

The Prevalence Of Racism And Injustice In Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

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Abstract

This paper discusses Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, published in 2019. The novel tells the pitiable life of Elwood Curtis, an African American boy. He grows up in Tallahassee, Florida.

The central theme of the book is racial segregation and brutality. Elwood, a ten year old child is taken to a reformatory school after being falsely convicted of stealing. During his stay at the Nickel Academy, he becomes aware of the unavoidable violence and lawlessness that black people face. Elwood Curtis is unjustly accused and imprisoned for a crime he does not commit at reform school. The novel explores the psychological effects of violence and oppression on

African Americans. Elwood's journey begins with his experiences at Nickel Academy, the discovery of a secret graveyard on the grounds. The novel describes Elwood's experience of confinement, abuse, and racism at the hands of the institution's authorities as well as his

struggles against cruel treatment to stay alive and retain his sense of self. These experiences shape his identity and worldview, and serve as a powerful indictment of the racism, violence, and oppression against the black people. The legacy of Jim Crow laws, racial segregation, and discrimination continues to affect black communities in the United States and other countries, perpetuating disparities in education, housing, healthcare, and criminal justice. The novel's themes resonate deeply with contemporary issues and provides a powerful critique of racism and its ongoing impacts, highlighting the need to achieve true social justice. *The Nickel Boys* resounds with conversations about racial inequality, social injustice, and the need reform in institutions that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

Key words: African American, Racism, Reform school, Violence, Oppression.

Introduction

Whitehead's writing often blends elements of realism with elements of speculative or historical fiction, creating compelling narratives that provoke thought and discussion. *The Nickel Boys* sheds light on the injustice faced by African American boys at a reform school in Florida during the Jim Crow era. America has a racial system ever since it broke away from the British Empire and become an independent nation. The novel affirms that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are among the fundamental liberties that every person has the right to.

The Nickel Boys is a novel written by Colson Whitehead and published in 2019. It tells the story of Elwood Curtis, a young black boy from Florida during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Elwood is an idealistic and ambitious young man who, despite facing racial discrimination, goes to college to bring forth a difference in the world. However, his aspirations are dashed when he is falsely accused of a crime. He is sent to Nickel Academy, a juvenile reform School, for brutalizing its students, especially black boys. The themes revolving round this novel include racism and injustice. Based on the real life, the novel sheds light on a dark chapter in American history.

In *The Nickel Boys* Colson Whitehead follows the life of Elwood Curtis, a young black man who has aspirations for a bright future, but finds himself at Nickel Academy, a reform school, after being falsely accused. At Nickel, Elwood faces the harsh realities of institutional racism, abuse, and corruption, which challenges his idealism and forces him to confront the cruel injustice of the world. The novel exposes their dark history of reform school and the racism that creates violence and oppression against black people. The novel also highlights the ways in which institutions do not support the vulnerable population, instead enduring harm and trauma. Elwood's story serves as a powerful indictment of the systemic fail that continues racial injustice of black people. According to Tim Adam:

The Nickel Boys, a worthy and singular novel to follow that landmark achievement begins with literal archaeology. The secret graveyard that stood behind a prison reform school in the Florida of the Jim Crow era has been disturbed by developer building a shopping mall. The bodies of black boys who had been unearthed, giving substance to the mythological of the Nickel Academy a segregated brutal in which children were routinely brutalized and sometimes covertly killed by staff. An endnote to the novel confirms not only the factual truth of the archaeological dig – in 2014 – but also of the institution, the Arthur G Dozier school for boys, in Marianna, Florida, on which all that follows is based. (45-60) It clearly shows the discovery of the secret graveyard behind the former prison reform School. Nickel Academy is a stark remainder of the atrocities that took place there. The bodies of the black boys were dumped in potato sacks

and buried in a secret graveyard. This is a chilling testament to the brutality and cruelty by the institution to the blacks. The novel is based on the real life of Arthur G. Dozier School for boys in Marianna, Florida, noted for its history of abuse and violence against the black children in its care. The novel is rooted in historical fact which makes the story even more compelling and disturbing. The use of archaeology is a metaphor to uncover the past and bring hidden truths to light. The excavation of the graveyard and the unearthing of the bodies serves as a reminder that the past is not buried and that the truth will eventually come to light.

The prologue starts “Even in death the boys were trouble” (1). It explains that the trauma and pain inflicted on the boys at Nickel Academy continues to have an impact. The consequences of racism and abuse persist long after the individuals who continued them are gone. The boys’ experiences were criminalized and stigmatized, even in death. The fact that they are still seen as “trouble” (1) even in death underscores the dehumanizing effects. “Elwood received the best gift of his life on Christmas Day 1962, even if the idea it *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* was the only album he owned and it never left the turntable” (9).

