

A Specter of Communism: Divergent

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Abstract

This paper strives to illuminate the social discrimination and the conflict between different classes of society in Veronica Roth's novel, *Divergent* and aims to explore how the plot of the book coincides with the philosophy of Marxism. This book proves the theory Marx makes in *The Communist Manifesto*. In this political document, Marx maintains that the capitalists, or the bourgeoisie, exploit and oppress the working class, or the proletariat. Marxism addresses its rallying cry to the working class and declares how the proletariat must lead a class war to revolt the bourgeoisie of its power and establish a new social order. In *Divergent* which takes place in the post-apocalyptic Chicago, society has been divided into five factions based on aptitude. The proletariat is represented by Abnegation. The bourgeoisie is reflected by Erudite who controlled Dauntless under simulation to attack Abnegation in order to take the authority of the government. In the end, we see the revolution of the oppressed class against the oppressing class which was reflected by the protagonist, Tris Prior, along with some others to stop the simulation.

Keywords: *Divergent*, Marxism, Marxist criticism, class struggle.

Introduction

The American novelist and short-story writer, Veronica Roth is known for her creation of a dystopian world in *Divergent*, which is a trilogy of young adult novels. The novels in her debut New York Times bestselling trilogy have been titled *Divergent* (2011), *Insurgent* (2012), and *Allegiant* (2013). Roth wrote her first book, *Divergent*, while on winter break in her senior year at Northwestern University, and took her manuscript to a writers conference in March 2010 and secured an agent. The book was sold the following month to HarperCollins. It debuted in 2011 at number six on the New York Times best-seller list. *Insurgent*, released in 2012, captured the number one spot on that list. Roth had clearly hit her stride at the right moment—the niche market for dystopian novels was blossoming, and her offerings came on the heels of the popular *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* young-adult series. Roth's fan base grew quickly, and when *Allegiant* came out in 2013, it became the most-preordered book ever issued by HarperCollins. The trilogy was a huge commercial success, with more than 30 million copies sold by 2015. What inspired Roth to write it comes from a very personal struggle—her ongoing battle with anxiety. Having dealt with anxiety ever since she was young, Roth found it therapeutic to create a 16-year-old heroine, Beatrice, who faces fears head-on. In her writer's workshop, she mentioned that the initiation process which requires facing your worst fears was inspired by the similar, real-life concept of exposure therapy, which Roth learned about in a psychology class. She imagined a sci-fi version of exposure therapy,

where you repeatedly confront your fears until they are no longer scary, and that is what started the Divergent story.

In the first book, readers are introduced to a dystopian version of Chicago set in the future that has been divided into five factions in hopes of creating a better and more peaceful world than the one that existed before. The city of Chicago is said to be abandoned in ruins due to the collapse of the last society. Each faction of society is dedicated to the cultivation of a particular virtue—Candor (the honest), Abnegation (the selfless), Dauntless (the brave), Amity (the peaceful), and Erudite (the intelligent). Every year, on Choosing Day, all sixteen-year-olds are obliged to take an aptitude test which defines the attribute that suits the faction to which they will devote the rest of their lives. If people do not have a compatibility aptitude with any faction, they will become factionless which means that they will be exiled from society. There are also some people who do not fit easily into a single faction; they have attributes for more than one. These people are called Divergent and protagonist Beatrice Prior, who is born into Abnegation but transfers into Dauntless, is one of them. She must figure out her life as a Divergent, conceal her true nature, and live with the danger of being killed if her true nature is discovered by the Erudite leaders who believe this type of personality or the Divergent is a threat and will take over society. Having said that, Erudite altogether with Dauntless start hunting and killing the Divergent and attacking the Abnegation faction which governs the city in order to take control of the government.

