystopian female protagonists: “Dystopian heroines face a variety of violent, creative horrors in the dystopian world that they inhabit. As they grow into maturity, young female characters must diverge from society’s norms if they are to change these worlds; they must develop new (and
sometimes, disturbing) ways of viewing, valuing, and rebelling against social structures” (26). Thus, female characters such as Tris Prior are encouraged, and at times forced, to challenge society’s norms as they mature and begin their journey towards adulthood.

Maria Nikolajeva states the following about masculinity and femininity in novels for children and young adults: “. . . [M]asculinity is traditionally given priority in power relationships, [so] it would seem natural that in YA novels male protagonists must confirm their masculinity, while female protagonists must negotiate their power position in compliance with patriarchal rules” (105). Female protagonists in young adult dystopian novels are not given the opportunity to exist as they are, but they rather commit to changing their course and working towards more masculine traits to feel validated, and because this enables for better chances of fighting the authoritarian governments that often rule in dystopian novels. Females may not aim to validate their gender by acting in a quintessentially feminine manner, but rather diverge from those norms and apply more of the opposing gender norms to themselves, for their own advantage and to add credibility to their quests and rebellions.

Sharyn Anleu lists the following traits as considered to be more feminine: “Feminine gender norms valorize passivity, weakness, pathology, and irrationality in contrast to strength, normality, and rationality, which are more associated with masculine gender norms” (359). So, to explain these traits further one could argue that women are supposed to be self-sacrificing and put their own wants and wishes aside for nearly everyone. Women are physically, as well as mentally, weak. Further, women are unable to control their emotions and reactions, they are unable to see reason and do not think clearly, letting their feelings get in the way of logic. These traits concern what women should act like, and who they are supposed to be compared to their male counterparts.
Putting other people’s wants and needs before her own is how Tris has been raised and “[she] try[ies] to love it” (Roth 28). By choosing a different faction she would “… forsake [her] family. Permanently” (24), and the pressure she feels to make her family happy and staying with them echoes feminist critiques and conforms to society’s rules and wishes. This creates a conflict within her because she has her own aspirations to find her identity and where she belongs, and essentially to put herself first. By choosing to leave she puts other people’s wants and wishes aside, and instead of being passive she becomes active in her own process of finding her identity. This also means that she does not conform to the female gender norm of being passive and selfless. Thus, as Cothran and Pickett contend, Tris could arguably be said to belong to the group of female characters that “… prioritize their personal wants over the demands of their communities, families, friends and lovers…” Beatrice will reject her upbringing to pursue her ‘true self’” (27). When choosing to join another faction, Tris thinks to herself, “I am selfish. I am brave” (Roth 47). Being selfish and doing whatever she wants to do is completely new to her: “At home, I could never do what I wanted, not even for an evening. I had to think of other people’s needs first. I don’t even know what I like to do” (70).

Tris looks young, is of small build and is not physically strong (26, 51). However, leaving her home and joining the Dauntless, who are very active, will change Tris’s body: “Frowning, I stare at my leg. A bulge of muscle is stopping the fabric … I see muscles that I couldn’t see before in my arms, legs and stomach … Dauntless initiation has stolen whatever softness my body had. Is that good, or bad?” (167-168). These significant physical changes seem to prove that women do not have to be physically weak at all. However, as much as this might deviate from feminine stereotypes, Tris is still conscious about, and very aware of, her appearance and her looks: “I am not pretty - my eyes are too big and my nose is too long…” (87), and “I wish I was taller. If I was tall, my narrow build would be described as ‘willowy’
instead of ‘childish’ . . . ” (312). She is insecure about her body and the way she looks. However, Green-Bartreet argues that because Tris is from Abnegation, she “believe[s] her physical appearance, something with which most teenage girls are preoccupied, is of little importance” (43). This might be true as Tris lives in Abnegation, but that does not mean that Tris is not insecure about her looks.

Joining a new faction means there are new rules and norms to abide by. Tris lets her friend Christina give her a makeover. She is dressed in Dauntless clothing, which are tight black form-fitting clothes that also reveal some skin, and she wears make-up. Tris seems to enjoy this and she appears personally empowered by wearing these types of clothes and make-up: “. . . I will find new habits, new thoughts, new rules. I will become something else . . . This is someone whose eyes claim mine and don’t release me; this is Tris” (Roth 87). However, Green-Bartreet notes that “[Tris] has been taught that everyone must belong to one faction or another” (44), and that this might be the reason she allows the makeover. However, Green-Bartreet argues that the black tight-fitting clothes, the makeup and showing some skin is “. . . representative of her faction membership rather than her own identity . . . ” (43). Relating to Tris’s wish to belong and thus she conforms to society’s rules rather than pursuing her own identity and wants.

Tris is strong minded and wants to make it through initiation. She is intent on proving her instructors wrong, and that she is not as weak as she might look (Roth 134). The training also seems to make her feel powerful. When shooting a gun for the first time Tris feels like “[t]here is power in controlling something that can do so much damage - in controlling something, period” (79). During training, a hand-to-hand fist fight, Tris is up against Molly, who was present and an instigator when she was humiliated in the dorm room. Having learned what Molly’s weaknesses are, Tris manages to get the upper hand and hits and kicks Molly repeatedly, in anger. When the fight is over Tris thinks: “I wish I could say I felt guilty
for what I did. I don’t” (174). This proves she is strong minded, but also that she might not be able to control her feelings and emotions in some cases. Taking into account what has been mentioned previously in this section of the thesis, Tris does not appear to conform to all of the feminine gender norms described by Anleu, and at the very least she actively changes throughout her journey.

