**Themes, Motifs & Symbols-Divergent**

**Themes**

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

THE COMPLEXITY OF IDENTITY

From the beginning of the book, it’s clear that the society in *Divergent* has placed unrealistic limits on its members’ identities. The segregation of different personality types into different factions has consequences on both the group and the individual level. Each faction’s values – kindness, honesty, bravery, selflessness, and intelligence – are admirable in their own right. But although the factions are meant to complement and cooperate with each other, they tend to splinter into competing forces. Erudite thinks Abnegation is forcing its identity onto the other factions by rationing food and luxury goods. Erudite and Dauntless also question whether the humblest faction should be the only one responsible for governing. The increasing tension suggests that the roles created by the founders were too simplistic and not responsive to the changing needs of a dynamic society.

By forcing every person into factions focused on a single personality trait, the government discourages the personal growth that normally takes place throughout a person’s life. For everyone in Tris’s society, identity is locked in at age sixteen and never allowed to change. Tris thinks she has to choose whether to be brave *or*selfless, because neither the Choosing Ceremony nor faction system acknowledges the possibility that she may be both. [Al](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/divergent/character/al/)though she initially thinks everyone else is happy to choose, and her discontent makes her an outlier, she soon learns that others around her are also conflicted, suggesting that the government’s attempts to quash individuality haven’t entirely succeeded. Caleb seems to be a model Abnegation member, but his choice to join Erudite hints that he has struggled with his identity, just as Tris has. Their mother was once a capable member of Dauntless, yet she hid her origins in order to become a responsible wife and mother in Abnegation. And [Tobias](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/divergent/character/tobias/) tries to emulate the values of all five factions, even though it often makes life harder. Tris and Tobias’s Divergence rests in their willingness to acknowledge their own complexity, even when doing so is personally painful or challenges faction unity.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELFLESSNESS AND BRAVERY

Thanks to her upbringing in Abnegation, Tris initially thinks that selflessness and bravery are incompatible. Her father calls the Dauntless “hellions,” suggesting that he views the Dauntless as dangerous people who do nothing but cause trouble. Raised to be strongly prejudiced against the Dauntless, Tris naturally feels guilty for wanting to join them: if they are troublemakers, then her desire to be like them must make her a bad person. But her guilt is outweighed by her desire to rebel against the boring life she thinks her parents want her to lead. As proof, when she picks Dauntless at the Choosing Ceremony, she thinks to herself, “I am selfish. I am brave.”

If Tris’s father made her think selflessness and bravery were incompatible, her mother’s actions have the opposite effect. On Visiting Day, Tris realizes that her mother grew up in Dauntless, making her exactly the kind of person Tris wants to be: responsible, loving, and generous, but intelligent and brave when necessary. Her mother becomes the perfect embodiment of selfless courage late in the book during the Dauntless uprising: first she rescues Tris from drowning, then she sacrifices herself to keep her daughter from being killed.

Tris comes to realize that her selfless instincts actually help her behave courageously. When Eric orders Al to have knives thrown at his head as punishment, Tris offers to take his place, both protecting her friend and showing her willingness to put her own safety at risk. During her fear simulation, when Jeanine orders her to kill her family, she refuses, offering her own life instead. Doing so allows her to escape the simulation quickly, suggesting that the computer program finds her response effective. This scenario prepares her for the novel’s climax, when she must choose whether to kill a simulation-controlled Tobias. By choosing not to, she brings him out of the simulation and allows him to put a stop to the computer program that has taken control of the Dauntless.

THE ROLE OF INTIMACY IN ADULTHOOD

Tris is initially uncomfortable with displays of a romantic or sexual nature, since they show people giving in to their desires. Having been taught to think only of others, she considers public affection a selfish act. In Abnegation, her brother Caleb and their friend Susan showed they liked each other by asking polite questions, and her mother and father did so by holding hands. So when Tris sees two Dauntless initiates openly kissing, she’s disturbed, although her curiosity is piqued. In Abnegation she wasn’t supposed to explore adult relationships, but Dauntless is much freer.

As Tris progresses through initiation, her emotional connection to Tobias increases, and she begins to realize that she has romantic feelings for him. Her attraction to Tobias makes her aware that she’s nervous about physical intimacy. When she interacts with him in private, she longs for their bodies to be closer, often describing a feeling of electricity and “a wanting” sensation. She initially has trouble reconciling these sexual impulses with her reserved upbringing. Because Tobias is two years older than Tris, she fears that his idea of intimacy involves having sex. Peter, Al, and Drew’s attack exacerbates these fears, making her aware that her body can be overpowered and sexually assaulted by physically stronger boys. Her worries influence her fear simulation, forcing her to tell a simulated Tobias that she doesn’t want to sleep with him. Eventually, though, she learns to recognize and express her desires in a responsible way. She feels both strong and safe with Tobias, and by the end of the book, they’re able to talk honestly about sex.

**Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

RANKINGS AND HIERARCHIES

Along with the five factions, the book contains many examples of people being ranked and categorized according to their performance in various testing scenarios. The Dauntless faction is particularly hierarchical. This is a strong contrast to Abnegation, where everyone is supposed to be equal and no one strives to be more successful or admired than anyone else. The initiation tests use numbers to create an impression of objectivity, even though the actual process of ranking is invisible to the initiates.

For Tris, who’s unaccustomed to competing against others, this is an exciting new world, especially since she finds herself performing better than she expected. Having grown up in the humble world of Abnegation, she struggles with her desire to defeat others, especially Peter, who constantly tries to sabotage her. She’s eager to make friends with the Dauntless-born initiates, who have an advantage since they’ve grown up in the Dauntless world. Among her transfer friends, anxiety is higher. The atmosphere is an intensified version of high school competitiveness. The initiates get test anxiety, are curious about each other’s relative standings, and become insecure and resentful when they don’t measure up to their friends. The sense of competition is particularly strong in the dining hall, where the initiates divide into cliques and gossip about each other.

