
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study of Trauma Writing in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

You Juanzhi

College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

Corresponding Author: You Juanzhi, **E-mail:** Orange_yjz@163.com

ABSTRACT

Colson Whitehead, a well-known contemporary African American writer, who has won the Pulitzer Prize twice. *The Nickel Boys* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2019, and the novel takes the tragic experience of black teenagers in the Nickel Academy Reformatory School as the main line of the story. This paper applies Judith Herman's trauma theory to analyze the physical and psychological trauma faced by the characters in the novel, as well as the causes of this trauma. The racism and prejudice that the black people suffered have been deeply affecting their living and mental state. At the same time, this paper discusses the possible ways to realize the recovery of trauma with the theory of trauma and recovery. Through the trauma study, we can see that under the combined stress of these traumas, African Americans suffer from a great blow in their body and spirit. The causes of the trauma are multidimensional and are the result of a combination of historical and social factors. For example, the segregation system is responsible for the trauma of African Americans. At the end of the paper, it discusses ways for black people to come out of trauma. Trauma recovery is a complex and difficult process in which black people must rely on their own efforts and help from the black community to achieve trauma recovery. It can be said that Whitehead's exploration of the trauma recovery in the novels shows his realistic concern for African Americans and even human beings.

KEYWORDS

Colson Whitehead; *The Nickel Boys*; Trauma Theory; Black Community

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1. Introduction

1.1 Colson Whitehead and *The Nickel Boys*

Colson Whitehead, in full Arch Colson Chipp Whitehead, is an American novelist. He was born in 1969 and was raised in Manhattan. After graduating from Harvard College, he started working at the Village Voice, where he wrote reviews of television, books, and music. He has written eight fiction and two non fictions work so far, including *The Intuitionist* (1999), *John Henry Days* (2001), *The Colossus of New York* (2003), *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), *Sag Harbor* (2009), *Zone One* (2011), *The Underground Railroad* (2016), *The Nickel Boys* (2019) and *Harlem Shuffle*(2021). Because of the wide range of themes and diverse styles, he gained a reputation as a "Literary Chameleon" by Harvard Magazine, which praises him for "deftly blurring the lines between literary and genre fiction, and using his uncanny abilities to inhabit and reinvent conventional frames in order to explore the themes of race, technology, history, and popular culture". With these excellent works, he won the Mac Arthur Genius Award, Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award successively. Furthermore, he won the Pulitzer Prize twice for *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys*. Colson Whitehead thus became the fourth novelist to win Pulitzer Prizes twice after Booth Tarkington, Faulkner and Updike. In addition to two Pulitzers, Whitehead is also the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship (2002) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2013). NPR called Whitehead "one of the most gifted novelists in America today".

The Nickel Boys, which is set in the segregation period, is an accusation of this atrocity. The novel is Whitehead's ninth work, and also his first novel published three years after the successful *The Underground Railroad*, which has the continuation of theme and the self-renewal of language style. The novel takes the tragic experience of black teenagers in the Nickel Academy Reformatory

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School as the main line of the story, revealing that the United States, which is known as the free world, is actually full of violence and injustice.

1.2 Theoretical Foundation

Trauma theory is one of the most important literary critical theories of the twenty first century. Trauma, which came from the German "traumatize", originated from clinical medicine related to industrial accident trauma in the Victorian period and modern psychology at the end of the 19th century, especially Freud's psychoanalysis, and then permeated into literature, philosophy, history, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology and other fields. In 1996, Cathy Caruth first put forward the term "trauma" in the book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. The real trauma research was going on after the Vietnam War. A large number of important scholars emerged, such as Judith Herman, Geoffrey Hartman, Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, KalfTal, Dominick La Capra, Michael Rothberg, and so on. Therefore, research objects also began to differentiate, and many aspects were involved.

Traumatized individuals are subjected to repeated traumatic events until they recover. Their psychological mechanisms are severely disrupted after a traumatic event, and the memory of the trauma tortures them in recurring nightmares. The inevitable repetition of traumatic experiences in an individual's mind makes traumatized individuals instinctively feel afraid, helpless or fearful. This can lead to excessive shock reactions, difficulty sleeping, sudden outbursts of anger, and severe depression. These symptoms can cause mentally numbed individuals to appear in public in an abnormal state. Therefore, unpredictable, unexpected events and frightening catastrophes can cause great psychological trauma to the affected individuals.