With the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, many heard the death knell pronouncing loudly the demise of Marxism and its accompanying political and ideological structures. Down came the Berlin Wall, down came the Iron Curtain, and supposedly down came

Marxism and an alternative form of government to capitalism as an acceptable worldview. performing only limited Internet research under the keyword “Marxism” results in a listing of more than 7 million sites with titles such as “Learning What Marxism Is About,” “In Defence of Marxism,” “Marxist Media Theory,” “Women and Marxism,” “Marxism, Philosophy, and Marx’s Philosophy,” proving that Marxist theories and criticism are not only alive but also may even be prospering. Borrowing Mark Twain’s phraseology, “Announcements of Marxism’s death have been greatly exaggerated.” Unlike many schools of literary criticism, Marxism did not begin as an alternative, theoretical approach to literary analysis. Before many twentieth-century writers and critics embraced the principle of Marxism and used the ideas in their theories and criticism, Marxism had flourished in the nineteenth century as a pragmatic view of history that offered the working classes an opportunity to change their world and their individual lives. By providing both a philosophical system and a plan of action to initiate change in society, Marxism delineated a social, political, economic, and cultural understanding of the nature of reality, society, and the individual, not a literary theory. Marxist literary theory has its roots in the nineteenth-century writings of the German social critic and philosopher Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883). Using Marx’s philosophical assumptions, twentieth-century critics formulated a variety of Marxist approaches to textual analysis that focus on the study of the relationship between a text and the society that reads it. Based on the theories of Marx and Engels, Marx’s friend, this school concerns itself with class differences, economic and otherwise, as well as the implications and complications of the capitalist system: “Marxism attempts to reveal the ways in which our socioeconomic

system is the ultimate source of our experience” (Tyson, 1999: 277). They articulate their ideas on the nature of reality in two works: *The German Ideology* (1845) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). They formulate dialectical materialism—that is, their understanding of how workers can lead a class war and establish a new social order. Marx asserts that “...stable societies develop sites of resistance: contradictions build into the social system that ultimately leads to social revolution and the development of a new society upon the old” (Richter 1088). Both Engels and Marx assert that “consciousness does not determine life: life determines consciousness.” To Engels and Marx, our ideas and concepts about who we are and who we are becoming are fashioned in everyday interactions and in the language of real life. In asserting their materialistic view of humanity, Engels and Marx argued that the economic means of production within a society—what they call the base—both engenders and controls all human institutions, all political and educational systems, all religions, and all art. These ideologies and institutions develop as a direct result of the economic means of production. Each individual’s work within the economic system becomes differentiated. This differentiation divides people into different social classes. Eventually, the desires and expectations of the various social classes clash and class conflicts lead to a capitalist system. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels maintained that the capitalists, or the bourgeoisie, have successfully enslaved the working class, or the proletariat, through economic policies and production of goods. The continuing conflict between the classes will lead to upheaval and revolution by oppressed people and form the groundwork for a new order of society and economics where capitalism is abolished. According to Marx, The proletariat must revolt and strip the bourgeoisie of its economic and political

power and place the ownership of all property in the hands of the government, who will then fairly distribute the people’s wealth.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the *Divergent* novel, using Karl Marx’s view and examine its power structure through a Marxist lens by demonstrating that the novel depicts ambiguous images of capitalism and how the dominant class’ ideology controls and oppresses the working class and leads to the commodification of people, based on class theory. This paper also explores how the author’s text reflects the writer’s ideology through an examination of the fictional world’s protagonist and society.

Marxist’s View in *Divergent*

Marxism is not primarily a literary theory that can be used to interpret texts. Unlike other schools of criticism, it is a cultural theory that embodies a set of social, economic, and political ideas that its followers believe will enable them to interpret and, more important, change their world. Although a variety of Marxist theories exist, most Marxists posit a few core ideas.

Marxism declares in order to understand ourselves and our world, we must stop trying to look solely to religion or philosophy and begin by examining all aspects of our daily activities within our culture. Upon examining these, we will discover that it is our cultural and social circumstances that determine who we are. What we believe, what we value, and even what we think is a direct result of our culture and our society, not our religion, our supposed philosophy of life, or our worldview.