Elwood’s encounter with Martin Luther King’s speeches is a pivotal moment in his journey. The speeches open his eyes to struggle for racial equality and justice, and inspire him to think critically about the world around him. The album serves as a catalyst for Elwood’s growing awareness of the racial oppression that he and other black people face. “Yolanda begged her parents whenever she spotted the big sign from express way or the commercials came on TV. Dr. King had to tell her in his law, sad rumble about the segregation system that kept colored boys and girls on the other side of the fence” (10). The interest in Yolanda’s amusement park and Dr. King’s explanation of the segregation system that excludes him and other Black children is a tense moment in the novel. The bitter reality of the segregation and discrimination of Black people faced in the 1960s, is witnessed even in happy places like amusement parks. Dr. King explains this to Yolanda in a “low sad rumbling” (10) voice that underscores the pain and frustration of experiencing discrimination and ostracism.

The novel explores on its main character’s incarceration experience at Nickel School, a Juvenile reformatory. Whitehead deconstructs the school’s environment and expose it presenting readers with violence and abusive practices. The protagonist, Elwood Curtis, is an idealistic teenager, a boy who lives with his grandmother, tries to excel in school, contribute to the gradual development of the black race. He is influenced by Martin Luther King who dreams that equality will someday prevail, mostly through love, nonviolent actions, and civil rights marches. Elwood’s time in the nickel is something embedded with racist misbehavior and abuse reminiscent of slavery. He understands and fight against injustice inflicted on blacks.

Black people did not have right to vote, own property, or get an education. The state laws are provided so that blacks received harsher sentences than whites for the same crime. It was not easy for slaves to gain freedom. The fate of the freedmen was not that much better they were afraid of being sold into slavery again. Although slavery ended with the civil war, the white/black hierarchy did not end there.

Elwood’s childhood was spent at the Richmond hotel. “After rushes, Elwood sometimes challenged the dishwashers to plate-drying races, and they made a good natured show of being disappointed by his superior skills” (39). He faces a disappointing and hurtful experience at the Richmond Hotel. He was tricked into participating in a dish drying competition by the kitchen staff. His prize is collection of encyclopedias that have become empty except for a volume. The experience makes him feel betrayed and disappointed as Elwood trusted the staff and was excited about the prize. The incident also highlights the theme of racism and discrimination that Elwood faced as a black figure in the 1960s. It creates a form of disrespect and marginalization that Elwood experiences in his daily life. Elwood gets a job at Marconi’s Tobacco and Cigars. He reports the theft by some boys at the store which ends in his dismissal by Mr. Marconi, who refuses to take action. Instead, the boys beat up Elwood after work, suggesting that they are protected and shielded by the system. Elwood’s experience is a perfect memento of the dangers and challenges faced by black people in a society that often turns a blind eye to their suffering.

Mr. Hill, a teacher at Elwood’s high school takes an interest in Elwood’s passion for civil rights and encourage him to explore the movement further. Elwood’s journey to the college takes devastating turn when the person driving him drives a stolen car. They are pulled over by police, and Elwood is wrongly arrested and taken away. It clearly shows the racism and injustice that Elwood faces as a black teenager in the 1960s. Despite his effort to educate himself and get involved in the civil rights movement, he is still vulnerable to being unfairly targeted and criminalized by the authorities. The incident also marks a turning point in Elwood’s life. He is faced to confront the harsh realities of the criminal justice system and the way in which it is used to oppress and marginalize the black people with regard to racism and police brutality, the black people face in the United States. The fact that Elwood was wrongly accused and arrested and now faces the threat of violence. The Nickel Academy is a notorious institution with a history of abuse and mistreatment of its students, particularly black students like Elwood.

The next morning, Desmond, the boy from his dormitory shows him around. Elwood discovers that Nickel Academy is not a place of learning, but rather a site of exploitation and oppression. He is forced to work in the Yard, with Hispanic boy Jaimie, who is also a victim of the system. The fact that Elwood is constantly being shifted between the black and

white sides of the campus highlights the arbitrary and oppressive nature of the system. The Nickel Academy is a place where young people are dehumanized, racialized, and exploited rather than educated.

Elwood's experiences in the Yard, under the watchful eye of the cruel and abusive authorities, serve as a reminder of the brutal realities of the criminal justice system. His forced labor alongside Jaimie, a boy who is also marginalized and oppressed, highlights the way in which racism and oppression affect people of different backgrounds and identities.

