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# The Dehumanizing Impact of Racism and Exploring Systemic Injustice in Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys

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## Abstract

*The depressing effects of racism and systematic injustice in Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys are investigated in this research. It looks at how racism still shapes social structures and maintains discrimination from its roots in historical preconceptions and colonial persecution. Particularly of Black people, the research emphasises how racial dominance results in exclusion, harassment, and institutionalised abuse. Examining the way the book portrays racial violence and systematic inequity helps one to highlight the continuous fight for racial justice in American culture. In the end, the report contends that racism is still strongly rooted even with legal advancement, so constant attempts for social change and equality are very necessary.*

Racism is a belief, attitude, or behaviour directed against groups or people unjustly based on their race or ethnicity. This view stems from the idea that certain racial or ethnic groups are better than others, which could cause systematic discrimination, prejudice, and unfair treatment. Personal acts of bias, society or institutional inequalities, and cultural biases are just a few of the many ways racism could manifest itself. Racism has been used historically to justify destructive policies like genocide, segregation, colonialism, and slavery. Many countries all over today still show clear effects of it. During the colonial period, the concept of racism first surfaced as colonists sought greater control over their acquired lands. Racial prejudice is an unfavourable attitude towards people or groups based only on race, religion, profession, gender, or socioeconomic level. The intricate and multifarious issue of racism is the belief that one's own racial or ethnic group is better than others, which fuels prejudice, discrimination, and injustice.

Racism is the unjust treatment of people depending on their race within a society under influence of skin colour and outer appearance. Black people are mistreated by supremacists, who also exclude them, harass them, degrade them, Many white people see Black people as subordinates and believe they are essentially better than them. Though slavery has been officially outlawed, white people still abuse Black

people. Black people keep on their struggle for equal rights and improved treatment in American civilisation. Though the United States might be regarded as a great country, its handling of Black people still falls short. The Black Lives Matter demonstrations and the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century highlight the continued and extreme realities of racism in American culture.

Racism is a major motif in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* that shapes the plot as well as the life of the characters. Set in the 1960s, the book chronicles the journey two African American youths, Elwood Curtis and Turner, are sent to a Florida reform school called Nickel Academy. Both go through the terrible, racially discriminating processes at the facility despite their different personalities and viewpoints on life. Emphasising the perspectives of the main protagonists, Elwood and Turner, Colson Whitehead explores both personal and institutional racist actions taking place at Nickel Academy. The story shows how the brutal reality of racism clear-cut in society is reflected in both institutional and personal racism, including how the heroes face these racist occurrences. This chapter will examine the many forms of racism that *The Nickel Boys* presents as well as the difficulties the main characters run over when they come across.

Within Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, the examination of personal racism is deftly weaved into the life of the two main protagonists, Turner and Elwood Curtis. Set in the American South during the 1960s, this book not only explores the terrible reality of systematic racism but also closely looks at how individual acts of prejudice and discrimination affect the daily life of its protagonists. Emphasising the negative long-term effects of such personal racism, the relationships among the boys, the instructors and staff of Nickel Academy, and the larger society that they deal with expose how racism is expressed via human choices, attitudes, and behaviours. Among the staff members and instructors at Nickel Academy, who are supposed to be guiding the boys towards recovery but instead act as enforcers of systematic violence and humiliation, there is clear personal racism. Among them, people like the strict administrator, Dr. James, and the instructors who ignore the suffering of the pupils show the everyday manifestations of racism that affect the lads in the rehabilitation facility. For Elwood, his efforts to live up to a civil rights hero run into constant criticism. Particularly, Dr. James shows how individual racism in institutions could be more harmful than more obvious types of racial prejudice. Though the school professes to be emphasising on the growth of its pupils, the brutality the boys go through clearly reveals the ingrained racial biases.

Turner sees these events of personal racism with a critical and doubtful eye, unlike Elwood's hopeful approach. Through difficult events, he has come to see that one's skin tone will always affect their treatment regardless of how "good" one tries to be. Turner's mistrust in Black boys's ability to alter their destinies within a racist framework stems from his own betrayals at the hands of white power leaders. For Turner, these individual acts of racism are frequently very personal, not just representations of a racist system but rather demonstrations of the biased opinions carried by people who expose their biases.

The way white characters see Black people—often reducing them to caricatures or denying them their humanity—showcases the personal racism shown in *The Nickel Boys*. Often characterised as "noble" and "articulate," Elwood faces the terrible fact that no amount of personal integrity or decency will protect him from the constant prejudice all around him. In one especially incident, Elwood is unfairly sent to Nickel Academy after false accusations of a crime, and it is abundantly evident that his race—not his behaviour or intentions—is the actual basis for his sentence. His story perfectly captures how individual racism finds its way into the legal system, where Black people are presumatively guilty right away.

