

Trauma and its Impact on Friendship and Self-Redemption in Colson Whitehead's Novel "The Nickel Boys"

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Abstract:

Many issues or conflicts in daily lives can lead to trauma. Traumatic events can stem from human experiences and interactions, potentially impacting our emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Prior studies on the consequences of psychological trauma have mostly ignored the domain of friendship and self-redemption in the novel "The Nickel Boys". Consequently, this study examines how trauma may affect these crucial ideas in more detail. This study attempts to give a more thorough knowledge of the impact of trauma on individuals in the novel by examining the link between friendship and trauma as well as the significance of self-redemption in the healing process. Qualitative and descriptive methodologies are employed in the study to examine these concepts. The study concluded that Turner and Elwood Curtis, survivors of the trauma at Nickel Academy, find solace in each other's company, offering emotional strength, belonging, and unity. Their unwavering relationship empowers them to confront their imprisonment's harsh realities and strengthens their inner resilience. "The Nickel Boys" explores the impact of bigotry, aggression, and unfairness on the boys' worldview and self-perception, highlighting their emotional scars and the resilience of the human spirit in times of adversity.

Keywords: (trauma, friendship, self- redemption, bigotry, aggression).

1. Introduction

Trauma can stem from various issues or conflicts in our daily lives. Human experiences and encounters can lead to traumatic situations. These experiences can leave a deep, damaging impact on both our mental and physical health (Rahmi, 2023:327). Trauma is linked to our psychology and emotions. According to Figley (2012:14), trauma can be defined as events and memories that are painful, life-threatening, or upsetting. Natural disasters, as well as societal issues such as racism, abuse, and violence, are just a few examples of factors that can cause trauma. Confusion and insecurity are the main causes of trauma; prominent psychological trauma causes include sexual assault, domestic abuse, bullying, police brutality, and job discrimination.

The study focuses on the effects of Trauma on themes of Friendship and Self-redemption in the Novel "The Nickel Boys". "The Nickel Boys" is a remarkable novel written by Colson Whitehead, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author. The book is based on the real-life events that took place at the Nickel School, an all-male reform school that operated for more than a hundred years. The story follows the experiences of the young boys who were sent to this institution, which was supposed to reform them but instead turned out to be a place of horror and abuse. Whitehead's writing is powerful and evocative, bringing to life the struggles, fears, and hopes of the Nickel Boys. The novel is a poignant and unforgettable tale of injustice and perseverance that will leave a lasting impact on anyone who reads it.

2. Literature Review

Ali (2023: 38-49) examines the politics of racism and its effects in *The Nickel Boys*, a novel by Colson Whitehead. The story revolves around the real-life events that occurred in the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, where hundreds of human remains that had fallen prey to racial politics in America were unearthed by an excavation crew. The central topic of the novel is racial segregation and brutality, as seen and experienced by Elwood, a ten-year-old child who is taken to a reformatory school after being falsely convicted of stealing. He becomes aware of how African Americans are trapped in an unavoidable maze of violence and anarchy throughout his time at the Nickel. Whitehead examines earlier decades in depth to demonstrate how racism has changed but is still ingrained in American culture. To examine how racism, whether overt or covert, destroys the lives of American Blacks, the theories of intersectionality advanced by Kimberle Crenshaw, Critical Race Theory, and Paulo Freire's theory of oppression is employed in the study. The findings of the study shows that with the help of two distinct generations of Black people attempting to understand the system that rules them, Whitehead is able to demonstrate the extent to which the concept of race has changed. Tragically, though, there are people like Floyd and Martin who die every day and suffer the same fate as the Nickel brothers. On the one hand, multiple bodies that are representative of a violent history are being unearthed.

You (2023: 65-71) utilises Judith Herman's trauma theory to examine the causes of the characters' bodily and psychological suffering as well as the

trauma itself. Black people's way of life and mental health has been significantly impacted by the racism and prejudice they faced. This study addresses the concepts of trauma and recovery in conjunction with potential approaches to actualize trauma healing. According to the trauma research, African Americans experience severe physical and spiritual harm as a result of the cumulative stress of these traumas. The trauma has multiple origins, arising from a combination of social and historical factors. For instance, the segregation system has caused trauma for African Americans. The study's conclusion discusses methods for aiding Black individuals in overcoming trauma. Black individuals need to depend on their own resilience and the support of the black community to navigate the complex and arduous journey of trauma recovery. It could be argued that Whitehead's exploration of healing from trauma in his books reflects his sincere empathy for African Americans and humanity as a whole.

