

Towards a Struggle for Freedom: Studying the Significance of Protagonist's Sufferings and Violence in Colson Whitehead's Novel the Nickel Boys

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Abstract

This research explores Elwood, the main character in *The Nickel Boys* by Whitehead, suffers captivity at the rehabilitation center known as Nickel School. This constellation of novels serves as the basis for *The Nickel Boys'* established narrative structure, which is strongly narrated as a journey from physical prison to freedom. It constructs the experience, like most prison stories, as an opposition between the outside and the inside, passing over the ethical and moral dilemmas between freedom and prison. This research observes that the narrative development and identify the incidents in the text. Even it explores the struggles of slavery. Examining how a painful violence history works its way into the present. Colson Whitehead confesses an important connection between laws and reality, revealing that sufferings often point to official condemnations of discrimination to avoid taking responsibility for their prejudiced ways. Whitehead follows the significance of black people's survival through the slavery system and the role slave-trading has in degrading their survival in consistent ways. Therefore, history becomes a representation of *The Nickel Boys'* process of healing from a group trauma particularly in the Prologue, but mentioned again in the adult Elwood chapters. In this sense, the thesis proves the presence of the landform, essential to prison narrative, of writing to reveal the conditions of captivity. The text highlights how the unmarked graves constitute the tip of the iceberg of the violence inflicted at Nickel for decades. The use of narrative as an ideological instrument is intended to restore to society what has been forgotten.

Keywords: rehabilitation, dilemmas, constellation, violence, captivity, ideology.

Introduction:

Colson Whitehead's novel, *The Nickel Boys* to the tradition of prison experiences highlights the regular cycle of isolation and the need for freedom. More specifically, the slave narratives and Christian religious narratives (saints' lives) have a parallel inheritance in the African American prison narrative, both of which frequently repeat the progression from slavery to freedom as redemption. *The Nickel Boys* has a very rich textual depiction of this area. The positive difference becomes enlightenment, recognition of the brutal truth about the violence enacted against the boys at Nickel Academy. Elwood's journey into, through, and out of Nickel Academy can be compared to the "hero's journey," a common theme in ancient mythology. The phrase "hero's journey" was coined by Joseph Campbell, a scholar who studied mythology. In a discussion between

Campbell and Bill Moyers, transcribed in one of Campbell's books *The Power of Myth*, Moyers keeps asking why the hero's journey is so prevalent in mythology, to which Campbell responds,

"Because that's what's worth writing about. Even in popular novels, the main character is a hero or heroine who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself" (*Power of Myth* 151).

Significance of Protagonist's Sufferings and Violence towards for Freedom:

In this research the significance of protagonist who is Elwood, first arrives at Nickel, he notes the students' seeming freedom of movement while pointing to the disciplinary monitoring system:

Gangs of students walked the trails and roads to their work assignments while supervisors in their state cars crisscrossed the property, watching. Elwood stood in wonder at the sight of a black boy, thirteen or fourteen years old, driving an old tractor that pulled a wooden trailer full of students. The driver looked sleepy and serene in his big seat, taking his charges to the farm. (60)

Later on in the novel, when Elwood and Turner join the Community Service group and get to escape the Nickel grounds during the day, this is repeated (86, 94). The description of the forced work that Nickel prisoners were required to perform in this line serves to contradict the advantages of living in the "free world." The lateral references to chain gang slave labor suggest that the type of imprisonment experienced by African Americans throughout history does not always involve containment in an enclosed space but instead heavily relies on other violence strategies, making it practically identical to slavery as such: "Work like a slave, live in their basement or whatever. Beat you, kick you, feed you shit" (91). Further evidence that exposure to other people's observations is a significant part of punishment at Nickel comes from where officer Blakeley informs Elwood and the other boys: "Don't think I won't be watching you" (52). However, one's peers might also be a source of observation in response to the guards. Elwood has the feeling that he is being watched when he enters the hostel for the first time. No one had paid Elwood any attention on the walk over, but in here each boy took his measure, some of them conferring quietly with their buddies as Blakeley took him down the rows and others filing away their appraisals for later. One boy looked like a thirty-year-old man, but Elwood knew that was impossible since they let you out when you turned eighteen. Some of the boys carried themselves rough, like the white boys in the car from Tampa, but he was relieved that a lot of them looked like regular guys from his neighborhood, just sadder. If they were regular, he'd make it through. (51)

Only by covering his head with a pillow so that people won't see him cry would Elwood be able to establish some intimacy with those around him. However, there are numerous ways

in which the rhetorical structure of the text is influenced by the idea that the narrative is being used as a tool to expose abuse, torture, and death. The Prologue, which describes how a group of archaeology students found numerous unmarked tombs adjacent to the recently shuttered Nickel Academy, foreshadows this in the beginning. It is important to note that the topos of the unburied unmarked tombs represent both the actual and spiritual recovery of the past: "No white crosses, no names. Just bones waiting for someone to find them" (3). The conflict between the present and past, recollection and forgetting, and known and unknown is specifically created by the requirement for an agent willing to undertake the work of "finding" them. Except for those who were involved, everything about Nickel was kept secret until "someone" from outside the area managed to make it known to the public attention:

All the boys knew about that rotten spot. It took a student from the University of South Florida to bring it to the rest of the world, decades after the first boy was tied up in a potato sack and dumped there. When asked how she spotted the graves, Jody said, the dirt looked wrong. The sunken earth, the scrabbly weeds. Jody and the rest of the archaeology students from the university had been excavating the school's official cemetery for months. (1)

The text's conflict between what is known to them and what is unknown to society at large helps to reveal the identity of a group known as "The Nickel Boys": "Plenty of boys had talked if the secret graveyard before, but as it had ever been with Nickel, no one believed them until someone else said it" (3). The extent to which reality is shared with others determines how real it is: "Reassembling those fragments into confirmation of a shared darkness: If it is true for you, it is true for someone else, and you are no longer alone" (4).

The Nickel Boys follows a narrative pattern that is defined by the sequence of confinement-redemption, as is common in the prison story style. This constellation of literary forms serves as the foundation for *The Nickel Boys'* established narrative structure, which is strongly shaped by a movement from physical imprisonment to freedom. The narrative structure

of *The Nickel Boys* could be stated as follows, paying attention to both narrative progression and the recognition of literary fundamental events: In *The Nickel Boys*, knowledge and forgiveness work in a variety of intricate ways that are parallel. The unmarked graves at Nickel are found, and the novel starts in the narrative present.

In *The Nickel Boys*, revelation and redemption work in a variety of intricate ways that are parallel. With the discovery of the unmarked graves at Nickel, the narrative starts in the novel's present. Elwood Curtis is initially introduced before the action jumps back to 1962 via analepsis. As the narrative advances toward the first kernel event, Elwood's arrest while traveling in a stolen vehicle with another black man, his early years are fragmentarily recreated through more analepses in the first portion of the novel. Nikki Giovanni's poem, *One More Boxer* is one of the poem collections from *Blues: For All the Changes* (1999), In her poem about *The Nickel Boys*; the narrator considers himself or herself as *One More Boxcar* resolutely inching along to Freedom. Individual runaways become their own vehicles of emigration, and *The Nickel Boys* becomes into a person. Every runaway develops into a boxcar, and when they all move in concert, they create an infinite train of people fleeing for freedom. According to Darcy Zabel, the poem suggests that the real (*Underground Railroad in African American Literature*, *The Nickel Boys* "was composed of the individuals who never actually boarded a train, received no help, and made the journey, inch by inch." Giovanni is suggesting that "History and heroism ... is written not in milestones but in inches" and that "The slow, individual creep toward freedom becomes a massive force to be remembered when all the inches are measured up in miles" (Zabel, 2004). The narrative starts with the strange voyage to the Academy and notoriously avoids detailing the legal process that results in his transfer to Nickel. The narrator then shifts back to the story, introducing an adult Elwood who owns a moving business and lives in New York.

As events lead to Elwood and Turner's escape plan, details set in the present and the past (at Nickel) alternate moving forward from this point on. The story closes with them escaping

from the firing guards after they escaped from Nickel. Only in the epilogue, where we find the adult protagonist planning a flight to Tallahassee, does the story finally directly relate to its beginning. The previous sequence of story forms in the past and present have directed people who read' expectations in the direction of a point where the two narrative paths would combine, indicating that the past and present Elwood will represent the same believable person, whose biographical path is the main subject of the novel.

This assumption contradicts that Elwood "stumbled forward two steps and fell into the grass" while "Turner kept running" (199). It is never expressly stated that Turner or Elwood passed away. Only the epilogue confirms this: "Elwood's death made the papers" (200). The reason Turner used his dead friend's identity is subsequently given: "When the owner of the diner asked him his name, two weeks out of Nickel, he said, 'Elwood Curtis'. The first thing that popped into his head. It felt right. He used the name from then on when anybody asked, to honor his friend" (200). Later, he appropriates Elwood's legal identity by obtaining his birth certificate and then asking for a Social Security card in his name (201).

In Elwood's case, he is forced to escape or die. Although Harper shoots Elwood during his escape attempt and he does die, Turner is able to escape, and Turner's escape would not have been possible without Elwood's life being threatened, which forced him to plan the escape. Elwood's "death and rebirth" occurs when he is killed and Turner adopts Elwood's name as a way of honoring him. Throughout Turner's adult life, he does not talk about his experiences at Nickel Academy. Turner's refusal to revisit the trauma that he and Elwood went through together can be thought of as "the refusal of the return," which Campbell says often happens in the hero's journey before the "return with the elixir" (*Thousand Faces* 193). Elwood's "resurrection" occurs years later when archaeology students from the University of South Florida excavate the secret graveyard where Elwood was buried.

