



## Reverberations of Injustice: An Analysis of Race and Resilience in *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* is a poignant historical fiction that explores the deep-rooted racism and systemic corruption in American society, inspired by the real-life viciousness at the Dozier School in Florida. The narrative follows two main characters, Elwood Curtis and Turner, who endure severe mistreatment at the Nickel Academy, a reform school that perpetuates racial injustice. Elwood, an idealistic Black teenager, is unjustly incarcerated and faces brutal conditions, while Turner adopts a more pragmatic approach to survival. The school mirrors the Jim Crow-era segregation, where Black students are subjected to violence and dehumanization, reflecting broader societal inequities. Whitehead uses the Nickel Academy as a microcosm of systemic oppression, illustrating how institutions can perpetuate racial hierarchies. The violence inflicted on Black boys serves as a mechanism of social control, undermining their identities and beliefs in justice. Despite the pervasive cruelty, the novel also highlights resilience. Elwood's unwavering belief in justice contrasts with Turner's survivalist mentality, showcasing different forms of resistance against oppression. The dual narrative structure emphasizes the lasting impact of trauma on individuals and communities, as seen through Turner's adult life. The unmarked graves at the academy symbolize the hidden history of racial violence, urging historical accountability. The themes resonate with contemporary issues like police brutality and racial disparities, linking the past to current movements for justice. Ultimately, *The Nickel Boys* compels readers to confront the painful truths of America's racial history and the on-going struggle against systemic injustice.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Survival, Justice, Cruelty, Brutality, Institutional Racism

Colson Whitehead's literary works are renowned for their powerful narrative style and their exploration of complex social cultural and historical themes. His works are speculative and realist. Whitehead's work focuses more on nuanced issues of race, identity, memory and resilience. His writings had the ability to blend genre conventions with serious commentary that has earned him a distinguished place in contemporary American literature. Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* is a cathartic historical fiction that elucidates the entrenched racism and systemic corruption inside American society. The story is based on the actual awfulness of the Dozier School for students in Florida, a reform institution where Black students endured glaring mistreatment, prejudice, and brutality. Whitehead examines issues of racial injustice, endurance, and the enduring pain caused by systemic racism through the experiences of two primary characters, Elwood Curtis and Turner. This article examines the racial dynamics in *The Nickel Boys*, analysing how both the characters and society react to deeply rooted injustice. Whitehead offers a poignant assessment of the past and on-going racial battles in America by emphasizing survival amidst cruelty.

The Nickel students centre on the institutional racism that permeates the Nickel Academy, a reform school where mostly Black students are sent under the pretence of recovery. Elwood Curtis, an intelligent and idealistic Black adolescent, is unjustly incarcerated at the Nickel Academy after an unpleasant interaction with law enforcement. The institution is divided into two sections, mirroring the segregated society beyond its limitations, white students are afforded greater leniency, superior nourishment, and enhanced rehabilitation

opportunities, whereas Black students endure brutality, excessive labour, and dehumanization. The racial segregation present in the school reflects the broader frameworks of Jim Crow-era America, when Black individuals were systematically deprived of fundamental human rights, and where institutions were established to perpetuate these power disparities. In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead used the Nickel Academy as a microcosm for the broader systems of oppression that characterized the United States at this era, especially in the South. The institution operates as a venue for both physical and emotional torture, as well as a tool for the state to impose racial hierarchies and hinder Black males from attaining upward mobility. Elwood's early belief in the principles of justice and equality, significantly influenced by his reverence for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., is progressively undermined by his experiences at the Nickel Academy. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the institution functions not to rehabilitate but to imbed violence and dehumanization inside black boys. This illustrates the actual shortcomings of several American organizations that assert their commitment to change, but effectively maintain the socioeconomic and racial inequities they apparently strive to eradicate.

The violence at Nickel Academy is racially motivated in both its implementation and its intent. Black boys such as Elwood and Turner often endure physical violence, starvation, and humiliation, whilst white boys are mostly protected from the most severe mistreatment. The violence perpetrated on Black boys functions as a mechanism of social control, aimed at dehumanizing them and perpetuating their servitude inside the institution. Whitehead's portrayal of this violence is both vivid and profoundly emotive, compelling the reader to face the reality of institutionalized brutality. The novel's recurrent allusions to the White House signify both the physical anguish endured by the lads and the emblematic dominance of white supremacy in American culture. The Nickel Academy is more than a mere rehabilitation school; it serves as a testament to the historical subjugation of Black Americans, encapsulating the brutal enforcement of racial hierarchies prevalent in the Jim Crow South. Elwood's encounter with the institution's brutal violence underscores the detrimental impact of institutional racism on Black identity. His early conviction in the efficacy of peaceful resistance is undermined by the extreme brutality of his treatment, leading to a deterioration of his confidence in justice and fairness. Whitehead depicts this loss of innocence as an element of the extensive heritage of racial oppression in America, where the actual experiences of Black Americans often diverge sharply from the principles advocated by the nation's leaders.

