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**Unravelling the Moral Development Stages of Sonya Kantor in  
Veronica Roth's *Poster Girl* through Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory**

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*Abstract*

Morality is a cornerstone of a sustainable and healthy society; it shapes individuals' behaviours and contributes to the overall harmony of a community. The profound impact of morals on society has prompted investigations into their developmental processes within individuals. Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist, proposed a comprehensive theory of moral development that provides a framework for understanding the stages individuals traverse on their moral journey from childhood to adulthood. Kohlberg's theory delineates six stages across three levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. This study seeks to apply Kohlberg's theory of moral development to the dystopian fiction *Poster Girl* by Veronica Roth, with a specific focus on the character Sonya Kantor. Sonya undergoes a transformative moral journey, after recognising the inadequacies in her previously held values and beliefs. The research analyses Sonya's moral development in alignment with the six stages delineated by Kohlberg, shedding light on the intricate nuances of her evolving moral perspectives.

**Keywords:** Morality, moral development, community, society, *Poster Girl*, Kohlberg

### **Introduction**

Morality is the foundation of human ethics and plays a significant role in society, shaping cultural norms, influencing individual behaviour and guiding human interaction. Oxford Dictionary defines morality as "a system of values, normative rules, or principles according to which intentions or behaviours are judged to be good or bad, right or wrong" ("Morality"). Mary Louise Arnold, a researcher on Kohlberg's theories, asserts "that it is as a result of

development in moral reasoning that one becomes a truly moral person, in both mind and deed” (367). Morality encompasses a wide range of ethical considerations, including personal virtues, ethical conduct, and broader societal norms and justice. The study of morality extends beyond philosophy and encompasses psychology, sociology, and even neuroscience, exploring the cognitive processes, social dynamics, and biological factors that contribute to the development and expression of moral values. Throughout history, scholars and thinkers, from Aristotle to modern ethicists, have grappled with questions about the nature of morality, its origins, and its role in shaping human societies.

As we navigate the complex landscape of morals and morality, it becomes evident that these concepts are not static or universal. Rather, they are dynamic and shaped by diverse perspectives, cultural contexts, and individual experiences. This complexity underscores the need for comprehensive frameworks developed by psychologists like Jean Piaget (1986), Lawrence Kohlberg (1927) and Martin L. Hoffman (1924), to understand how individuals progress through different stages of moral reasoning from childhood to adulthood. The exploration of morals and morality gains added depth and nuance through the lens of Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development theory.

Exploring the intricacies and depth of fictional settings and characters in novels and movies by juxtaposing them with social and psychological theories, is an interesting research field. Earlier studies have applied Kohlberg’s theory of moral development to analyse fictional narratives, as manifest in works as Bernard A. Rihn’s essay “Kohlberg Level of Moral Reasoning of Protagonists in Newbery Award Winning Fiction,” Jency Brightlin S’ essay, “Approach to Moral Development in Children” in Roald Dahl’s novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*” and Riska Fitriani et al. essay, “The Moral Development of the Main Character Sebastian Wilder Portrayed in *La La Land Movie* (2016).”

The present paper will attempt to study the stages involved in the moral development of Veronica Roth’s protagonist, Sonya in *Poster Girl* against the backdrop of Kohlberg’s theory. Veronica Roth is an accomplished American author known for her significant contributions to the young adult dystopian fiction. Born on August 19, 1988, in New York City, Roth gained widespread acclaim with her debut novel, *Divergent*, which quickly became a bestseller and the foundation for a successful trilogy. Roth’s ability to craft immersive and thought-provoking narratives extends beyond the *Divergent* Series, with subsequent works like *Carve the Mark*, *Chosen Ones*, *Poster Girl* and *Arch Conspirator* showcasing her versatility and depth as a storyteller.

In the dystopian tapestry meticulously woven by Veronica Roth in *Poster Girl*, the narrative discloses against the backdrop of a society ensnared in the clutches of constant scrutiny of Insight, a surveillance device that meticulously records every aspect of their lives. The Delegation, an authoritative regime, maintains control through a rigid moral code disguised as “What’s Right is Right,” until Triumvirates seize power (Roth 1). Sonya Kantor, once the Delegation’s celebrated poster girl, now languishes in the Aperture, a prison for dissenters who challenged the new government of Triumvirates. Enduring a decade of confinement, she grapples with memories of her life in the Delegation rule. Unexpectedly, she is offered freedom by a former adversary turned government member, contingent on her locating the long-missing Grace Ward. Driven by a desperate desire to break free and burdened by guilt, Sonya reluctantly agrees, embarking on a perilous journey beyond the Aperture’s confines. Her quest to uncover Grace’s fate unravels a web of intricate secrets and treachery that surpass the Delegation’s known crimes. Shockingly, Sonya learns of her involvement in Grace’s abduction, compelling her to confront the harsh realities of her past actions. The revelation propels Sonya into a realisation that Grace’s disappearance holds the key to unveiling the truth about the Delegation’s history.