Marxist theory is a very vast subject and there is a difference between traditional Marxism and Neo-Marxism in terms of their ideologies. Classical Marxism is the ideas that the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has defined the course of human history, capitalism is a system that is oppressive to the proletariat due to how the

poor are forced to work for the rich while not earning the true product of their labor, and communism is the only answer. As Karl Marx puts it: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” (Marx, 1848: Section1.1). We tend to think of our history as a series of events. Marx argues that these events can best be characterized through the lens of class struggle: the rich fighting against the poor, and vice-versa. In the novel, Veronica Roth described factions as social class. There are different kinds of factions with their characteristics which have similar characteristics to those of social classes. As it is stated in the quotation below:

The Amity exchange smiles. They are dressed comfortably, in red or yellow. Every time I see them, they seem kind, loving, and free. But joining them has never been an option for me. “Those who blamed ignorance became the Erudite.” Ruling out Erudite was the only part of my choice that was easy. “Those who blamed duplicity created Candor. “I have never liked Candor. “Those who blamed selfishness made Abnegation. “I blame selfishness; I do. “And those blamed cowardice were the Dauntless. (Roth, 2011: 41)

The Divergent novel opens with a couple of hints that shows members of Abnegation are oppressed by those of Erudite. It is shown by the quotation below:

My cheeks are warm. I get up and dust myself off. A few people stopped when I fell, but none of them offered help to me. Their eyes follow me to the edge of the hallway. This sort of thing has been happening to others in my faction for months now— the Erudite have been releasing antagonistic reports about Abnegation, it has begun to affect the way we relate at school. The gray clothes, the plain hairstyle, and the unassuming demeanor of my faction are supposed to make it easier for me to forget myself, and

easier for everyone else to forget me too. But now they make me a target. (Roth, 2011: 37) In this passage, an Erudite boy has pushed Beatrice who was born in Abnegation. This bullying has been happening to other Abnegation kids, too. To make matters worse, no one from other factions is stepping in to stop it. This is a picture of a society with a big problem.

Abnegation and other factions except for Erudite represent the oppressed class as the members of these factions work as farmers or guards. They do not have lots of money and work for the bourgeoisie to earn a salary but their salary is low. The factionless, who are cut out from society and live on the streets, are forced to do the jobs no one else wants to do:

This is where the factionless live. Because they failed to complete initiation into whatever faction they chose, they live in poverty, doing the work no one else wants to do. They are janitors and construction workers and garbage collectors; they make fabric and operate trains and drive buses. In return for their work they get food and clothing, but, as my mother says, not enough of either. (Roth, 2011: 39)

The quotation above explained that to live factionless is not just to live divorced from society; it is to live in poverty and discomfort, forced to do the jobs that no one else wants to do; however, they are really important jobs: a society without janitors is a society that will soon die of suffocation under a heap of trash. So even those outside of the system are exploited to help the system. According to Marx, “[The] work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him.” (Marx, 1848: section1.31) Erudite “pursued knowledge and ingenuity for the sake of doing well.” However, they

used it in the wrong way “with greedy hearts” and thus Erudite can be assumed as the oppressing class. It can be seen in the quotation below:

A long time ago, Erudite pursued knowledge and ingenuity for the sake of doing well. Now they pursue knowledge and ingenuity with greedy hearts. I wonder if the other factions suffer from the same problem. I have not thought about it before. (Roth, 2011: 161)

The quotation above explained that Erudite pursued science and intelligence to oppress and control the other factions. Marx argues that the workers are constantly under someone’s thumb and the capitalists successfully enslave the working class. Beatrice tells her friend that Erudite “don’t want people to listen, they want people to agree” (Roth, 2011: 245). The quotation below shows how Erudite has successfully achieved this goal:

“I can control what you see and hear,” she says. “So I created a new serum that will adjust your surroundings to manipulate your will. Those who refuse to accept our leadership must be closely monitored.” Monitored- or robbed of free will. She has a gift with words. “You will be the first test subject, Tobias. Beatrice, however “she smiles. “You are too injured to be of much this meeting.” (Roth, 2011: 335)

