



**Exploring Traumatic Experiences in
Colson Whitehead's Nickel Boys**

Sarah Khalid Sultan



Abstract

The Nickel Boys by Colson Whitehead is a powerful exploration of trauma in the context of systemic racism and injustice during the Jim Crow era in 1960s America. The novel follows the lives of two African American boys, Elwood Curtis and Turner, as they endure the horrors of the Nickel Academy, a fictional reform school in Florida. Trauma takes many forms in the novel, from the physical brutality inflicted upon the boys to the emotional scars that linger long after they leave the institution. Through Elwood and Turner's experiences, Whitehead vividly depicts the enduring impact of trauma on individual psyches and communal identities. The novel also explores the intergenerational transmission of trauma, tracing its origins back to the legacy of slavery and the enduring impact of systemic oppression on African American communities. Yet, amidst the darkness, there are glimmers of hope and resilience as Elwood and Turner forge bonds that transcend the confines of Nickel, offering each other solace and support in the face of unimaginable hardship. **Keywords:** Abuse, Colson Whitehead, psychoanalysis, segregation, trauma.

Introduction

Every human has a chance of being traumatized. Trauma is caused by several reasons such as inner conflicts or life problems. These conflicts become a horrible experience engraved in the human psyche. This unpleasant experience becomes a shadow and has a destructive impact on the mind and sometimes causes physical scars which remain for a long time. Generally, trauma is related to emotions and psychology. According to Figley (2012:14), trauma is defined as incidents and troubled memories, deadly experiences, and disturbing. Trauma occurs because of many things and aspects like natural disasters and social elements like racism, abuse, and violence that can be caused by trauma. African American literature typically mirrors the cultures and traditions of oppressed communities. The experiences of slavery and wars have been pivotal in shaping African American writing, which has now become an integral part of American literature. Movements such as the civil rights and Black arts movements have further contributed to the evolution of African American literature. The works within this literary tradition often center on the lives of oppressed individuals in the United States, highlighting themes such as slavery, racism, and the pursuit of equality. African American writers have consistently shed light on their own struggles and hardships within the country, providing poignant reflections on their experiences. The current study delves into the exploration of trauma and its aftermath as depicted in Colson Whitehead's novel "The Nickel Boys." The narrative is built upon real-life occurrences at the Arthur G Dozier School for Boys, where numerous human remains were unearthed by an excavation team, shedding light on the victims of America's racial injustices. The novel centers on the theme of trauma and violence, as experienced and comprehended through the perspective of a ten-year-old boy named Elwood, who finds himself unjustly sent to a reform school after being falsely accused of theft. His time at the Nickel institution exposes him to the harsh reality of how African Americans are ensnared in a cycle of violence and lawlessness. Whitehead delves into the past decades to illustrate the evolution of racism and its enduring grip on American society.

About the author

Author Colson Whitehead is well-known in the United States for his perceptive analyses of American society, culture, and history. November 6, 1969, was his birthdate in New York City. After growing up in Manhattan, Whitehead went to Harvard University to study comparative literature and English. His debut book, *The Intuitionist*, which was widely praised by critics and received multiple honors, was published in 1999, marking the beginning of his literary career. Since then, he has written a number of brilliant books, such as *Zone One* (2011), *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), and *John Henry Days* (2001) (Fain 2015). With the publication of his book *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Whitehead gained popularity and praise. The novel reinvents the historical Underground Railroad as a functioning train network, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize Book Award for Fiction. Whitehead maintained his literary winnings in 2019 and solidified his position as one of the most gifted writers in America. The book was a nominee for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction and was awarded the prize. The sharp analysis of American history and culture, the engrossing characters, and the skillful blending of fiction and truth that define Whitehead's work. Whitehead pushes readers to reevaluate their perceptions about the past and present and provides fresh insights on well-known tales.