Rahmi (2023: 327- 333) analyses “The Nickel Boys” (2019) from the perspective of social issues such as racism, abuse, and segregation. The main characters in this novel have suffered trauma from these social issues, leading them to develop defense mechanisms to deal with the resulting trauma. This thesis applies psychoanalysis theory from Colson Whitehead's 2019 novel The Nickel Boys. It could be suggested that within this framework, the racial "other" exists in a state of a Gambian "bare life" characterized by liminality, hovering between life and death and being perceived as less than human. This study draws on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic literary theory as well as

defence mechanisms found in Cloninger's book, *The Theory of Personality*. This study discovered that the characters employed four defence strategies—identification, solitude, sublimation, and intellectualization—to cope with their trauma. The information utilised in this study came from quotes, words, and phrases pertaining to social components and defence mechanisms in the study employing literary devices like characters, narratives, and defence mechanisms to detect social components and then classifying the information theory of psychoanalysis criticism.

Strickland (2021: 69-79) states that the *Nickel Boys* allows readers to empathize with and find hope through a fictional representation. It showcases the enduring impact of slavery, tracing its influence across past, present, and future. Whitehead's work connects the story of the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys to the broader context of the civil rights movement and the ongoing struggle for Black lives. Whitehead's use of fiction to draw from the archive allows readers to empathize with the characters and confront the history of racial injustice and the horrors endured by reform school survivors. Ultimately, it enables him to provide glimmers of a world devoid of injustice. Neglecting the political influence of history, empathy, and optimism is equivalent to saying that *The Nickel Boys* have no political agenda.

The area of friendship and self-redemption has been largely overlooked in the previous research on the effects of psychological trauma. As a result, this study takes a closer look at how trauma can impact these important concepts.

By exploring the relationship between trauma and friendship, as well as the role of self-redemption in the healing process, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of trauma on individuals.

3. Trauma in Literature

The term "stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behaviour" has been substituted with "state or condition produced by such a stress or blow" in relation to trauma. In other words, trauma refers to the mental state following an injury. It is a nightmare that represents trauma in a comprehensible manner. It is a painful and distressing experience. According to psychoanalytic theory, it is an event experienced after the fact at the level of its distressing reality. Trauma, often referred to as traumatise, is a term used to describe a catastrophic incident that comprises only one experience or event and all of the senses. Furthermore, psychoanalytic trauma has detrimental long-term effects. In essence, the characters' minds are impacted by terrible memories and prior tragedy. Trauma is mostly caused by confusion and insecurity; common causes of psychological trauma include domestic violence, bullying, police brutality, sexual assault, and discrimination in the workplace (Heidarizadeh, 2015: 789).

Literary studies utilize literature to exemplify mental trauma. Learning new, relevant information independently presents a social challenge. It is intriguing to observe that trauma inherently encompasses social, political, ethical, and historical aspects. Consequently, we cannot limit it solely to psychological

research. It inherently affects various academic disciplines to showcase its interdisciplinary nature and the substantial impact it holds within and beyond the academic realm. From its inception, the trauma theory branch, spearheaded by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, has significantly impacted literary studies, revealing a strong influence from poststructuralist philosophy. Caruth's "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History" (1996) and Felman's contributions to "Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History" (Felman and Laub 1992) extensively engage with de Man's poststructuralist philosophy of language. Both scholars were mentored by Paul de Man at Yale University, evident in their vocabulary and style reflecting a connection to deconstruction (Meretoja , 2020:24).

The concept of trauma syndrome suggests that individuals become trapped in the past and relive the traumatic events in various forms. The analysis of trauma literature delves into human psychology and the emotional distress of fictional figures, incorporating post-1980s trauma theory. As a result, trauma studies have gained valuable insights from trauma literature, providing firsthand accounts from victims. The importance of trauma in literature lies in its ability to accurately portray the unimaginable trauma endured by victims, uncover the psychological and physical harm resulting from violent historical events, and empower marginalized groups in vulnerable and silenced communities to engage with the broader society (Yang, 2023:2).

Fragmentation is a better way to describe trauma and is also a better way to reconstruct traumatic events, the psychological process behind despair, and the healing of traumatic memories. The novels under study contain intricate plots. The entire narrative framework is purposefully broken down into disparate forms by the author. The planar structural fracture exhibits a three-dimensional form. The reader's mind is taken over by several story threads, compelling them to reflect on the painful event. Fragmentation in a text can gradually expose to the reader the hidden and disturbing themes that lie beneath the surface. One technique that writers use to highlight the contrast between the usual cohesive structure of a novel and the subject matter they wish to explore is the fractured narrative. This strategy is intended to create a sense of unfamiliarity in the reader and to disrupt the normal flow of the narrative (Yang, 2023:3).