After Caruth's contributions to trauma, Judith Herman was considered one of the most important trauma theorists and has made significant contributions to contemporary trauma theory. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) focuses on the symptoms of trauma and the ways of recovering. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman thus proposes that the process of recovery can be divided into three stages: "The first stage is the establishment of safety, the second stage is the remembrance and mourning, the third one is the reconnection to normal life" (Herman, 2001:162). Herman argues that individual trauma can be recovered by telling others about it. She believes that the action of telling a story seems to be effective in the abnormal process of traumatic recall, and the phsioneurois caused by fear can be healed by speaking.

2. Literature Review

In July 2019, Whitehead's novel, *The Nickel Boys*, went on the market all over the United States, which continued his political concern about racial issues. Many scholars started to pay attention to it. Comparative studies were also carried out by foreign scholars. In "Psychoanalytical Study of the Gendered Eurocentric Sociosymbolic Dynamics in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019)", Fatima Tul Zahra believes that "The sorrows and oppression faced by the Black people living in Eurocentric white America by shedding light on the impact of existing racism on protagonists' psychology." (Zahra, 2019:709) Some foreign scholars focused on the narrative skills in the novel. Paula Martín-Salván analyzed Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys* through the prism of the tension between concealment and unveiling and its impact on the text's rhetorical, narrative and ideological structure. Besides, the analysis from the perspective of racial discrimination and trauma is the main direction of the novel. Mehvish Bashir thought that how micro aggressions are negatively associated with various aspects of psychological harm to black Americans. (Bashir, 2022:707) Dedi Kurnia Putra said that racial discrimination is present in the novel, and it influenced Elwood to develop several patterns of racism, such as the pattern of individual relations.

The Nickel Boys was translated into Chinese by Lin Xiaoxiao in 2022; due to its short-listing time, few domestic have conducted relevant research on it, and there are only a few relevant papers in CNKI which used different perspectives to analyze this novel.

Some scholars analyze the novel from the perspective of the new historicism. Yu Wei thought that Whitehead used Jim Crow politics to reflect the contemporary American government and criticize the turbulence and division of the current social reality. (Yu, 2021) Just as Qiao Haoyang proposed that Whitehead, through his literary historical narrative and rich connotations of plots, subverts the grand narrative of American official history, reconstructs the racial historical memory of black people, criticizes the deep-rooted racist thoughts in various fields in the United States, and endows his works with profound political and historical significance. (Qiao, 2022) Liang Huiying also explores racial problems; she thought that Whitehead guided the society to form an objective understanding of racism by examining the differences within the black group, and pointed out that in the "post-racial" era, African Americans should face the chaos of racial violence and transform their emotions into collective struggle practice. (Liang, 2022) Huang holds that the American judicial system has always continued the cultural characteristics of racism, which has essentially imprisoned the body and mind of African Americans as well as the justice of the whole American society. (Huang, 2022)

In addition, some scholars have studied the novel from other perspectives, such as identity construction; Zhai Yadong believes that, unlike Whitehead's other novels, *The Nickel Boys* focuses on the special black figures' group image and constructs a new

group identity. Through the presentation of the living conditions of this group, the real scenes of racial persecution in history reappeared, and the current status of racial discrimination in the United States is revealed. (Zhai, 2022)

All in all, foreign research on *The Nickel Boys* is earlier than that in China. In contrast, domestic research starts late, and so far, there is no relevant monograph published with only a number of papers on it, but the research perspective is more extensive. Remarkably, scholars at home and abroad pay more attention to the theme of racial discrimination and its narrative, such as the slave narrative. However, a few scholars have conducted in-depth studies on the trauma of the characters in the novel from the perspective of trauma writing. Therefore, in order to make up for the shortfall, this thesis attempts to analyze this novel through trauma writing to explore the trauma that has been inflicted on individuals and even the whole of African Americans.

3. Types of Trauma in *The Nickel Boys*

As an important component of Whitehead's novels, "trauma" is shown in various forms in his novels. This chapter will analyze the physical trauma and psychological trauma suffered by the main characters in the novel and expose the plight and darkness of African Americans' lives during the segregation period.

3.1 Physical Trauma

There was a sentence in the novel: "Violence is the only lever big enough to move the world." (Whitehead, 2019: 213) In *Nickel*, violence can destroy everything. At first, Elwood doesn't know the true face of the Nickel, and he always believes that "We must believe in our souls that we are somebody, that we are significant, that we are worthwhile, and we must walk the streets of life every day with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebody-ness."(72)

Then, Elwood was punished for helping others. He was taken to "the White House" and hit by the "Black Beauty" (the strap was three feet long with a wooden handle). "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." (Whitehead, 2019: 175) He decided to be more determined, even if they might curse and spit and strike him, but he'd make it through to the other side. Bloodied and tired, but he'd make it through.