Despite not conforming to the feminine gender norms, Tris seems to be very aware and conscious of her femininity and her female body, specifically. Tris often remarks on her own body: “I know I look young: I don’t need to be reminded” (Roth 26), “You aren’t going to be able to make me pretty, you know” (86), “Can he tell that I’m still built like a child?” (324). As previously mentioned, Tris does start wearing tight-fitting clothes and make up. She also has mixed feelings about sharing a dorm room with the other initiates that are boys (Roth 73).

The feminine gender norms cannot be ascribed to Tris. However, she does appear to care about how other people perceive her and does not want her femininity, or body, insulted or commented on. Much like Cothran and Prickett write: “Despite the fact that she can excel in masculine pursuits, Tris recognizes and respects her womanly body. She may be a brilliant fighter, but she never thinks of herself as a man” (28). After being sexually assaulted by Peter and a few other male initiates, one of the boys that took part in the attack wants Tris to forgive him. However, Tris makes it evident that she does not accept his apology and that her body is hers alone, and that consent matters: “Stay away from me,’ I say quietly . . . ‘Never come near me again.’ Our eyes meet . . . ‘If you do, I swear to God I will kill you . . . You coward” (Roth 300).

As a character Tris does not follow feminine gender norms, but she is protective of, and conscious of, her femininity. Tris does not consider herself a man or someone who possesses male qualities, and this is made the most evident when Tris and her friend Christina are having a conversation and Christina says: “Can you be a girl for a few seconds?” (369), to
which Tris sincerely replies: “I am always a girl”. As mentioned previously, females may not aim to validate their gender by acting in what is regarded as a quintessentially feminine manner, but rather apply male norms to themselves. As established in the previous section, Tris’s journey consist of equal parts male journey and equal parts female journey, and Cothran and Prickett write that “Tris sees her femininity as a constant, a part of her; in contrast, however, her surrounding society perceives her gender as fluctuating between feminine and masculine” (27). This is quite evident throughout Tris’s Bildung journey. She does not conform with the stereotypical feminine gender norms, but she does conform with and follow the female Bildung trajectory. Further, she does also follow the male Bildung journey with regard to the physical exploration and adventures, and perhaps it is this fluctuation between female and male trajectory that makes others perceive Tris’s gender as fluctuating, much like her Bildung process is.

**Conclusion**

This thesis aimed to study if Tris Prior in *Divergent* specifically followed the trajectory of the female Bildungsroman, and if *Divergent* could be considered a feminist novel. It was established that the female character’s Bildung process was evidently different from the male character’s, with regard to what the characters were likely to experience on their respective journeys. Contrary to the male character, the female character was likely to be subjected to several different harrowing events, such as humiliation, loss of reputation, death or the threat of losing her life, and sexual assault. It was also established that the male character’s journey was often more physical, whereas the female’s journey was more psychological. Tris follows the female Bildung conventions because she is humiliated, a virgin, she meets a boy, falls in love, and she is also the victim of sexual assault. Her reputation, as well as her life, is put at risk, all because she left her familiar home environment to search for her self-identity and where she belongs. When studying her journey, it was also determined that Tris actually does
follow the male characters physical journey. Tris does physically leave her home and the familiarity of it, and that alone poses a great risk to her reputation and her life. At her new faction she partakes in several physical activities which might harm and hurt her. Thus, it is established that Tris Prior’s Bildung journey contains equal parts female conventions and equal parts male conventions.

Tris Prior was also studied in terms of gender and femininity. The feminine gender norms studied in this thesis are the notions that women are supposedly passive, irrational, mentally and physically weak, and illogical. Females in dystopian novels often diverge from feminine norms and apply more of the opposing gender norms to themselves, for advantage and credibility. However, it was established that Tris Prior is very much gender fluctuating. She has been raised to not care about her appearance, and she tries hard not to. She eventually dons traditional Dauntless attire: tight fitting black clothing, tattoos, and make up. Some critics argue that this undermines the feminist potential, because by conforming to Dauntless conventions she appears desperate to belong anywhere. It is established that Tris does care much about her femininity, her womanly body and her looks, and even though she does masculine things such as shooting guns and being a brilliant fighter, it is important to note that Tris does not see herself as manly because of this. This thesis shows that Tris does not conform to the feminine gender norms, even though she does embrace her feminine traits. Liberal feminist theory advocates individual freedom and the opportunity for women to live lives of their own choosing. Tris Prior’s first step towards independence and growth occurs as she is left an opportunity to choose her own path for the first time, and this clearly reflects liberal feminist views and when presented with this opportunity she takes it and makes her first choice as an individual and not as part of a collective, reflecting her first act of individual autonomy, even though she is still very much restricted by the conventions of the female Bildung journey.
Tris follows both the female and the male Bildung process, as characteristics from both journeys can be identified in Roth’s novel. As previous research has shown, by Cothran and Prickett, Tris appears to be perceived as someone with both male and female gender stereotypical qualities, and it could be argued from this thesis that this is particularly based on her fluctuation between the two Bildung processes. As established in this thesis as well, Tris sees her femininity as a constant, even though her journey incorporates conventions of the male journey. This ambiguity and fluctuation in Tris and her Bildung process makes it challenging to brand her, or *Divergent* for that matter, as either one or the other, and it is not essential to do so. Tris does not seem aware of the fact that people perceive her as having both female and male qualities, and perhaps we should not either. Perhaps all that matters is how we perceive ourselves and so Tris’s words echo loud and clear: “I’m always a girl”.
Works Cited