FEARS AND PHOBIAS

In Dauntless, learning to face one’s fears is a vital skill and a major part of initiation. The Dauntless seek to be brave, both as a group and as individuals, and Dauntless leaders have evidently determined that the best way to teach courage is through a form of exposure therapy. In the second and third training stages, the trainees repeatedly encounter simulated versions of their phobias, a method meant to help them lessen their fears and control their reactions to real-life danger.

The initiates’ fears reveal their individual personalities. One of Peter’s fears is public embarrassment, a phobia that emphasizes his superficiality and insecurity. Tobias has only four fears, one of which is his father, who abused him badly enough to make him leave his home faction. Tris’s fears involve loss of control, hurting the people she loves, and intimacy with Tobias, to whom she’s strongly attracted. For both her and Tobias, sharing their fears becomes a way of displaying vulnerability and connecting to one another.

On the surface, the fear simulations are intended to help the initiates become stronger. However, Tris observes her friends breaking down as a result of constant terror. After readers learn that an Erudite plot involving the Dauntless is underway, the tests become even more sinister. The constant exposure to fear-inducing situations is inescapable, since if the initiates refuse to participate, they run the risk of losing their place in Dauntless and becoming factionless. Initially, Tris’s fear of becoming a social outcast outweighs her discomfort with Dauntless methods. When she first learns about the ranking process, she feels “colder” and “harder,” and she hesitates to help Christina hang onto the chasm railing for fear of looking weak. Eventually, however, facing her fears helps her learn what motivates her as an individual rather than making her a brainwashed member of the Dauntless army. She learns that acting selflessly can be brave, like when she offers to take Al’s place at the knife target. Her ability to act on that knowledge even in the face of death ultimately saves her home faction from total annihilation.

NAMES

Throughout the book, names given to groups and individuals play an important role in publicly defining them. They are an expression of one of the book’s main themes: the complexity of identity. Each faction is named for a common human trait, but the names are more elegant and less familiar-sounding than the qualities they encourage: Candor (honesty), Amity (friendship), Erudite (intelligence), Abnegation (humility), and Dauntless (bravery). These labels make each faction sound important and elevated, encouraging their members to aspire to be the best versions of themselves as allowed within faction guidelines.

The book emphasizes Tris’s many names, both the ones others give her and the ones she gives herself. We don’t learn her name is Beatrice Prior until the second chapter, when she’s called to take the aptitude test. “Prior” means “before,” representing the meek Abnegation identity she’ll soon abandon. Immediately after she joins Dauntless, she chooses to be called “Tris,” which sounds bolder and more daring than “Beatrice.” Her family will still call her Beatrice, however, subtly linking her to her old way of life. After the first day of initiation, Tris is known by her admirers as “the first jumper,” a label that helps cement her fearless reputation. By contrast, Peter and the other Candor initiates call her “Stiff,” an insult that makes fun of Abnegation’s formality and inflexibility.

**Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

BIRDS

Birds become an important symbol of Tris’s identity during initiation. During her aptitude test, she notices that Tori, the Dauntless test administrator, has a hawk with a red eye tattooed on her neck. Tori explains that in some cultures, the hawk was a symbol of the sun, so the tattoo reminds her that she conquered her fear of the dark. After Tris joins Dauntless, she has Tori tattoo three birds, one for each member of her family, on her collarbone, as if they’re flying toward her heart. The birds remind Tris of her home faction and help her feel as though her family is still with her. They also symbolize the rush of freedom Tris feels when she does things that resemble flight, like jumping onto trains, leaping into the Pit, and zip lining off of the Hancock building. On the other hand, Tris’s first fear simulation involves a huge, angry flock of crows pecking her to death. The crows’ blackness mirrors the black clothing worn by the Dauntless, suggesting that the birds represent Dauntless as a collective and hinting that the faction poses a threat to Tris’s life.

TRAINS

Other than walking, trains are the sole mode of transportation within and beyond the city. They act almost like an independent organism, running at all hours of the day and night, seemingly in every direction and without any operators to control them. Early in the book, Tris longingly watches the Dauntless jump off the train outside school, foreshadowing that she’ll soon leave Abnegation to join the more reckless faction. The trains’ loud noise and constant movement contrast sharply with Abnegation’s quiet atmosphere. They represent Tris’s desire to seek out new, exciting experiences rather than spend her life in Abnegation, where she must ignore her own desires and patiently serve others.

CLOTHING AND TATTOOS

When Tris leaves Abnegation to join Dauntless, she begins to experiment with her appearance, reflecting the fact that she has the freedom to explore her individual style for the first time. The members of Abnegation wear gray, loose-fitting clothing and simple hairstyles so they don’t stand out from each other. Dauntless has no such restrictions, and after Peter calls Tris “Stiff” on the roof of the Pit, she removes her gray outer shirt and throws it at him. This is one of Tris’s first steps toward rejecting her old faction and developing her Dauntless identity.

At first Tris wears her Abnegation clothes to bed, but because the Dauntless dress mostly in black, Tris gradually starts wearing black clothing, too. After the first day of training, Christina picks out a slim-fitting dress for her to wear and does her makeup, showing that she can look striking, if not exactly pretty. For the first time in her life, she’s allowed to want to be attractive. She begins dressing to flatter her body and is happy when Tobias tells her she looks good. The Dauntless are also tattooed, some heavily. Soon after joining, Tris gets three birds tattooed on her collarbone, and she adds the Abnegation and Dauntless symbols during a later stage of initiation. The tattoos make her feel unique, but they also help her fit in and feel closer to her friends in Dauntless.