However, the abuse in *Nickel* is beyond Elwood's Imagination. From Turner, we know that Trevor Nickel, who established the Florida Industrial School, instituted the championship matches in 1946, "He possessed a fervent belief in the miracle of a human specimen in top shape and often watched the boys shower to monitor the progress of their physical education."(Whitehead, 2019: 250) and "Dr. Campbell, the school psychologist, was known to loiter at the white boys' showers to pick his dates."(251).

What's more, what is waiting for them is death. They took black children to *out back* (two trees with two iron rings); as Turner said, "once in a while, they take a black boy here and shackle him up to those. Arms spread out. Then they get a horse whip and tear him up."(Whitehead, 2019: 262) They don't bring children to the hospital but put down these children as escaped. A boy called Griff was going to represent the colored half of Nickel at the annual boxing match; just because he didn't lose out to the white boys, he was taken to *out back*, "When the state of Florida dug him up fifty years later, the forensic examiner noted the fractures in the wrists and speculated that he'd been restrained before he died, in addition to the other violence attested by the broken bones."(285)

From Harriet's memory, we know that unfair events are everywhere. For example, Harriet's died in jail after a white lady downtown accused him of not getting out of her way on the sidewalk, and Harriet's husband got hit in the head with a chair while breaking up a scuffle at Miss Simone's, who'd stepped up to protect one of Simone's dishwashers from three white men. Finally, Elwood was shot when he tried to run. Is the tragic of their family not the tragic of the whole colored race?

The novel reveals that black people have suffered countless physical trauma. This kind of physical trauma not only mercilessly destroys their body but also leads to a large number of deaths. The bones of dead bodies at the beginning of the novel are the best evidence of physical trauma.

3.2 Psychological Trauma

People who experience trauma will have a great psychological crisis and mental illness. The novel depicts the great harm of these psychological traumas of the main character, Elwood.

The psychological trauma has been ingrained since Elwood's childhood. "Elwood's mother and father had lit out West and didn't even send a postcard. What kind of mother leaves her kid in the middle of the night? One that doesn't give a shit."(Whitehead, 2019: 312) Because of the absence of his parents, Elwood was brought up by his grandmother, Harriet. Evelyn and Percy were not

good parents, but his grandmother shoulder this responsibility. With both his parents gone, she preferred to have her nine-year-old grandson nearby instead of alone in the house. Therefore, Elwood's childhood was spent in the Richmond Hotel. "After rushes, Elwood sometimes challenged the dishwashers to plate-drying races, and they made a good-natured show of being disappointed by his superior skills." (39). With the change in staff, Elwood's races changed from endearing novelty to mean-spirited hustle. When he issued a challenge, everybody in the kitchen tried not to smirk. "Through high school, he went back and forth over the matter of whether the dishwashers had let him win all along. He'd been so proud of his ability, dumb and simple as it was." (49). Elwood lost pure happiness in the kitchen.

However, the real nightmare began in Nickel. After he was hit by the strap, he chose not to tell his grandmother and let her worry about him. However, the trauma was worse than he could imagine, "Elwood's beating at the White House had him scarred all over, not just his legs. It had weeviled deep into his personality. The way his shoulders sank when Spencer appeared, the flinch and shrink." (Whitehead, 2019: 303)

Elwood continued to suffer from the psychological torture. He woke after midnight and imagined sounds—footsteps at the threshold, leather slapping the ceiling would come up. "It wasn't Spencer that undid him, or a supervisor or a new antagonist slumbering in room 2; rather, it was that he'd stopped fighting." (Whitehead, 2019: 379) But he never stops; he wrote everything down, "Elwood had an idea that one day he'd tell his father about his letter, how it was just like the letter his father gave to his commanding officer about the treatment of colored troops, the one that got him a commendation in the war. But he was as much an orphan as many of the boys in Nickel. No one was coming."(474)

When Elwood's plan failed, he was taken to the dark cell and spent two weeks in the dark. His friend Turner had saved Elwood from those two iron rings out back from the secret graveyard. However, Elwood was shot and killed; they put him in Boot Hill instead, while Turner survived. Elwood's death became Turner's psychological trauma.

4. Resources of Trauma

After discussing the physical trauma and psychological trauma of the characters, this chapter mainly explores the long-standing and deep-rooted suffering imposed on African Americans according to the source of trauma.

