

Article

Wounded Words: Interpreting Trauma in the Narrative of Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

Andrew Ginmuanlian

M.A. English, Sharda School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India;
2023536880.andrew@pg.sharda.ac.in

Dr Ritu Singh

Associate Professor of English, Sharda School of Humanities & Social Sciences
Sharda University, Greater Noida, India;
ritu.singh2@sharda.ac.in

Accepted version published on 5th August 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16752517>

Abstract: This paper highlights how Colson Whitehead portrays trauma in *The Nickel Boys*, revealing the psychological and emotional scars inflicted on individuals by systemic racism and institutional violence. The novel is set against the backdrop of Nickel Academy, a fictional reform school inspired by the real-life events of Dozier School for Boys. It reflects the brutal realities faced by black boys in mid-20th-century Florida, where racial discrimination sanctioned extreme abuse, neglect, and the stripping away of human dignity. Using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which explains that trauma is often felt long after the event and is hard to understand or accept fully, this paper looks at how *The Nickel Boys* shows trauma as broken and delayed in its effects. Caruth says trauma is not fully experienced right away but comes back through flashbacks and confusion. Through a close reading of the novel, the paper explores the representation of trauma, racial discrimination and institutional violence, showing how these forces shape the characters' lives and identities. The study attempts to advance knowledge of how literature can represent and process racial injustice and historical trauma by closely examining the book *The Nickel Boys*. It also highlights the role of fiction as a powerful tool for raising awareness, fostering empathy, and promoting social healing.

Keywords: Trauma; Systemic Racism; Institutional Violence; Narrative Techniques; Historical Trauma

Introduction

The idea of trauma is often linked to pain that goes beyond what the eyes can see. Most people understand trauma as a result of the subject of physical abuse. However, it can live deep in the minds of individuals, affecting their memory, emotions, behaviour, and perceptions about the world. The word “trauma” is derived from the Greek word meaning “wound.” Over time, the word has gained a broader spectrum. It is not confined to the sufferings of physical pain or abuse, but it also includes the emotional scars left behind by experiences like violence, loss, injustice, grief, fear, etc. In Literature, trauma is not just something that happens to the characters; it also shapes how the stories are told. Through the journey of characters, readers can understand their emotional struggles and feelings over time, and gain insight into the confusion and pain that trauma causes in real life.

Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Nickel Boys* is an example of the depiction of psychological and emotional trauma through literature. Set against the backdrop of 1960s Florida during the Jim Crow Era, the fictional novel *The Nickel Boys* portrays the real-life Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida. The novel focuses on the lives of two protagonists, namely, Elwood Curtis and Turner, black boys sent to Nickel Academy, a reform school for juveniles, for their rehabilitation. The treatment meted out to the coloured boys is very different from its purpose. The black boys became the subject of racial discrimination, abuse, and segregation that defiled their fundamental human rights. Whitehead based Nickel Academy on the real-life Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida – a state-run institution that operated from 1900 to 2011.

Whitehead’s novel, *The Nickel Boys*, despite being a fictional novel, exposes the erased violence of history that had been in the shadow of negligence for far too long by giving voice to those who were silenced, especially the victims of the real Dozier School. His storytelling captures the long-lasting effect of trauma. Elwood, who believed in Justice and the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., represents hope and idealism. Turner, on the other hand, trusts no one and sees the world through a much darker and more realistic lens. Both are shaped by what they suffer, regardless of the way they perceive things differently, together they show how trauma creates lasting wounds – both personal and collective.

Whitehead does not just tell a story; he uses a specific narrative technique that reflects how trauma is experienced, making it realistic for readers to understand and interpret the sufferings of the boys at the Nickel Academy. Renowned trauma theorist E. Ann Kaplan explains that stories about trauma frequently use time jumps, repeated scenes, and gaps to show how confused and broken the mind can feel, resulting in trauma (Kaplan 41). *The Nickel Boys* employs time shifts and flashbacks to show how deeply the past still haunts the present. The structure of the novel itself becomes a tool to express pain that words alone cannot explain. Several studies have converged on the idea that literature is a powerful tool to convey the emotional and psychological effects of trauma experiences (Caruth 4; Whitehead xii). Colson Whitehead uses specific writing techniques to show how trauma affects people’s minds and the minds of

communities. It will start by talking about what psychological trauma is and how it is dealt with in stories.