The Nickel Boys

The novel *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead is a work of fiction that delves into the troubling secrets of a graveyard on the north side of the Nickel campus. It narrates the experiences of the boys involved. The story follows Elwood, a young African American boy, who faces challenges and injustices at the Nickel



Academy, which is a juvenile reformatory. The novel explores themes of racial discrimination, survival and the search for dignity and significance in the face of racism and life difficulties. Throughout the novel, the characters navigate the harsh realities of their environment. The novel sheds light on the impact of systemic oppression and the resilience of the human spirit. Apostolos Pistikoudis (2023) remarks on the protagonist's hopes, suffering and inner conflicts through his journey: Whitehead's novel, *The Nickel Boys*, is chosen in order to investigate through the representation of a fictional character, the inner yearnings, the aspirations, and the impact of traumatic experiences on the psyche of a young black boy, who is sent to Nickel Academy because he had the bad luck to be given a ride by a car thief on his way to attend university classes (P.5). Pistikoudis implies that Whitehead's novel serves as a tool to illustrate Elwood's traumatic experiences and mental sufferings for the black community. During his first journey to the Nickel Academy, he meets a car thief. At this point, his life takes a terrible detour. This incident marks the beginning of a series of bad luck and the beginning of his traumatic experiences. The novel is situated in the past and is full of examples of kinds of racism. During the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak and was fighting the Jim Crow segregation laws. These segregation laws are found in the work when it refers to the bus boycotts, where black people are prevented from using public universities and transportations, which lead to integrated buses in the city (Whitehead 2019, 30)

Psychoanalysis Theory

Psychoanalysis is a psychological theory developed by Sigmund Freud. It explores the unconscious mind, which contains thoughts and memories outside of awareness. The mind is composed of the id (pleasure-seeking), ego (mediator) and superego (internalized standards). Defense mechanisms help cope with anxiety. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the development and the influence of unresolved traumas and conflicts. Dreams are seen as expressions of repressed desires. In practice and therapy, techniques like free association and transference are used to uncover unconscious material. Despite evolving and facing criticism, psychoanalysis remains influential in understanding the human mind and behavior (Bateman et al, 2021).

The Theme of Trauma

The novel "The Nickel Boys" by Colson Whitehead explores the theme of trauma and its lasting effects. The protagonist, Turner, also known as Elwood, is unable to escape the traumatic memories of his time at Nickel, a violent reform school plagued by racism and brutality. Despite his attempts to repress these memories, they continue to haunt him. When an archaeological investigation reveals a hidden graveyard where black students were buried, Turner realizes that he must confront his past and actively deal with his trauma. The story emphasizes that psychological wounds persist even if suppressed. Turner's decision to revisit Nickel signifies the importance of actively facing and processing painful memories, as mere survival is not enough. Other former Nickel Boys also recognize the value of acknowledging their trauma and create support groups and a website to share their stories, finding solace in camaraderie. The novel highlights the delicate courage required to confront trauma and the emotional resilience needed to navigate its effects. While some former Nickel Boys openly embrace their pasts, Turner prefers to keep his memories private, leading to emotional and behavioral struggles that affect his relationships. Repressing trauma only intensifies its impact, as seen in Turner's nightmares and his inability to truly move on. Ultimately, the story suggests that living with trauma is challenging, but denying and repressing it is even more emotionally draining than directly confronting it. An example for trauma from novel is found in the epilogue: The nightmares that tormented him, the ones he claimed not to remember—she knew his reform school had been bad but she didn't know it had been this place. She took his head into her lap as he wept, running her thumb over that stray-cat notch in his ear. The scar she never noticed but was right in front of her (Whitehead, 2019) The quotation manifests Elwood's torment and suffering even in his dreams. Millie, Elwood's wife, supports him all the way by physical bonding like hugging and caressing to reduce the impact of trauma. Beside the psychological impact, the quotation highlights the scars and physical marks and impact of consequences of trauma. It also highlights the need for strong and close relationships to aid and overcome life adversities

Critical Analysis

Characters in The Nickel Boys:

In *The Nickel Boys*, trauma is a central theme that profoundly affects the characters, shaping their identities, behaviors, and relationships. The following section includes instances of trauma experienced by the characters and also an analysis of its effects. There are different sorts of traumatic situations and experiences of different characters in the novel. There is also the impact of these experiences. A thorough examination

shows the result that some characters are more capable of healing from trauma than others (Bashir et al., 2022, p.711). This illustrates the negative impact of traumatic experiences and their types with a greater ability to heal from some of the characters, while others horribly suffer more from the consequences of trauma.