4. Synopsis of “The Nickel Boys”

In 1962, Elwood Curtis receives a record album of speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., which introduces him to the Civil Rights Movement. Raised by his strict grandmother, Elwood works at the Richmond Hotel, where he is tricked into a dish-drying competition and gets a set of encyclopedias. He becomes more immersed in the movement, but his grandmother and Mr. Marconi worry about his high ideals. A teacher, Mr. Hill, encourages Elwood's enthusiasm for civil rights and arranges a class at a community college. Elwood gets arrested and sent to Nickel Academy, a reform school. He is

assigned to Cleveland dormitory on the Black students' campus, but learns that it doesn't provide an education. Elwood intervenes when he sees a boy being bullied in the bathroom, and all four boys are taken from their beds and subjected to a brutal beating in the White House. Elwood wakes up from a beating in the school infirmary, where he stays for two weeks to heal. His best friend, Turner, advises him to avoid conflict, but Elwood is ashamed of the pain and doesn't tell his grandmother about it. When Elwood returns to Nickel campus, Turner gives him a new job called "Community Service." They distribute goods to local businessmen, who give money to Harper for medicine, food, and supplies. Harper then leaves Turner and Elwood to paint a gazebo at a board member's home. Elwood records their activities in a notebook at night. At Nickel, a student boxing match is held every year, with the Black boxer, Griff, being a violent bully. Superintendent Spencer tells Griff to lose the fight, but he wins. Later, he is chained and beat to death by Spencer and Earl. The boys on campus believe Griff escaped, but his body is found in a secret cemetery. Meanwhile, students work on a Christmas Festival, with Jaimie poisoning housemaster Earl, but he survives and no one realizes he was poisoned (Rahmi, 2023: 328).

Elwood alternates between adult Elwood's life in the 1970s and teenage Elwood's life in Nickel. In the 1970s, Elwood works for a moving company in New York City and starts Ace Moving, named after the highest level of achievement at Nickel. In the 1960s, Elwood realizes that Nickel is breaking him down due to the arbitrary merit and punishment system. He loses hope

and believes in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s teachings. When his grandmother tells him that a lawyer left town with their money, Elwood decides to expose Nickel's injustices and close the school. In the 1980s, Elwood, now the owner of a successful moving company, is recognized by Chickie Pete, a fellow student at Nickel. They discuss the damage done to all the boys from Nickel, including Chickie Pete, who has no job or place to live. Elwood struggles with relationships and is unmarried (Ali, 2023:44)

Returning to 1960s, government workers are scheduled to inspect Nickel, and Director Hardee cancels classes to repair the campus. Elwood, a community service worker, decides to write a letter outlining the school's unlawful dealings. Turner becomes angry, believing Elwood will be killed. Elwood tries to deliver the letter, but is unable to do so due to his proximity to the inspectors. Harper asks him to run an errand on the other side of campus, making it impossible. Turner decides to deliver the letter himself, seeing Elwood's disappointment. Turner gives Elwood's letter to the inspectors, but Spencer takes him to the White House and gives him another beating before putting him in solitary confinement. Turner doesn't kill him immediately, but he's worried the government will take Elwood's letter seriously. After three weeks, Turner hears Spencer is going to kill Elwood the next day. He helps Elwood escape, taking him to an empty house and setting out on stolen bicycles. At dawn, the Community Service van appears, and they jump over a fence and run through a field. Harper and another staff member chase after them, but Harper shoots Elwood. Turner jumps over another fence and

disappears into the woods. At the end of the novel, Turner returns to Florida, using Elwood's name as a tribute to his life. He tells Millie the truth about his time at Nickel, and she gives him support. He must return to Nickel to properly bury Elwood's body. Upon arriving in Tallahassee, Turner discovers that the hotel used to be called the Richmond, fulfilling his old friend's wish (Ali, 2023:44).

5. Method

Qualitative and descriptive methodologies are employed in the study to explore the impact of trauma theory on notions of self-healing and companionship. The data is derived from the 2019 novel "The Nickel Boys" by Colson Whitehead.