The Biographical History of Nickel Academy

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* is based on the true story of the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, a reform school in Marianna, Florida, that operated from 1900 to 2011. It was meant to help troubled boys, but it became known for terrible acts of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Many survivors from the Nickel Academy spoke of violent punishments, neglect, forced labour, and racism, which were primarily targeted towards Black boys, who were often treated far more brutally than their white peers. One of the most feared places in school was the "White House," a small building where students were beaten severely. "In 2013, researchers used ground-penetrating radar to uncover over 50 unmarked graves on the school's property, exposing a long-hidden history of mistreatment and unexplained deaths (Kimmerle et al. 162.e1-5). This shocking discovery led to investigations into the school's dark past. Whitehead uses his novel to reveal the trauma and injustice that many children, particularly black boys, experienced. Whitehead uses these events as a direct source for the fictional Nickel Academy. When Elwood hears the scream coming from the White House and realises, "Even out of sight, the white building promised vicious pain" (Whitehead 61). Whitehead demonstrates how systemic racism and abuse can cause severe, long-lasting scars on people and communities by connecting his story to reality, basing it on the Dozier School.

Psychological Trauma in *The Nickel Boys*

Psychological trauma happens when a person experiences something very distressful, painful, shocking, or scary – something that feels too heavy or too sudden to understand fully. This could be an accident, loss of life, abuse, violence, or even the impact of war itself. Trauma can affect how a person thinks, feels, and remembers things. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" that the mind cannot fully process at the time it happens (Caruth 11). Judith Herman, another expert, says that trauma can make people feel helpless, disconnected, and unable to explain what happened to them (Herman 33). This is why in many books and stories that deal with trauma, the story is not told or narrated in a linear narrative but with broken timelines, flashbacks, repeated scenes, or missing parts to show us how the character is struggling with their memory that is too painful even to recall. This technique helps the reader feel the emotional impact of trauma.

In Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, he uses this technique to show how the main characters, Elwood and Turner, are hurt by the abuse and violence at Nickel Academy. The story jumps between the past and the present, and we do not fully learn the truth about Elwood until the end of the book, which shows how trauma can stay hidden for a long time (Whitehead 197). Some scenes are told in short, quiet ways, and sometimes painful events are not described in full detail, yet as a reader, we can understand the silence and gaps that fill the void upon reading the text. This reflects how people who are traumatised may go silent, concealing the pain from themselves.

For example, Elwood holds on to the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr., but his belief in justice is slowly broken down by the cruelty he faces. Turner, a completely different boy who views the world differently from Elwood, does not trust anyone. This depicts that trauma can also change how someone sees the world. Through these two characters, Whitehead shows how trauma can leave deep emotional scars that affect a person for life.

Narrative Technique used in the novel *The Nickel Boys*

Whitehead tells the story of *The Nickel Boys* using powerful and emotional storytelling. He does not follow a straight timeline; instead, he uses a non-linear structure, which shifts between the past and the present. This shows how trauma from the Nickel Academy stays with the boys even after they leave. Trauma theorist E. Ann Kaplan says that stories about trauma often use broken timelines and silence to show how hard it is to deal with painful memories (Kaplan 41). Whitehead shows in the book that Elwood, the main character, was later buried in a field under a different name. This shows how trauma and injustice took away his identity. "They did not even know who he was." *The Nickel Boys* were that thorough (Whitehead 196).

Whitehead also shows two ways to deal with trauma through the characters Elwood and Turner. Elwood believes in justice and change, thanks to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Turner, on the other hand, is more cynical and thinks that looking out for oneself is the best way to stay alive. Their friendship shows that trauma can bring people together even when they do not talk. As the narrator says, "Even in their silence, there was understanding" (Whitehead 143). Whitehead's writing often keeps the whole truth hidden until the end. The twist about Elwood's fate does not happen until the last chapters, much like how survivors experiencing trauma are often hidden and then slowly exposed. The novel's structure, which includes flashbacks, silence, and truths that come out slowly, shows how trauma stays with you in your memory.

Bearing Witness through Fiction: The Power of Storytelling

Fiction can be used as a powerful tool to tell stories of individuals who have been silenced, hidden, or ignored. Oftentimes, writers use this technique to voice out the suppressed history of the past inflicted upon individuals who have been victims of abuse or mistreatment through their works. In Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead uses storytelling to give voice to the boys who suffered abuse and injustice in the fictional Nickel Academy, based on the real Dozier School in Florida. From the very beginning, the novel shows that even in death, these boys were not allowed peace: "Even in death the boys were trouble" (Whitehead 3). This line reveals how the boys' suffering was not only physical but also deeply emotional and long-lasting. Through the novel, Whitehead remembers these forgotten victims and gives them a presence in history.