4.1 Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination has always been a common phenomenon and social problem that the United States should not be underestimated. It has a long history, and it is a product of historical legacy and the deformity of the times. In 1954, the Supreme Court declared in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* that it was illegal to segregate public schools based on race. Ten years later, President Johnson made all institutional forms of racial segregation and discrimination illegal by signing the Civil Rights Act. However, even after the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1861, racial discrimination still existed. From 1876 to 1965, the southern states and local governments successively formulated and implemented various laws of segregation, which were collectively referred to as "Jim Crow Laws". Places where segregation laws were enforced in the southern states mainly included public schools, housing and many aspects of public life. For example, "Elwood asked his grandmother when Negroes were going to start staying at the Richmond, and she said it's one thing to tell someone to do what's right and another thing for them to do it."(Whitehead, 2019: 52) Elwood just waited for the day when black people can go to the Richmond, but only to find that he was defeated by the reality.

The segregation system of public schools was finally established in the 1890s. The legal basis of the segregated school system was the principle of "separate and equal", but the fact was that the facilities of black schools were inferior to those of white schools, and the books they used did not fully meet the educational needs of black children. In Elwood's school, students only use the book from the white high school and "the white students left inscriptions for the next owners: Choke, Nigger! You Smell. Eat Shit."(Whitehead, 2019: 77) These curses and impolite suggestions reminded black boys their identity again and again. When Elwood had a chance to learn university courses for free, but the first day Elwood went to college, he got into trouble for hitchhiking a car stolen by a black man-- they were caught by the police, the police said: " 'First thing I thought when they said to keep an eye out for a Plymouth', he said. 'Only a nigger'd steal that.' " (111) The racial discrimination was thoroughly exposed in just a sentence.

Besides what has been mentioned above, there are many aspects of segregation. For example, all railway companies and buses or any rail transit system must provide separate vehicles for white and colored people. In the novel, it mentions the bus boycott. "That winter, the city finally integrated the buses, and she got on and saw a colored driver behind the wheel. Sat where she wanted."(Whitehead, 2019: 86)

To sum up, this kind of discrimination makes black people inferior in politics, economy and employment. It not only prevents them from enjoying the same status and rights as white people but also aggravates their poverty, which brings serious psychological trauma to them.

4.2 Family Environment

It is not difficult to find that students in Nickel all have some family problems. Just as the novel said: "Some students were wards of the state, without family, and there was nowhere else to put them." (Whitehead, 2019: 136) That's why they were put into Nickel, and no one will care their lives.

The abandonment of parents brings psychological trauma to black people. We can find the absence of parents in Elwood's life. His father, Percy, "love the army, and even received a commendation for a letter he wrote to his captain about inequities in the treatment of colored soldiers." (Whitehead, 2019: 179), and Percy had been too big for the town since he got back from the war. So, they were leaving for California to try their luck. So did Elwood's friend Turner. "Turner last saw his father when he was three years old. After that, the man was the wind. His mother, Dorothy, hung around longer, long enough for her to choke on her own vomit." (311). He was raised by his aunt, who is a victim of domestic violence. His aunt's boyfriend bought him ice cream to buy off children to make them forget their bad actions, which made Turner feel sick of ice cream.

"Boys arrived banged up in different ways before they got to Nickel and picked up more dents and damage during their term." (Whitehead, 2019: 352) They were sent here to receive physical, intellectual, and moral training, to be a good citizen, honorable and an honest man with trade or skilled occupations fitting such person for self-maintenance. However, All the violent offenders were on staff. Desperately, children find that they are merely drifting from one abyss to another.

5. The Effort to Recover from Trauma

Whitehead not only writes about the various traumas suffered by African Americans but also actively explores ways to heal them in his works. The trauma recovery is a tortuous and complicated psychological process. In Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, the key step in healing trauma is to reconstruct the traumatic story.

5.1 Self-Reconstruction

"There are big forces that want to keep the Negro down, like Jim Crow, and there are small forces that want to keep you down, like other people, and in the face of all those things, the big ones and the smaller ones, you have to stand up straight and maintain your sense of who you are." (Whitehead 73) Elwood always remembered what Dr. King's speeches told him. When Mr. Hill gave him a copy of James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, he kept thinking: Negroes are Americans, and their destiny is the country's destiny. He decided to write letters on the racial question to the newspaper.