6. Discussion

Friendship and self-redemption play significant roles in the lives of the main characters in "The Nickel Boys," particularly Elwood Curtis and Turner. Whitehead argues that friendship and interpersonal support can uplift those who endure severe adversity. The novel demonstrates the strength of this compassion. Elwood faced racism and segregation before attending Nickel Academy. Fortunately, he found support and inspiration to stand up for himself. For instance, at the beginning of the school year, his new history teacher, Mr. Hill, instructed him and the other students to erase the racist slurs written by white students in their textbooks. Elwood meets Mr. Hill, an activist who educates him about the Civil Rights Movement, and feels

instantly less alone when he accepts his invitation to join him at a demonstration in front of a movie theatre. Elwood feels as like he is fighting for everyone in the United States, not just himself, after taking this first step to understand the need of speaking up against injustice as a united group:

“My struggle is your struggle, your burden is my burden. But how to tell people? (Whitehead, 2019:43)

Due to being unjustly incarcerated and sent to the Nickel Academy, Elwood is deprived of the guidance and encouragement of responsible adults who could have served as mentors. Consequently, his sole source of emotional support is his relationship with Turner:

“The second thing Elwood noticed was the boy’s eerie sense of self. Themess hall was loud with the rumble and roil of juvenile activity, but this boy bobbed in his own pocket of calm. Over time, Elwood saw that he was always simultaneously at home in whatever scene he found himself and also seemed like he shouldn’t have been there; inside and above at the same time; a part and apart. Like a tree trunk that falls across a creek—it doesn’t belong and then it’s never not been there, generating its own ripples in the larger current.

He said his name was Turner.

“I’m Elwood. From Tallahassee. Frenchtown.” (Whitehead, 2019:58)

In "The Nickel Boys," friendship and trauma have a complex relationship that provides both solace and struggle for Turner and Elwood Curtis. Elwood and

Turner take solace in their bond of friendship in the aftermath of traumatic events at the Nickel Academy. Despite the inhospitable and unsympathetic atmosphere they are immersed in, their companionship offers them profound emotional fortitude, a shared sense of unity, and a feeling of inclusion. They are empowered to confront the harrowing realities of their confinement by the unbreakable bond that unites them, endowing them with a resilient spirit:

“The key to in here is the same as surviving out there — you got to see how people act, then you got to figure out how to get around them like an obstacle course,” (Whitehead, 2019 :88)

Despite their different personalities and strategies for survival, Elwood and Turner form a strong bond. Elwood, influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings, is idealistic and values education and moral principles. In contrast, Turner is cynical and realistic as a result of enduring years of mistreatment and injustice. Their partnership is symbiotic, with Turner's realism balancing Elwood's idealism, and Elwood's optimism occasionally inspiring Turner to see the world differently. Turner consuming soap powder to make himself ill so he can take a day off work when he can no longer bear to work; Elwood continuing to think about the sound of the leather strap scraping the ceiling after being thrashed. The most pernicious aspect of Nickel, though, is how it manipulates its victims' minds to the point where, after a few months, Elwood views himself as "ruined."

“Turner waited until Nurse Wilma went outside for a cigarette and explained his visit. Thought I’d take me a vacation,” he said. He’d eaten some soap powder to make himself sick, an hour of stomachache for a whole day off. Or two—he knew how to sell it. “Got some more powder hidden in my sock, too,” he said. Elwood turned away to brood.

(Whitehead, 2019:73)

Turner often insists he doesn't bother to resist Nickel Academy, but it becomes clear that he does so in subtler ways that still carry a hint of rebellion. Instead of working, he ingests soap powder to deliberately make himself ill. The fact that he is harming himself in this act rather than letting others hurt him gives it power. By taking back control over the choice to feel pain, he asserts his physical autonomy from Nickel. The harsh and violent conditions at Nickel often cause tension and conflict between Turner and Elwood. They have different coping techniques and reactions to their situations, which sometimes lead to estrangement from one another. This highlights the complex nature of their relationship in the face of adversity.

“I ain’t faking—that soap powder is awful,” Turner said. “But it’s me choosing, not anyone else.” (Whitehead, 2019:79)

Turner shares the problems he has with Elwood’s way of thinking. As he explains in this quote, you can change the laws, but you can’t change people. He also thinks it is nice that college students can spend their time protesting and working to change laws, but says he never had time to do anything like

that because he was too busy working, emphasizing the struggle he faces as both a Black man and a member of the working class. He agrees with them and believes everyone should have the right to eat at the lunch counter at Woolworths, but that doesn't matter much to someone like him who doesn't have the time or indeed the money to eat there regardless. Overall, the laws didn't change the way some people feel, and if a person is racist and evil, no law can change their heart:

“The blinders Elwood wore, walking around. The law was one thing—you can march and wave signs around and change a law if you convinced enough white people. In Tampa, Turner saw the college kids with their nice shirts and ties sit in at the Woolworths. He had to work, but they were out protesting. And it happened—they opened the counter. Turner didn't have the money to eat there either way. You can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other. Nickel was racist as hell—half the people who worked here probably dressed up like the Klan on weekends—but the way Turner saw it, wickedness went deeper than skin color.” (Whitehead, 2019:148)

Elwood's letter sheds light on the violent and inhumane practices at the school, and they learn that a government inspection is on the horizon. At first, Turner declines to assist Elwood in delivering the letter to the inspector. However, when Elwood fails to find a suitable person to deliver the letter to, Turner agrees to take on the responsibility himself. Upon discovering the

letter, Spencer, the school administrator, punishes Elwood by placing him in solitary confinement. Despite his earlier reluctance, Turner decides to help Elwood escape from the school in the middle of the night. Together, they make a daring escape to seek a life of freedom and dignity.