To comprehend this intricate web of deceit, Sonya faces the formidable task of challenging and reconsidering the beliefs ingrained in her throughout her life, as articulated by the statement, “Sonya must unlearn what she has been taught her whole life to believe. She must compare what she has learned to what she sees in the world around her to learn the truth about her situation” (White). Sonya initially adheres to the societal norms and regulations that are imposed on her by the Delegation and helps in the abduction of a young girl, because having a second child is considered illegal. However, she experiences an epiphany and strives to rectify her mistakes when the impacts of her actions are brought to light. This paper will examine the hypothesis that Sonya’s transition from a conformist to a revolutionary individual who evaluates and defines her own moral stance is consistent with Kohlberg’s moral development theory.

### **Theory of Moral Development**

Kohlberg, an American psychologist has “dedicated his life to articulating and applying a universal theory of the development of moral reasoning” (Vozzola 27). His “study of morality, and his moral stage theory is generally acknowledged to have dominated the field” (Arnold 366). His work emerged during a time when psychology was expanding beyond behaviourism and delving into cognitive processes and moral philosophy. He built upon the groundwork laid by his predecessor, Jean Piaget, who had explored cognitive development in children. He

expanded Piaget's ideas into the realm of morality, seeking to unravel the intricate cognitive processes that underpin moral reasoning. Kohlberg's theory evolved through extensive research and longitudinal studies conducted primarily in the 1950s and 1960s. His ground-breaking findings on Stages of Moral Development presented a six-stage model that delineated the progression of moral thinking from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

Kohlberg's theory categorises moral development into three levels, each with two stages. "The description of the stages themselves has changed somewhat several times (e.g., Kohlberg, 1958, 1969, 1973, 1976)" (Siegal 286). In the 1963 essay "The Development of Children's Orientations Toward a Moral Order I. Sequence in the Development of Moral Thought" he described levels as the "Pre-Moral Level, Morality of Conventional Role-Conformity, and Morality of Self-Accepted Moral Principles" (Kohlberg, "The Development", 1963, 13). In his 1976 essay "Moral Stages and Moralization: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach" he describes them as "preconventional level (Stages 1 and 2), conventional level (Stages 3 and 4), and postconventional level (Stages 5 and 6)" (Kohlberg, "Moral Stages," 31). The describing terms vary, but throughout the concepts remain the same, this paper uses the terms used in the paper mentioned later and the six stages are,

the first two of the six stages comprise a "preconventional level" of moral reasoning characteristic of most children under 9 and many adolescents. Stage 1 is a punishment-obedience orientation . . . Stage 2 is an instrumental-hedonistic orientation . . . Stages 3 and 4 comprise the "conventional level", one which characterizes the moral reasoning of most adults. A Stage 3 orientation involves living up to a stereotypic "good" behavior. Stage 4 is a law-and-order orientation . . . Finally, Stages 5 and 6 involve the acknowledgement of the rights of individuals over the rules or laws of institutions. These last two stages comprise the "postconventional level" . . . and are reached by a small minority of adults. (Siegal 286)

In essence, Kohlberg's theory offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending the intricate stages of moral development. This study analyses Sonya's moral journey from childhood to adulthood, as she evolves from blindly following rules to developing her own moral compass. It focuses on her decision to reunite an abducted child with her parents, which reflects a shift towards conscientious moral deliberation. This exploration draws parallels with Kohlberg's moral stages, highlighting Sonya's transformative journey towards moral autonomy.

### **Application of Stages of Moral Development on Sonya Kantor**

Kohlberg has proposed these stages after intrinsic research observing children and their moral development from age 10 to adulthood by bringing some changes in the theory proposed by Piaget. "Piaget (1932/1977) claimed that there are two childhood moralities: one of adult constraint and one of mutual respect" (Siegal 285). Adapting these aspects of Piaget's idea,

Kohlberg introduced a fully developed framework that demonstrates the stages involved in the development of morals in an individual from childhood to adulthood. These stages are pertinent to study the moral development of Sonya Kantor. Sonya's evolution towards valuing her own conscience involves a lot of moral dilemmas. Initially, she adheres to the stringent rules imposed by the Delegation, participating in morally dubious actions in exchange for DesCoins, a kind of fictional digital currency that helps people meet their needs. However, the collapse of the Delegation alters Sonya's trajectory, and with the rise of the Triumvirates, she finds herself incarcerated in Aperture. A pivotal turning point emerges when Sonya is tasked with locating a girl separated from her parents, prompting a profound shift in her perspective and a redefinition of her moral compass. This study applies Kohlberg's theory of moral development to Sonya Kantor's moral development as follows.