This plot twist may be analyzed in terms of James Phelan's theorization of the "surprise ending". Unlike the progressive revelation of the

character's true identity, as would be the case of John Harmon in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, the unveiling of adult Elwood's identity amounts to a sudden plot twist that modifies readers' judgments of the plot and characters. To start, Elwood/Turner is presented for the first time with these words: "In New York City there lived a Nickel Boy who went by the name of Elwood Curtis" (5; emphasis added). The literal meaning of this term already points to the appropriation of Elwood's identity, which will be disclosed at the end of the story and the epilogue, despite the usual figurative sense that readers automatically think that it was his actual name. When Elwood/Turner is said to be forced to a secret existence, constantly terrified of being discovered and finding out, it is indicated at once more that he has been living under a false identity:

Some boys escaped into silent futures under different names in different places, living in a shadow. Dreading for the rest of their lives the day Nickel caught up with them. Most often runners were captured, taken for a tour of the Ice Cream Factory, and then ushered into a dark cell for a couple of weeks of an attitude adjustment. It was crazy to run and crazy not to run. (144)

Readers may elaborately rework the passage that describes Elwood and Turner's uncomfortable encounter with Chickie Pete, another Nickel boy. What seems to be Elwood's mysterious hesitation to respond to Chickie Pete's inquiry "what happened to that kid you used to hang around with all the time?" (164). is given a deeper significance in light of the unexpected conclusion. Next, discuss the text's ethical context and how the surprise conclusion works within it. In this approach, Turner is portrayed through his "strategies and hard-won dodges and a knack for keeping out of scrapes" (292) whereas Turner is portrayed through "his fine moral imperatives and his very fine ideas about the capacity of human beings to improve" (206). Turner comes out as doubtful, in contrast to Elwood's idealistic portrayal.

The encounter with the unexpected in and of itself, as well as the sudden inversion in the attribution of the thematic functions to characters, which may be felt to betray the validity of character construction, both contribute

to the ethical readjustment that occurs through the novel's surprise ending. While each character adopts the convictions of the other before the escape is started, I would argue that this ethical dimension of the surprise ending, which is based on the characterization method, is indirectly recognized and defined in ethical terms. Elwood engages in the kind of daydream and inquiry that frequently leads to an experience of inner freedom in previous prison narratives when he is sent into solitary confinement and sent "to the dark cell" after attempting to expose Nickel to the authorities during a state inspection. These typically occur when prisoners learn a crucial component of their nature that cannot be reduced to physical imprisonment, reflecting the revelation of divine grace in saints' lives. This finding affects the character's identity change.

This idea is a part of Elwood's understanding, but it also violates it. Elwood, who is confined to his cell, can hear his friends talking on the floor below him. "A jail within a jail" (193) is the next line in the passage, which may be a reference to the position the dark cell occupies within the Nickel Academy. However, a longer reflection on Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from Birmingham jail and his appeal to love come before his conclusion that the gloomy cell represents "A jail within a jail" (193): "Throw us in jail and we will still love you . . ." (ibid). As the words resonate on Elwood's head, he comes to the realization that he could not make that leap to love" (194), and that they contradict the rules "the world had whispered" to him his entire life. Campbell's description of the hero accurately describes Elwood. We learn in the first chapter of *The Nickel Boys* that Elwood spends a lot of time listening to Martin Luther King's Zion Hill speech, "even if the ideas it put in his head were his undoing" (Whitehead 11). In that sentence, Whitehead acknowledges that Elwood, like Campbell's hero archetype, dedicated his life to something greater than himself. According to Campbell, the typical hero's journey begins with someone who has suffered a loss at the hands of another, or who feels that something is missing from other members of his or her society (Power of Myth 151). Something is taken away from Elwood, and it is the same right that Black people in the

United States have been denied throughout history for freedom.

These instead suggest that not to love, trust, or speak out because one is always alone when facing abuse. Elwood's conclusion, predicted by Turner, is that Nickel is a jail within the larger national jail of racism rather than about a deep inner freedom that cannot be taken from him: "there were hundreds, hundreds of Nickels and White Houses scattered across the land like pain factories" (173). He realizes this while he waits for his punishment:

There was nothing they could do to him that white people hadn't done to black people before; we're not doing at this moment somewhere in Montgomery and Baton Rouge, in broad daylight on a city street outside Woolworths. Or some anonymous country road with no one to tell the tale. (178)

The ethical development of the story and the identification of ideological roles to Elwood and Turner. According to my thesis, turn at this point. In the sense that he now adopts the suspicion and stoic defeatism that had marked Turner's perspective on racism, Elwood has essentially become Turner at this point: "Those ready to commit their weight to the great lever and move the world. They never appeared" (194).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this analysis refers to the challenging and critical conditions that protagonists must deal with in their life for their freedom. They think reasonably to let the sequences pass. They usually avoid expressing

their emotions in every situation. They obscure analyzes the full situation and balances the consequences to deal with the complicated circumstance are going through by them while they escaping. They have internal conflict when they must confront their desire to escape and fear of being discovered. They learned and work hard as a result of those conflicts in their life for freedom and live a peaceful life. This research proves that Whitehead's novel, *The Nickel Boys* are in a critical situation and both of them work hard to attain their freedom in every aspect of their life. Constantly, *The Nickel Boys* also escaped from the jail of nickel academy. Turner always reminds Elwood in his speech wherever he goes and he tells Elwood's past life and their relationships. Both of them always become optimistic thoughts to live a great life. This is the impact of the significance of freedom and individuality in the life of the Whitehead's novel.

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