Whitehead's fictions are more than just entertainment; they are a way to remember and tell the truth. Dori Laub, a scholar, says that literature can be a kind of testimony, especially when historical trauma has been ignored or erased. He says, "Testimony is a narrative that keeps the truth alive" (Laub 70). This suggests that even

when official records fail or history tries to forget, personal stories explained through literature and memory help make sure that the truth stays alive. In the same way, Whitehead's novel becomes a testimony for the boys who lived and died in such situations. Through characters like Elwood and Turner, the novel shows two different ways of dealing with pain: Elwood believes in Justice and change, inspired by Martin Luther King Jr., while Turner sees the world as unfair and chooses survival. When Turner says, "You cannot get what you want by doing everything they tell you" (Whitehead 129), this illustrates how the system eroded the boys' belief in fairness. According to Kali Tal, a scholar known for her work on trauma literature, literature written by trauma survivors serves as a powerful form of testimony, giving voice to experiences that are often silenced or ignored (Tal 7). She also explains that when people read about suffering in stories, they begin to understand it in a personal way (Tal 15). Colson Whitehead applies this technique in his novel, *The Nickel Boys*. It does not just talk about facts – it makes the reader understand the emotions of the characters, such as fear, confusion, and helplessness of the boys. The story helps us understand what they went through and what we must not forget. By blending real history with fictional characters that undergo trauma and painful memories of the past from a real event, Whitehead made sure that the Trauma of the past is not erased based on his work. He uses fiction as a witness to injustice and a call for justice today.

Conclusion

In the novel *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead recreates the horror of racial abuse and violence. Through the characters of Elwood and Turner, he explores the lives of victims and their different mechanisms of dealing with trauma. Where Elwood upholds the ideals of justice and change, believing that proper actions will lead to better outcomes, Turner is sceptical, doubtful, and pessimistic about their state of lives. He believes that the system has failed them and has no hope for a better tomorrow. These two contrasting views of the characters reflect on the working of young brains and how they develop their perspectives, adapt themselves, and respond differently to the same environment, the same gruelling and vicious circumstances.

Their difference highlights how everyone in the same way does not process trauma. Through these characters, the novel explores how injustice and abuse (in any and every form) damage a person not just in bodily but also psychologically, emotionally, and behaviorally. The abuse and violence inflicted at an impressionable age leave the individuals vulnerable and leave indelible scars on them for life.

Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys* depicts that trauma does not just hurt the body; it also affects the way people think, remember, and see the world. One of the most potent things Whitehead does is how he structures the story to show the readers how trauma works. Applying non-linear techniques by jumping between the past and present, keeping important truths and details hidden until the end, leaving gaps, and using silence in his storytelling, he captures the way memory works for people who have undergone pain in this same condition. This highlights what Trauma Theorist like Cathy Caruth and E. Ann Kaplan describes- how trauma lingers beneath the surface, quietly shaping behaviour and memory over time.

The suffering of these characters testifies to the cruelty and abuse faced by individuals and entire communities. Fictional setup, in reality, speaks up for the victims and questions the victimisers of that time and the mistreatment. The narrative serves as a reminder that the past continues to influence the present, particularly regarding racial injustice and the silence around institutional abuse. The abuse at the Dozier School for Boys inspired the fictional Nickel Academy, and also through Elwood and Turner's experiences, Whitehead's novel becomes the voice of the silenced boys who were never heard. The story also becomes a way of remembering them, making sure that their suffering is not lost or swept away over time. It encourages readers to care about the actual people and events that served as the novel's inspiration, alongside the fictional characters. *The Nickel Boys* shows that storytelling is about more than just recalling the past; it is also about understanding its impact and fostering empathy and present-day awareness.

In conclusion, *The Nickel Boys* shows how fiction can speak for those who were hurt and forgotten. By telling the story of boys, primarily through the lens of Elwood and Turner, who suffered at Nickel Academy, my research highlights how literature helps us understand and face historical trauma and racial injustice. By reading *The Nickel Boys*, we see how stories can show the deep pain caused by racism and abuse. *The Nickel Boys* helps us see how storytelling can reveal the deep pain caused by racism and cruelty. Through this novel, we understand how fiction can do more than just tell a story—it allows us to feel the suffering of others and recognise the injustices they faced. Books like this remind us of people who were once forgotten and bring their stories back to life. This study shows that literature can break the silence around painful history, help us remember what happened, and encourage us to build a fairer and better world.

Author Contributions: All authors contributed equally to this work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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