The incident seen shows how readily racism may show itself in Nickel Academy's environment. Once Black Mike strikes Elwood, he experiences personal prejudice. From the standpoint of

personal racism, this event shows how larger racial experiences could influence specific encounters. Black Mike's response might indicate an internalised hostility or distrust, maybe shaped by past experiences with people who have either embodied or supported racial behaviour. Though they demonstrate how both internal and external racial variables may influence human encounters, his actions may not clearly indicate racism as prejudiced.

Chuck, a young man trying to leave the toilet, runs over Phil as Black Mike attacks Elwood and yells, "oh, shit." Staff member Phil of Nickel Academy is watching the activities take place around the facility. He decides to ignore the pounding right in front of him. This situation captures the personal prejudice Elwood and other black kids go through. Phil's usage of the epithet "nigger" shows that his racial slights are meant to humiliate and offend the black kids. Phil's acts support the individual racism by utilising insulting words.

Elwood's memories stray back to the hospital, when he came across a white student lad who had given him a glimpse of hope. That expectation was quickly dashed, however, when one of Nickel Academy's notorious counsellors struck him in the stomach for talking with the white pupils. Although the suffering was great, it was nothing compared to the emotional harm done by learning he was undeserving of fundamental human decency. Elwood understood he had to figure out a way out, to release himself from the constraints of bigotry holding him back. Still, he felt imprisoned, compelled to bear the staff's severity and cruelty as well as the weight of his own powerlessness.

Elwood's initial encounter with institutional racism happened when he was unlawfully arrested without cause. Mr. Hill, who taught history to Elwood, advised him to apply to a college situated about seven miles from where he lived. He decides to thumb a ride there. A black man driving a Plymouth picks him up, but soon after, a police car closely trails them. The police claimed the vehicle was stolen, exposing the racial biases inherent in the system with a statement made by the officer.

The novel underscores the existence of institutional racism within the educational framework. The institution maintains separate facilities for white and black students, blatantly disregarding the court's ruling. It does not promote the integration of individuals from both races. Furthermore, there exists a significant disparity between Nickel Academy's claimed objectives and its actual behaviors. In one instance, a boy suffers a deadly heart failure after being confined in an overheated chamber known as "sweetbox." This term refers to a tiny, excessively warm room intended for disciplining students, ultimately leading to the victim's heart failure and compromised health. In the second scenario, twenty-three people lost their lives in a fire in 1921, with one contributing factor being that half of the exits in the dormitory were obstructed. These occurrences illustrate that institutional racism plays a significant role in the appalling conditions at Nickel Academy, where negligence and apathy lead to heartbreaking losses of student lives. The speaker emphasizes that while overt forms of racism (such as discriminatory policies or actions) can be challenged, the deeper and more pervasive issues represented by characters like Spencer, Griff, and the parents who instill harmful beliefs in their children are more difficult to change. This underscores that racism is not confined to individual behaviors or legislation; it is embedded within families, communities, and the values taught about interpersonal treatment. More broadly, the assertion suggests that laws alone cannot eliminate the entrenched prejudices and social customs that shape human behavior. Even with official prohibitions against discrimination, the mindsets and frameworks that sustain it may endure unless there is a genuine societal shift in how individuals understand and relate to one another. The phrase "wickedness went deeper than skin color" holds significant importance. It indicates that racism encompasses more than just racial identity; it involves power, control, and the dehumanization of individuals, which can take various forms. "Spencer" and "Griff" represent individuals who are part of the larger system that perpetuates these cycles of harm. This

points to the notion that racism is not simply an individual shortcoming but is perpetuated by families, communities, and institutions, as well as by the individuals who support them. When examining institutional racism, it becomes evident that people of color, or the communities that educators strive to assist, often endure underfunded and neglected educational environments. The mention of “hard work” in the quote may emphasize the frustration felt by teachers who, despite their commitment, are faced with deeply ingrained structures that resist change for marginalized groups. The brief tenures of young educators might indicate that those who challenge these systems frequently encounter burnout or leave, potentially believing that their efforts are futile. This scenario may imply a broader commentary on how institutions, including schools, frequently reproduce inequality through their policies, practices, and even their cultures, which can be resistant to alteration despite the dedication of those attempting to enact reform.

The Nickel Boys delves deeper than just the stories of a few individuals, shedding light on how racism is deeply embedded in American society. Whitehead utilizes the personal journeys of the characters to demonstrate the harmful effects of systemic racism on both individuals and entire communities. The novel challenges readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of America’s past and the enduring consequences of racial disparity. Through its powerful narrative, *The Nickel Boys* calls for acknowledgment, remembrance, and a confrontation with history to create a more just and equitable future.

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