Elwood Curtis:

Elwood is a bright and idealistic African American teenager who is unjustly sent to the Nickel Academy after being falsely accused of a crime. He comes from a background of poverty and racial oppression, but maintains a strong belief in justice and equality. Elwood experiences both physical and emotional trauma at Nickel, including beatings, solitary confinement, and betrayal by his friend Turner. The injustice and brutality he witnesses and endures at the institution deeply scar him. Elwood maintains his idealism and belief in the power of education to uplift him. However, as the trauma intensifies, he struggles to reconcile his ideals with the harsh reality of life at Nickel. He becomes increasingly disillusioned and desperate to escape the brutality of the institution. Elwood copes with his trauma by holding onto memories of his grandmother's wisdom and his dreams of attending college. He also seeks solace in his friendship with Turner, though this relationship becomes strained as they cope with their trauma in different ways.

Turner:

Turner is a pragmatic and streetwise African American teenager who has learned to survive by navigating the injustices of the world. He comes from a background of poverty and has a more cynical outlook on life compared to Elwood. Trauma: Turner has endured his own share of trauma, including witnessing the abuse and violence at Nickel and experiencing betrayal by authority figures. His pragmatic approach to survival is a coping mechanism developed in response to the trauma he has faced. Unlike Elwood, Turner is less idealistic and more focused on self-preservation. He recognizes the injustices of Nickel but believes that survival is more important than fighting against the system. Turner's pragmatism serves as a defense mechanism against the trauma he experiences. Turner copes with his trauma by adopting a "survival of the fittest" mentality. He distances himself emotionally from others, including Elwood, and prioritizes his own well-being above all else. His pragmatism allows him to navigate the dangers of Nickel, but also isolates him from forming deep connections with others. Many other characters in the novel, such as the boys at Nickel and the staff members, also experience trauma in various forms. Some, like Griff and Jack, internalize their trauma and struggle to cope with it, while others, like the sadistic staff members, perpetuate trauma onto others as a means of asserting power and control. The trauma experienced by these characters reflects the broader systemic injustices and abuses present in institutions like Nickel during the Jim Crow era.

Defense mechanisms

In Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys*, the characters often employ various defense mechanisms to cope with the trauma they experience. One of the most prominent defense mechanisms used by the characters is denial. Several characters, particularly the boys at the Nickel Academy, deny the extent of the abuse they suffer. They repress their emotions and memories as a way to cope with the trauma they face. Another defense mechanism frequently observed is disassociation, where characters mentally detach themselves from the traumatic events they experience. Characters often rationalize the abuse they endure, convincing themselves that it's for their own good or that they somehow deserve it. Some characters use humor as a defense mechanism to mask their pain and make light of their situations. These defense mechanisms help the characters survive and navigate through their traumatic experiences at the Nickel Academy (Rahmi, 2023)

Types of Traumas in The Nickel Boys

Trauma constitutes a significant theme in Whitehead's novel, manifesting in diverse forms throughout his work. This analysis will delve into the physical and psychological traumas experienced by the central characters, shedding light on the harrowing realities and challenges faced by African Americans during the era of segregation.

Physical Trauma in The Nickel Boys:

The boys at the Nickel Academy are subjected to regular beatings and other forms of physical punishment by the staff as a means of discipline. This includes being struck with belts, sticks, or other objects. These beatings are often severe and leave lasting physical injuries. The boys are also forced to engage in strenuous manual labor, such as working in the fields or performing maintenance tasks around the school. This labor is often grueling and contributes to physical exhaustion and injury among the boy. The oppressive and



volatile environment of the Nickel Academy often leads to violent confrontations between the boys themselves, as they struggle to survive and assert themselves within the brutal hierarchy of the institution. These confrontations can result in physical injuries for those involved. The boys receive inadequate medical care and attention for any physical injuries they sustain while at the school. Minor injuries are often ignored or left untreated, leading to complications and exacerbation of their conditions. The living conditions at the Nickel Academy are described as harsh and dehumanizing, with the boys enduring overcrowded dormitories, inadequate food and hygiene and exposure to the elements. These conditions contribute to physical deterioration and health problems among the boys. Harriet's memories reveal the prevalence of unfairness and tragedy in her family's history. Her father's demise in custody, following an accusation by a white woman that he had obstructed her path on the sidewalk, and her husband's head injury sustained while trying to break up a fight at Miss Simone's establishment, where Miss Simone had intervened to protect one of her dishwashers from three white men, exemplify the systemic injustices faced by Black individuals. Furthermore, Elwood's tragic fate, shot while attempting to escape, further underscores the ongoing tragedies endured by Harriet's family. These personal tragedies reflect the broader struggles experienced by the Black community as a whole. The novel sheds light on the countless instances of physical trauma suffered by Black individuals, which not only inflict severe harm on their bodies but also result in a significant loss of life. The depiction of a pile of bones at the outset of the novel serves as poignant evidence of the toll exacted on Black bodies by systemic violence. Through these depictions, "The Nickel Boys" portrays the systemic abuse and brutality inherent in the reform school system during the Jim Crow era, highlighting the profound injustices and suffering endured by those ensnared in such institutions.

