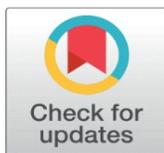
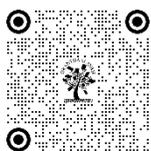


PERSECUTION IN FLORIDA: A MEMORY AND TRAUMA READING OF COLSON WHITEHEAD'S THE NICKEL BOYS

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.4204](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.4204)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

The abolition of slavery didn't put an end to the problems of African Americans. They were reduced to people with no means of living. They couldn't find a sure footing in such a vast country. They were dragged into debt labour through various laws. Jim Crow being the popular that Nazis modeled their Anti Jew laws based on this. The Nickel Boys is a coming-of-age tale set in the Jim Crow era Florida that tells the story of Elwood who was caught in the web of oppressive law and suffered infinitely. A tale with pain, torture, agony and hope through justice in the end.

Keywords: Jim Crow Law, Persecution, Memory, Trauma and Justice

1. INTRODUCTION

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* won him his second Pulitzer Prize in a row. Whitehead wrote his novel inspired by true events that came to light in 2014. Post the abolition of slavery black people faced different kinds of seclusion, segregation and persecution. This novel is set in 1960's Florida, a hundred years after the abolition of slavery and black people are still suffering in infinite number of ways.

Elwood Curtis, the teenager protagonist is living with his strict grandmother Harriet, who has seen her share of tragedy happen in the name of Jim Crow Law:

Her father died in jail after a white lady downtown accused him of not getting out of her way on the sidewalk. Bumptious contact, as Jim Crow defined it. That's how it went in the old days. He was waiting for his appointment with the judge when they found him hung in his cell. No one believed the police's story. (Whitehead 68)

It's a law that ensured that blacks remained powerless except they were free as per the abolition of slavery act, "Jim Crow law, in U.S. history, any of the laws that enforced [racial segregation](#) in the South between the end of [Reconstruction](#)

in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s." The severity of Jim Crow Law was such that, "The segregation principle was extended to parks, cemeteries, theatres, and restaurants in an effort to prevent any contact between Blacks and whites as equals." The damage the laws did to the black people was infinite. Dr. King's Civil Rights Movement played a major role in the abolition of such acts.

Elwood is coming of age when the Civil Rights Movement was picking up the wind. Elwood's parents abandoned him to Grandmother Harriet's care when he was just six. Harriet is very particular about keeping Elwood out of trouble and to make him somebody in the world. "Elwood saw it all: Africans persecuted by the white sin of slavery, Negroes humiliated and kept low by segregation, and that luminous image to come, when all those places closed to his race were opened." (10)

Martin Luther King's speeches inspired him, "Elwood received the best gift of his life on Christmas Day 1962, even if the ideas it put in his head were his undoing. *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* was the only album he owned and it never left the turntable." (10) When boys of Elwood's age were becoming rowdy elements in the streets, Elwood learned, listened and read to improve himself. He was aware of everything going on for the rights of black people. He lived a principled life at such a young age.

As he has become a true adherent of everything Dr. King writes and preaches, he cannot look the other way when something wrong happens, "The boy was intelligent and hardworking and a credit to his race. But Elwood could be thick-witted when it came to the simplest things. He didn't know when to stand back and let things be. Like the business with the black eye." (22) He gets beaten by the neighborhood boys for blowing the whistle on them while stealing in the store where he worked part-time. All his reading has made him idealistic and intelligent but not shrewd or street-smart.

His teacher helps him to get a scholarship at Melvin Griggs Technical, a college for the advancement of black people. While on his way to the college on the first day-as fate would have it- unwittingly he hitchhiked in a stolen car and the law punishes him to Nickel for being an accomplice in theft. He was merely a wrong man at the wrong place at the wrong time, he "had never permitted himself the kind of misbehavior that landed others in trouble. He consoled himself with the notion that he just had to keep doing what he'd always done: act right." (48) His spirit and motivated self was ready to endure it.

At Nickel, a reformatory school in Florida, Elwood was glad at first for it was not a prison but only a school. He imagined that he could use his time to better himself. Not long before he realized that school provided outdated education and the system didn't really care about the black boys there. His upright personality makes him to intercept a fisticuff. His attempt to stop the fight was understood as involvement in the fight and they take him to the White House. A euphemistic name for the place where they take both black and white boys for corporal punishment, "No one had asked Elwood for his side of the story, that he was trying to break up the fight in the bathroom – but maybe he'd get less for stepping in." (66)

Punishment with hands tied to a bed and leather strap beatings that would scrape the skin of one's behind. A memory and scar that would remain for the life and keep the boy in his place for the rest of his stay at Nickel:

The leather slapped across the ceiling before it came down on your legs, to tell you it was about to come down, and the bunk springs made noise with each blow. Elwood held on to the top of the bed and bit into the pillow but he passed out before they were done, so when people asked later how many licks he got, he didn't know. (67)

During his stay at the hospital to treat the injury that the leather strap beatings caused he befriends Turner. A street-smart black teenager. He is everything opposite of Elwood. He is there for the second time and knows his way around Nickel. He recommends Elwood to Harper for an extra helping hand during the chores to be done in the city for the Nickel official's home.

This trips to town to serve the white people with lot of unpaid work helps Elwood to see the dark belly workings of Nickel. How they swindle food meant for black people and how they are stealing the future of people who are already left without family and society. His inherent goodness and positive outlook of life makes him to write a letter to the visiting authorities. He hoped that it would set right things. Only he didn't realize that the share of the graft goes all the way to the top.

The authorities at Nickel decide to do away with Elwood as they have done away with so many students in the past, "Sometimes they take you to the White House and we never see your ass again." (78) They would make the person disappear and let his relatives-if there is any- know that he ran away and couldn't be found. Turner gets the wind of it and helps Elwood to escape.

The narration of *The Nickel Boys* travels back and forth in a non-linear way and reveals the reader only a part of it at a time. Piece by piece the narrative puts the incidents together and draws a larger picture of the things happened in 1960's Florida.

During his stay at Nickel Elwood sincerely believed that he would be able to get out of it without any harm:

I'm stuck here, but I'll make it brief. Everybody back home knew him as even, dependable – Nickel would soon understand that about him, too. At dinner, he'd ask Desmond how many points he needed to move out of Grub, how long it took most people to advance and graduate. Then he'd do it twice as fast. This was his resistance. (62)

In their escape attempt Elwood loses his life to a shot gun wound. Turner survives and calls himself Elwood for the rest of his life. He lives to honour the memory of his friend. He reveals his true identity only at the end of the novel and arrives at Tallahassee, Florida to tell the entire story to the world:

He'll find Elwood's grave and tell his friend of his life after he was cut down in the pasture. How that moment grew in Turner and changed his life's course. Tell the sheriff who he was, share Elwood's story and what they did to him when he tried to put a stop to their crimes. (207)

Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* came right after the great success of *The Underground Railroad*. In a way it's a companion novel to its predecessor. It magnifies the trauma experience of *The Underground Railroad* and cries out loud to listen to the forgotten stories of the people who faced injustice for all of their days on earth.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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