Even when he came to Nickel, he continued his way against this unfair world. He believed "If everyone looked the other way, then everybody was in on it. If he looked the other way, he was as implicated as the rest. That's how he saw it, how he'd always seen things." (Whitehead, 2019: 206) He was alone in this particular protest. He tried to write to the newspaper but hadn't heard back. There were four ways out, and Elwood decided there was a fifth way. Get rid of Nickel. "Each time they returned to Nickel, he wrote down the particulars in a composition book. The date. The name of the individual and the establishment." (241)

Optimism made Elwood as malleable as the cheap taffy below the register. (Whitehead, 2019: 100) Maybe that's what led him to death. After Elwood's death, his friend Turner used Elwood as his name for 50 years. Turner turned into a man he thought Elwood would have been proud of. He got a steady job and finally established his own company--Ace Moving, in New York. With the spirit of Elwood, it seems that Turner had a successful life. However, even after leaving Nickel, the shadow of Nickel still haunts him, and he cannot find his true self. It is not enough for him to recover from the trauma. Only when individual effort and collective help are combined can the traumatic subject come out of the trauma and achieve recovery.

5.2 Love from Family

Turner physically escaped the control of Nickel School, but psychologically, he was still haunted by his experiences and the sacrifices of his friends. Until he decides to tell the truth to his wife, he not only reviews all the traumatic experiences but also tells her everything, including the story of his friend Elwood.

"Not because he had someone in his life. But because that someone was Millie. She chipped off the bad parts. He hoped he did the same." (Whitehead, 2019: 463) Millie's appearance brought hope for Turner. At first, Turner was afraid of death because no one would know that he died. And Nickel will hunt him to his final moment. He said to Millie he tried to find another way in Elwood's name, and he did it. But he didn't know what to do next. Turner, for the first time, tells his wife that his real name is Jack Turner.

When his wife calls him "Jack", he thinks it is good and even feels more real every time it comes out of her mouth. It is Millie who gave Turner the courage to come back to Nickel and face the trauma. With his wife's love, care and understanding, Turner has gone further out of trauma.

In summary, recollection and sharing about the past is a key step in helping the traumatic person to get rid of the pain and regain the hope of life.

5.3 Persistence from Community

As time went by, most of those who knew the story of Nickel were dead by now. After Nickel had been closed for three years, the secret graveyard was discovered. Of the forty-three bodies, seven remained unnamed. The national press picked up the story, and people got their first real look at the reform school.

Some of the former students organized support groups; they "reassembled 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."(Whitehead, 2019: 25) Big John Hardy, a retired carpet salesman, built a website for the Nickel Boys with the latest news. Former Students can email his/her stories to them; they will share your story on this website. It is a good chance for those who are haunted by Nickel to speak out and face their trauma.

The annual reunion, for those people, now in its fifth year, was strange and necessary. Nickel let them break but also let them together. To get rid of this pain, the black community must be united to establish harmonious relationships and provide mutual help; only in this way can the black people get out of the trauma. They could comfort each other, for they really knew each other's pain. What they attempted to do was to be recognized, and they wanted a memorial and an apology from the state. They wanted to be heard. Turner is always concerned about their situation. He has been a bystander for years. But this time, he decided to stand out. " He'll find Elwood's grave and tell his friend of his life after he was cut down in that 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."(Whitehead, 2019: 511)

6. Conclusion

Colson Whitehead's novels always run through the theme of trauma, describing the traumatic experience of blacks and guiding the blacks to the path of healing. Unlike other African American writers, his novels highlight confronting and deconstructing the distortion of the official history of the persecution of black people. The characters in *The Nickel Boys* suffered from various kinds of trauma from the white society. From the perspective of trauma theory, this paper makes an analysis and study of *The Nickel Boys* from the following three aspects: the types of trauma, the resources of trauma and the effort to recover from trauma. There were two types of trauma: physical and psychological trauma, in the novel, with a lot of examples to demonstrate, which show African Americans' living conditions in the long history. In *The Nickel Boys*, the causes of this trauma are mainly related to racial discrimination and the family environment. The treatment process is extremely challenging for people who have suffered trauma. The power of the individual is extremely weak, and the healer needs the group's assistance to treat the trauma.

In conclusion, Whitehead's realistic description of the trauma of American society is not only to call attention to special groups of black people but also to convey the necessity of building a world of racial equality. *The Nickel Boys* reflects his profound reflection on the current situation in the United States and also expresses his political appeal of realizing true ethnic equality. However, this paper still has some limitations; for example, this study only discusses two types of trauma in the novel. Thus, it is suggested that further research could pay more attention to other traumas like cultural trauma.

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