### **Level I: Preconventional Morality**

Kohlberg's moral development theory categorises children under 10 as preconventional. "At this level, the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but interprets these labels in terms of either the physical or the hedonistic consequences of action" and it is separated into two stages, "punishment and obedience orientation and instrumental relativist orientation" (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 17). Children at this level are responsive to cultural labels of virtuous or wicked but understand them in terms of self-indulgent consequences. Sonya Kantor's acceptance of Delegation rules fearing physical punishment falls under this level.

In stage I: "Punishment and obedience orientation" (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 17), people consider the morality of an action based solely on its consequences. It's all about "avoidance of punishment and the superior power of authorities" (Kohlberg, "Moral Stages" 34). In *Poster Girl* society, Delegation imposes several restrictions on its participants like haircuts, tattoos, and clothing, stating "What's Right is Right" (Roth 1). Those who violate the rules are punished with DesCoin penalties. Sonya, born and raised in this totalitarian society, follows these rules without question, fearing the penalties because it would "cost a person at least five hundred DesCoin for the day-a penalty for being disruptive" and without DesCoin it would become hard to fulfil even her basic needs (Roth 43). She's deeply conditioned by Delegation's tactics. She does not evaluate the concept of right or wrong in terms of the meaning or ethical value of the consequences; rather, her focus is on avoiding negative repercussions and complying with those in positions of power.

Stage 2 is the "instrumental relativist orientation" (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 17), at this stage, individuals begin to consider their own needs. Morality is viewed through an instrumental lens

and human relations are perceived in a pragmatic manner akin to a marketplace. It is considered as “acting to meet one’s own interest and needs” (Kohlberg, “Moral Stages” 34) and is seen as a form of exchange with an emphasis on the immediate and tangible benefits gained. Sonya highly values the benefits of following the Delegation rules, which provide quantified rewards for good behaviour, and “under Delegation, everything was quantified . . . If you did something good, you were rewarded” (Roth 65). When she discovers that a couple, Roger and Eugenia, are having a second child, she informs her father of this illegal act, knowing that she would be rewarded with DesCoins for helping in “rehomeing” the child. Sonya’s eagerness to increase her DesCoin count is evident when she says, “I was up all night waiting for my DesCoin count to increase” (Roth 205). This implies that at this stage her morality is instrumental and driven by her own needs and desires. Essentially, she follows the rules because she knows that it will benefit her in the end.

### **Level II: Conventional Morality**

At this level, individuals move beyond external consequences and start to “internalize the definitions of right and wrong of their particular reference group” (Vozzola 30). They act per “mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships and interpersonal conformity” (Kohlberg, “Moral Stages” 34). They evaluate the morality of actions by assessing them with the prevailing views and expectations within society and it encapsulates the third and fourth stages of Kohlberg’s moral development theory. Sonya following Delegation rules to get appreciation and recognition from people falls under this level.

Stage 3 is the “interpersonal concordance or good boy-nice girl orientation” (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 18); at this stage, individuals base their understanding of good behaviour on the premise that it should please or assist others and gain their approval. In Kohlberg’s words, it is defined as “living up to what is expected by people close to you or what people generally expect of people in your role” (“Moral Stages,” 34). This stage reflects a developing awareness of the interpersonal dynamics involved in moral judgments and the significance of maintaining healthy relationships within a communal framework. Sonya’s moral development can be compared to this stage when she starts to follow the rules because it is expected of her. She is delighted when people identify her as a “good Delegation girl” (Roth 17). She follows the rules to gain this recognition and appreciation. A report in the Delegation record showcases her desire for recognition from others in doing things, “she is compliant with Delegation protocols, with a strong desire to please” (Roth 51). Thus, during this stage conformity to socially accepted norms, becomes prominent in her.