Despite the pervasive cruelty of Nickel Academy, *The Nickel Boys* is also a narrative of perseverance. Elwood and Turner, the novel's dual characters, embody two distinct but equally vital forms of resistance against the repressive systems they confront. Elwood's perseverance is founded on his steadfast conviction in justice, equality, and the ethical supremacy of nonviolence. Motivated by the orations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Elwood has the conviction that virtue can triumph even in the bleakest situations. His conviction in humanity's redeeming capacity, despite his own anguish, exemplifies how humans may sustain optimism throughout profound misfortune. Turner, however, exemplifies a more pragmatic manifestation of resilience. Elwood's idealism compels him to attempt reform from inside the system, while Turner's cynicism directs his attention towards survival. He recognizes the system's corruption and permanence, and his objective is not to combat it but to withstand it. Turner's resiliency is founded on his capacity to adapt and manoeuvre through the tumultuous and erratic environment of the Nickel Academy by whatever means required. This pragmatism often conflicts with Elwood, but it remains a legitimate and essential form of resistance against a system intended to undermine him. Whitehead's depiction of these two people underscores the many strategies used by underprivileged persons to traverse systems of oppression. Elwood and Turner are both victims of the same racist system; but, their reactions to that oppression are influenced by their unique interpretations of justice, power, and survival. Whitehead examines the intricacies of resistance against systematic injustice using several methodologies, posing significant inquiries about the essence of resilience during dehumanization.

A primary topic of *The Nickel Boys* is the enduring effect of trauma on people and communities. The book encompasses two timelines, chronicling the experiences of Elwood and Turner in the 1960s, as well as Turner's life as adult decades later. This dual narrative structure underscores how the trauma experienced at Nickel Academy reverberates through the lives of its survivors, influencing their identities and relationships long after their departure from the school. The unmarked graves found at Nickel Academy in the current era symbolize the concealed history of racial violence in America. These graves symbolize not just the boys who perished at the hands of the institution but also the extensive history of racial injustice that has often been overlooked or obliterated from public awareness. Through the excavation of these graves, Whitehead emphasizes the need for historical accountability and the recognition of the damage inflicted by systemic racism. Turner's choice to take Elwood's name posthumously exemplifies the persistent residue of pain. By assuming Elwood's identity, Turner guarantees the perpetuation of his friend's history and the remembrance of the abuses they endured. This commemorative ritual underscores the significance of communal memory in confronting past injustices and critiques a society that often attempts to obscure or neglect its most painful episodes.

*The Nickel Boys* has significant relevance in the contemporary social landscape. The themes of racial injustice, police brutality, and institutional corruption align with current dialogues on the Black Lives Matter movement, the prison-industrial complex, and persistent racial disparities in the United States. Whitehead's portrayal of the Nickel Academy illustrates the overarching structures of racial domination that persist in

American culture, especially with mass imprisonment and the unequal effects of state brutality on Black communities. The story examines perseverance under racial injustice, reflecting the ongoing challenges faced by oppressed communities striving for justice within an oppressive system. The persistence shown by Elwood and Turner is seen in the activity of modern racial justice movements, as people and communities persist in resisting and contesting the power systems that sustain inequity.

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* is a comprehensive examination of the racial injustices that have influenced American culture. Whitehead explores how systemic racism dehumanizes people and creates cycles of violence and oppression via the narratives of Elwood Curtis and Turner. Nonetheless, the tale demonstrates the persistence of the human soul notwithstanding such savagery. Elwood's steadfast conviction in justice and Turner's pragmatic approach to survival exemplify significant kinds of resistance, providing insights into individual navigation within oppressive institutions. The enduring reverberations of injustice and pain are crucial to the narrative, underscoring that the legacies of racial brutality are not simply forgotten or obliterated. Whitehead emphasizes the persistent effects of institutionalized racism, compelling us to face the distressing truths of America's history and current state, and asking us to recognize, oppose, and address the injustices that continue to influence our society today.

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