From Elwood the violent experience of nickel's regulatory action occurs later he tries to intervene in a fight between three other boys. Before Elwood's violent abuse, the narrator points out "No one had asked Elwood for his side of the story, that he was trying to break up the fight in the bathroom but may be he'd get less for stepping in"(68). Elwood witnesses the brutal abuse of a boy in the shower and tries to intervene, but is met with violence himself. He, along with three other boys, including Corrie, are taken from their beds in the middle of the night by supervisor Spencer and a white house parent, Earl and subjected to a savage beating in the White House. It clearly shows the physical and emotional brutality that the boys at Nickel Academy face in the hands of their supposed caregivers. The trauma and horror of this experience have a lasting impact on Elwood and the other boys, and serves as a grim reminder of the systemic failure and abuses of power. That's a heart wrenching moment in the novel. Elwood is overcome with shame and guilt as he looks at the bruises on his legs, a constant reminder of the brutal beating he suffered at the hands of those who were supposed to care for him. He feels shame to share the truth with his grandmother, who had entrusted him to the Nickel Academy's care.

Nickel serves as a place of imprisonment and punishment rather than reformation or education. Elwood is forced to participate in an illegal scheme, double community service where he and Turner are made to transport goods from the Nickel Academy to local merchants, who pay Harper, then hands the money over to supervisor Spencer and director Harden. Elwood decides to document everything they do in a notebook. This suggests that he is aware of the illegality and immorality of the situation and his gathering evidence to potentially expose the truth. This moment highlights Elwood's resistance and determination to fight against the injustices.

The student boxing match between Griff the black boxer, and his white opponent, is a symbol of the racism and oppression that exemplifies the endless violence and exploitation at the Nickel Academy. Despite Griff's victory, he is brutally murdered by the supervisor Spencer and Earl, highlighting the deadly consequences of resistance and defiance in the face of white supremacy. Griff's body is hidden and later discovered in a secret grave, years later. This vividly shows the ways in which the Nickel Academy and its officials' ceaseless violence, trauma, and erasure. The novel highlights how the oppression of black bodies is incessant through violence, trauma, and silence, and how resistance and defiance are met with brutal force. The students are forced to work on this display, while the staff enjoys a festive dinner. This underscores the power dynamics at play, with the students being exploited and abused. Jaimie's attempt to poison Earl also reveals the themes of resistance and revenge, as Jaimie seeks to fight back against the abuse and trauma, he suffered at the hands of Earl. Survival of Earl suggests that the system of oppression is difficult to dismantle. Elwood's realization that Nickel Academy is corrupt and that he is failed by the system, including his grandmother's lawyer, who embezzled his money, marks a shift in his perspective. He loses faith in the teaching of Martin Luther King and becomes disillusioned with the idea of nonviolent resistance.

Elwood's decision to expose the corruption at Nickel Academy by giving his notebook to an investigator is a bold move, despite Turner's subsequent action, taking it upon himself to deliver the notebook to an investigator, shows his loyalty and commitment to Elwood's cause. The fact that Turner poses as an investigator, claiming to be someone who looks like John F. Kennedy, adds a layer of tension and humor to the scene. However, the tone quickly shifts when Spencer and his new assistant Hennepin, come for Elwood in the middle of the night, leading to a brutal beating in the white house. Elwood and Turner expose the truth, and the consequences they face in resisting the oppressive Nickel Academy. The use of violence and intimidation by those in the power serves as a reminder of the injustices that perpetuate trauma and oppression.

Elwood's confinement in the dark room subjected to physical and psychological torture, serves as a sobering reminder of the brutal realities of oppression. Turner's rescue attempt, though violent, ultimately ends in tragedy with Elwood's fatal shooting by Harper. The white van representing the oppressive forces of Nickel Academy, and the boys' desperate attempt to escape, highlights the striking difference between imprisonment and freedom. Elwood's outstretched arms as he falls to the ground, symbolizes his surrender to the forces of oppression. This scene underscores the themes of trauma, resistance, and devastating consequences of fighting against injustice. The fact that Turner is left to flee, leaving behind his friend and comrade, serves as a reminder of the brutal truth of survival and the toll it takes on individuals and communities.

Conclusion:

The novel highlights institutionalized racism that covers violence and trauma against the blacks. The character of a young black boy named Elwood Curtis, wrongly accused and sent to a reform school, exemplifies ways in which racism and injustice can destroy lives and endless violence. The novel shows how the system fails Elwood and other black

boys, subjecting them to physical and emotional abuse and denying them their basic human rights and dignity. Through the characters' experiences, the novel exposes the ways racism and injustice are embedded in the American society, enduring harm and trauma for generations. The novel is a powerful indictment of systemic failures to incessant racial violence, the black youth continue to face.

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