In Stage 4 “society maintaining orientation”, individuals exhibit an orientation toward authority, fixed rules, and the preservation of the social order (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 18). “People in this stage realize the importance to obey laws, dictums and social conventions because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society” (Zhang and Zhao). Right behaviour, according to this stage, involves fulfilling one’s duty, displaying respect for authority figures, and following the existing social order for its intrinsic value. Sonya’s evaluation of social stability resulting from following the Delegation rules, falls under this stage. She acknowledges the positive impacts of those rules, believes “what is right is right after all” and following those rules will help to maintain order and says, “the Delegation was good at keeping things tidy” (Roth 44). These thoughts instil a sense of duty and commitment in her, irrespective of her personal feelings or intentions. She recognises the significance of societal structures and rules in maintaining order and prioritises conforming to these regulations.

### **Level III: Postconventional Morality**

The postconventional level also identified as the “Autonomous, or Principled Level,” (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 18) represents a more advanced stage of moral development. At this level, individuals move beyond conventional societal norms and rules, demonstrating a heightened capacity for independent moral reasoning. This stage reflects a heightened moral autonomy and a commitment to principles that are grounded in reason, justice, and individual conscience. Individuals operating at the postconventional level prioritise ethical considerations that transcend immediate societal norms, emphasising principles that possess inherent validity and application beyond the confines of specific groups or personal identifications. This level comprises the stage 5 and 6 of the moral development. Sonya’s transition in morality from a conformist to a morally autonomic individual falls under this level.

Stage 5 is the “social contract orientation” (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 18), in this stage, the “right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and in terms of standards that have been critically examined and agreed on by the whole society” (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 18). Sonya’s moral journey extends beyond the collapse of the Delegation, reflecting a tenacious commitment to justice and lawfulness. Despite the upheaval that led to the rise of the Triumvirates, Sonya remains tethered to the values embedded in Delegation rules. Throughout this transitional period, she grapples with the complexities of moral reasoning, especially when it comes to actions, she had previously considered justified within the Delegation’s framework. Even as societal dynamics shift, Sonya continues to grapple with the moral intricacies surrounding the abduction of a young girl. She clings to the belief that the Delegation’s decision to rehome the girl was a morally justifiable act, citing reproductive legislation violations by the

parents as the ethical basis for the separation (Roth 44). She emphasises morals and principles agreed upon by society, even in the face of political change, showing moral reasoning beyond personal or immediate societal considerations at this stage.

Stage 6, known as the “universal ethical principle of orientation” (Kohlberg, *Essays*, 19), marks the pinnacle of moral development according to Kohlberg’s theory. At this final stage, individuals shape their understanding of the right action based on their conscience, guided by self-chosen ethical principles. So, “following self-chosen ethical principles” becomes the aim at this stage (Kohlberg, “Moral Stages” 34). These principles are characterised by their appeal to logical inclusiveness, universality, and unwavering reliability. In the culmination of Sonya’s moral journey, a profound shift occurs during the final stage of her development. This transformative moment is marked by questioning of the Delegation’s rules and a pivotal realisation encapsulated in her doubt: “Do you think Delegation was good?” (Roth 159). Sonya confronts the flaws inherent in the Delegation’s structure, recognising that she has “quite literally lived in a system under Delegation, developed to cultivate particular qualities” (Roth 212). The revelation of the tragic fate of the girl taken from her parents due to Sonya’s actions that “Grace Ward is dead. She’s been dead for over a decade” also becomes a catalyst for change (Roth 186). In response to these realisations, Sonya undergoes a profound moral transformation, relying on her conscience to guide her decisions. She gains a newfound sense of confidence and clarity, as reflected in the statement, “She feels steady. She knows what she’s doing” (Roth 186). With an unwavering determination for justice and conscientiousness, Sonya takes it upon herself to expose the corrupted side of the Delegation, exposing corrupted individuals like Easton Turner, a former Delegation official who assumes a leadership role in the Triumvirate after the fall of the Delegation. And her decision demonstrates the final stage of her moral development.

### **Conclusion**

Examining Sonya Kantor’s moral development through the lens of Kohlberg’s theory unveils a compelling narrative of transformation and self-discovery. From her early adherence to Delegation rules, including participation in morally ambiguous actions, to her conscientious and independent moral stance in adulthood, her journey reflects the dynamic nature of ethical growth. The hypothesis that Sonya’s transition from a conformist to a revolutionary individual who evaluates and defines her own moral stance, is consistent with Kohlberg’s moral development theory. The parallels drawn between her experiences and Kohlberg’s moral stages underscore the human quest for moral autonomy. Her evolution serves as a poignant reminder that even in the face of oppressive regimes and personal culpability, individuals have the



capacity to forge their own ethical paths. This exploration not only deepens the understanding of the moral development of Sonya but also prompts reflection on the resilience of the human spirit in the pursuit of justice, autonomy, and the enduring quest for a higher moral ground.

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