”More distressing than the notion that the newspaper didn’t care about what was going on at Nickel was that they received so many letters like it, so many appeals, that they couldn’t address them all. The country was big, and its appetite for prejudice and depredation limitless, how could they keep up with the host of injustices, big and small. This was one place, but if there was one, there were hundreds, hundreds of Nickels and White Houses scattered across the land like pain factories.” (Whitehead, 2019:130)

Another significant concept of the novel is “self-redemption”. The boys' trauma at Nickel shapes their perspectives on the world and themselves, resulting in enduring wounds from facing prejudice, brutality, and injustice by the staff. Elwood, especially, believes in the power of education to promote justice and redemption, along with the nonviolent principles advocated by Martin Luther King Jr.

“They didn’t have a TV set but Dr. King’s speeches were such a vivid chronicle containing all that the Negro had been and all that he would be that the record was almost as good as television. Maybe even better, grander, like the towering screen at the Davis Drive-In, which he’d been to twice. Elwood saw it all” (Whitehead, 2019 :23)

As both Characters work through their pain and try to make sense of their pasts and present, the road to self-redemption gets more complicated. For Elwood, it means finding a way to bring about change even in the worst of situations and clinging to his convictions in the face of hopelessness. Turner believes that it entails acknowledging the imperfect condition of the world and figuring out how to retain some degree of autonomy and dignity in it.

After discovering Spencer's plan to harm Elwood by taking him "out back," Turner decides to abandon his independent nature and help Elwood escape. As the two companions leave Nickel, Harper and Hennepin chase after them. They eventually reach the pair and fatally injure Elwood. Turner then honors his friend by invoking Elwood's name. Ultimately, Turner chooses to confront his painful past and testify, seeking to speak for all the silenced boys who endured suffering at Nickel Academy when reports of the graveyard surface in the press:

“Flying to Tallahassee.”Turner said.“Lastname Curtis. “Identification?”. 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 then on when nobody asked, to honor his friend, to live for him” (Whitehead, 2019:203)

According to Cloninger (2004:45), identification is a defense mechanism where one borrows or adopts another's identity. In this novel, Turner used

Elwood's name after graduating from the school to honour his buddy and cope with the trauma of the Nickel school. :

“When the owner of diner asked him his name, two weeks out of Nickel, he said Elwood Curtis. First thing that popped into his head.. he used the name from then on when anybody asked, to honor his friend. To live for him” (Whitehead, 2019:203)

Turner makes the decision to acquire his GED once he leaves Nickel Academy. Given that Elwood was the one who was initially more committed to pursue his studies, this gesture has symbolic meaning. Turner, whether he realises it or not, unconsciously adopts some of Elwood's ideals when he adopts his persona. As though living out the life Elwood would have had if he had survived their escape from Nickel, he continues his schooling:

“Earned his certificate and feeling proud and it was one of those moments that makes you realize you have no one in your life who cares about the occasional triumph.” (Whitehead, 2019:205)

"The Nickel Boys" explores the impact of trauma on individuals' perspectives of the world and their own identities, as well as their efforts to make amends in the face of adversity. It is a touching portrayal of survival, resilience, and the unwavering power of the human spirit.

7. Conclusion

The study shows the effects of trauma on the concepts of friendship and self-redemption in “The Nickel Boys”. The study concluded that:

The connection between friendship and trauma is complex, and for Turner and Elwood Curtis, it brings both comfort and challenge. Following their traumatic experiences at the Nickel Academy, the two find solace in each other's company. Despite the harsh and unsympathetic atmosphere, their bond offers them emotional strength, a feeling of belonging, and unity. Their unwavering relationship empowers them to confront the harsh realities of their imprisonment and fortifies their inner resilience.

It can be argued that the boys' exposure to bigotry, aggression, and unfairness from Nickel's personnel may have had a significant impact on their worldview and self-perception, possibly leaving them with enduring emotional scars. In addition to exploring how trauma impacts individuals' views of the world and their identities, "The Nickel Boys" also delves into how individuals seek to apologize in times of adversity. It is a touching portrayal of resilience, determination, and the unwavering power of the human spirit.

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