The quotation above simply explains that the Erudite faction, who really wanted to control other factions, has created a serum in order to manipulate the minds of all factions and therefore oppress and master them all. Jeanine, the leader of Erudite, used her intelligence in a bad way because her faction was thirsty for power, and “she wants everyone to be pliable and easy to control” (Roth, 2011: 430). She wants to get rid of factionless and make Abnegation go away because “most of the Divergent came from Abnegation” (Roth, 2011: 429). Here is Jeanine’s laying out her plans for what she would do with power:

“Currently, the factionless are a drain on our resources,” Jeanine replies. “As is Abnegation. I am sure that once the remains of your old faction are absorbed into the Dauntless army, Candor will cooperate and we will finally be able to get on with things.” (Roth, 2011: 429).

The serum that Jeanine has created; however, does not work on those who are Divergent and the protagonist, Tris Prior is one of them. “Among other things, you ... you are someone who is aware, when they are in a simulation, that what they are experiencing is not real,” (Roth, 2011: 257). Tris can manipulate the simulation or even shut it down. This power might help her, but it also makes her a target as Tori tells her, “if they discover what you are, they will kill you.” (Roth, 2011: 258). Tobias and Beatrice, who are both Divergent and are not manipulated by the serum Jeanine has created, decide to destroy the serum because it is very dangerous for other factions. For Marx, revolution is defined by the nature of the change involved, by sociopolitical relation. It shows the process of the oppressed class against the oppressing class. In Divergent, the revolution is reflected at the end of the story. Tris’s actions start to fuel a revolution. She, along with her father, Caleb and Marcus came to Dauntless headquarters trying to save Tobias and stop the simulation. Tris realized that Tobias himself has gone under a newly-made simulation which apparently works on Divergents except for her, so she saves him and asks him to stop the simulation. Tobias did it and took the data on the computer. Later, they all escaped to Amity by train and became factionless:

Abnegation and Dauntless are both broken, their members scattered. We are like factionless now. I do not know what life will be like, separated from a faction—it feels disengaged, like a leaf divided from the tree that gives it sustenance. We are creatures of loss; we have left everything behind. I have

no home, no path, and no certainty. I am no longer Tris, the selfless, or Tris, the brave.

I suppose that now, I must become more than either. (Roth, 2011: 487)

As it is shown in the quotation above, Tris describes how bad things are—two out of five factions are broken, everything lost, and left behind. But then Tris noted that she'll have to grow her identity even more than she already has. Society may be collapsing by the end of the book, but there still seems to be some hope in the individual. As Marx asserts, "let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win." (Marx, 1848: section 4)

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that *Divergent* is connected to our today's society. When we examine our society, declares Marxism, we discover that its structure is built on a series of ongoing conflicts between social classes. The chief reason for these conflicts is the varying ways the members of society work and the struggle for power between different social classes. In America, for example, the capitalists exploit the working classes, determining for them their salaries and their working conditions, among many other conditions of their lives. From this base arises the superstructure, or a multitude of social and legal institutions, political and educational systems, religious beliefs, values, and a body of art and literature that the one dominant, social class (e.g., the capitalists in America) uses to keep in check members of the working classes.

In *Divergent*, Roth explains the condition of society where people are divided into five factions based on the citizen's personal aptitudes. Erudite, or in Marxist terms, the bourgeoisie who in want of power has created a serum with which they can control other factions. On the other hand, we have the other factions who are oppressed by Erudite such

as Dauntless that goes under a simulation and becomes an army for Erudite to be used against Abnegation since they control the government for now and most Divergent are from this faction. Marxism calls this group of society, the proletariat. Roth also tries to manifest the social realities of people in the world at present time through the political conflict among factions. She also tries to reflect the historical materialism that shows the base and the superstructure of the society, class struggle, and revolution that happened in the story.

This paper has shown that the book critiques the power structure capitalism support and spreads the interest to look at a society in a critical way.

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