Psychological trauma in The Nickel Boys:

You Juanzhi emphasizes that: "people who experience trauma will have a great psychological crisis and mental illness. The novel depicts the great harm of these psychological traumas of the main character, Elwood" (p.67). This quotation manifests Elwood's mental crisis and struggle of all the incidents he met through his life. Elwood's Psychological trauma is caused by several incidents. The first and the most important reason is racial discrimination. The boys at the Nickel Academy, particularly Elwood and Turner, experience pervasive racial discrimination and violence due to the Jim Crow era setting. They face systemic racism from both the staff and their peers, which leads to feelings of fear, anger, and powerlessness. Witnessing or experiencing racial injustice and violence deeply scars them psychologically. Isolation and Alienation: Many of the boys at the Nickel Academy come from troubled backgrounds and have experienced trauma prior to their arrival. Once at the school, they are further isolated from their families and communities, exacerbating feelings of abandonment and loneliness. This isolation intensifies their psychological distress. The second reason is Elwood's fear of punishment. The boys live in constant fear of the brutal disciplinary measures employed by the staff at the Nickel Academy. This fear creates a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety and hypervigilance, as they are always on guard to avoid punishment. The threat of physical violence and punishment contributes to their psychological trauma. Loss of Identity and Agency: The oppressive environment of the Nickel Academy strips the boys of their sense of identity and agency. They are subjected to dehumanizing treatment and forced to conform to the rules and expectations imposed upon them by the staff. This loss of autonomy and sense of self-worth leads to profound feelings of despair and hopelessness. Survivor's guilt: Elwood, in particular, struggles with this feeling after seeing a fellow prisoner die at the hands of staff. His psychological trauma is exacerbated and his internal difficulties are further compounded by emotions of guilt and humiliation that he has for having survived when others did not. Post-traumatic stress disorder: The boys' horrific experiences at Nickel Academy leave them with long-lasting psychological scars, which lead to signs of the disorder. Their inability to function and lead fulfilled lives is hampered by intrusive memories, nightmares, and flashbacks related to their time at the school. The severe and widespread psychological suffering portrayed in The Nickel Boys highlights the terrible effects of systematic abuse and injustice on the human psyche. In exploring the intricate relationships between trauma, race, and power dynamics, the book highlights how resilient the human spirit can be when faced with immense suffering.

Sources of Trauma in The Novel

Colson Whitehead adeptly portrays the racial discrimination experienced by Black individuals through nuanced details and poignant scenes in the novel. The narrative reveals a stark contrast in treatment between Blacks and Whites, with Black characters consistently marginalized and mistreated by their White counterparts. One key aspect of this discrimination is the exploitation of Black labor and intellectual



curiosity. Elwood's grandmother, Harriet, works in a restaurant where Elwood spends time. Initially, he forms positive connections with the kitchen staff, engaging in playful interactions and demonstrating his eagerness to learn. However, when new staff members take over, they take advantage of Elwood's innocence and curiosity. This exploitation of Black labor and vulnerability sets the stage for further injustices. A significant example of this exploitation is the dish-drying contest organized by the staff, promising an Encyclopedia set as the prize. Elwood, a dedicated learner, eagerly participates and puts in immense effort to win. Despite his consistent success in previous contests, he is ultimately cheated out of the promised reward. The staff's deception not only robs Elwood of the recognition he deserves but also symbolizes the broader exploitation and manipulation faced by Black individuals in society. Furthermore, Whitehead intricately portrays the systemic barriers to education faced by Black students. The books provided to them are second-hand, filled with racial slurs, and often in poor condition. This deliberate neglect of educational resources reflects the entrenched racism within the educational system, perpetuating inequality and denying Black individuals access to quality education. Through these detailed depictions, Whitehead exposes the insidious nature of racial discrimination and the ways in which it pervades every aspect of Black individuals' lives. The exploitation of labor, the denial of educational opportunities, and the betrayal of trust serve as powerful reminders of the systemic injustices faced by Black communities, even in the post-slavery era. Many of the students at Nickel Boys have familial issues, as depicted in the novel. As stated, "Some students were wards of the state, without family, and there was nowhere else to put them" (Whitehead, 2019: 136), which explains why they end up at Nickel, where their well-being is largely overlooked. The absence of parental figures contributes to psychological trauma among black individuals, as seen in Elwood's life. His father, Percy, was preoccupied with military service and felt out of place in town after returning from the war, prompting their move to California. Turner, Elwood's friend, similarly lacked parental guidance; his father was absent since he was three, and his mother's life ended tragically due to substance abuse. Raised by his aunt, Turner endured domestic violence and received questionable rewards like ice cream from his aunt's boyfriend, contributing to his aversion to such treats. This illustrates how the boys at Nickel arrive with pre-existing emotional and physical scars, only to encounter further mistreatment within the institution. Despite Nickel's purported aim of instilling moral values and practical skills, the presence of violent staff members ensures that the boys' experiences are characterized by a continuous cycle of misery and neglect.

Narrative Techniques:

In *The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead utilizes various narrative techniques, including flashbacks, imagery, and symbolism, to express the trauma and its effects on the characters. Whitehead uses flashback technique to gain an insight into the tragic experiences of Elwood and Turner. These flashbacks offer insights into the lives of the protagonists before their time at the Nickel Academy, emphasizing the events that molded them and the tragedies they faced. By blending past and current storylines, Whitehead illustrates the lingering impact of tragedy on the characters' lives and identities. Whitehead uses strong and emotive images to convey the physical and psychological tragedies endured by the protagonists. Through evocative language, he offers a clear image of the terrible and dehumanizing conditions at the Nickel Academy, such as the overcrowded dormitories, limited food and cleanliness, and exposure to the weather. The use of sensory imagery helps to engage the reader in the characters' feelings, making the trauma feel visceral and immediate. Whitehead employs symbolism to represent the characters' trauma and resilience. One powerful symbol is the "White House," a building on the grounds of the Nickel Academy where the worst abuses take place. The White House serves as a symbol of the systemic racism and brutality of the institution. Another symbol is the "black box," a literal and metaphorical container for the traumas and secrets of the Nickel Academy. The black box represents the hidden history of abuse and injustice that the institution seeks to bury. Additionally, the "skeletons" buried on the grounds of the Nickel Academy symbolize the forgotten victims of the institution, whose stories are erased and ignored. By employing these narrative techniques, Whitehead effectively conveys the profound impact of trauma on the characters, as well as the resilience and strength they demonstrate in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Conclusion

Colson Whitehead's novel tackled subjects that is related trauma, by describing the real experience happened in the society of black people. Colson highlights in his writing the official history of African American people exploring their struggles for achieving independence, respect, and autonomy. Elwood the protagonist of the novel of *The Nickel Boys* had suffered from deferent kinds of trauma, the white people in America abused him mentally and physically by disrespect him and mistreat him. This research deals with trauma



theory, by giving deep analysis and study the personality of the protagonist Elwood by follow three aspects: the first study the types of trauma, the second study the source of trauma and last is the effort to recover from trauma. There are two types of trauma: psychological and physical. The main reason of this trauma is the suffering from racial discrimination, oppression and segregation. Whitehead attracts the readers by concentrating on one of the most important issues which is the trauma of the Black American in the society. Whitehead's aim is to convey a message to the world advocating to abolish the slavery, racial equality. The author gives a sense of hope to the reader to build a world empty of racism and discrimination, by facing the painful truth of the ancestors, and the problems of the past. The novel of the nickel boys is a masterpiece, timeless, and memorable piece of literary writing. The novel set the justice and equality between the white and the black people showing that there must be no difference depending on the color of skin. Nickel boys highlights the significance of the equality between people.

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