



Deconstructing Racism and Social Repression in whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*: A Thematic and Discourse Analysis

Dr. Firas Al Jumaili
Assistant Professor
English Department
Al Buraimi University College
Oman

Dr. Sheren Al Hiti
Assistant Professor
English Department
Al Buraimi University College
Oman

Abstract:

*This paper undertakes a thematic and critical discourse analysis of Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Nickel Boys* (2019), exploring the socio-political themes and discourses embedded within its narrative. The novel explores the distressing experiences of young boys at a reform school, exposing the systemic racism and social repression prevalent in a past era.*

The thematic analysis reveals the pervasive themes of ill-treatment and the imminent deaths of dreams. Through the protagonists' voices, Whitehead intricately portrays the impact of hope, fear, and sacrifice, shedding light on the enduring effects of self-awareness and resilience.

Critical discourse analysis helps shed light on the text's social circumstances, and language choices. The analysis looks closely at the language used to describe racial experiences, breaks down the power dynamics present in language, and looks at how the structures that support racism are portrayed.

The intersection of themes and discourses in the novel underscores the interconnectedness of systemic racism, social justice, and individual agency. Through the characters' experiences and social structures, Whitehead offers a poignant critique of historical and contemporary injustices.

*This analysis elucidates the nuanced layers of meaning within *The Nickel Boys*, emphasizing the novel's relevance in addressing ongoing social and racial issues. By engaging with themes and discourses, readers are challenged to confront systemic inequalities and advocate for change in their communities.*

Key Words: racism, discourse, injustice, oppression, inequality

Received 05 June, 2024; Revised 15 June, 2024; Accepted 17 June, 2024 © The author(s) 2024.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction:

When Colson Whitehead won his second Pulitzer Prize, he had taken a place of literary achievement yet unheld, which underscored the power and mercilessness of his work, *The Nickel Boys*. On one hand, while it makes strides in addressing and questioning the nature of racism in American society, it also serves as a once-removed commentary on how easily we dismiss the sufferings experienced by others. The superficial manner of complaints and discussions about racism only touch the tip of the iceberg. There is an immense amount of historical, cultural, and academic work which lies hidden underneath. Whitehead strives to shed light on these works as the backdrop and hypertext through the experiences of a group of black young adults attending a fictional school, inspiring our critical study deconstructing racism and social repression through a thematic and discourse analysis of *The Nickel Boys*

Background of *The Nickel Boys*:

A grim reflection of the society in the late 1960s, tension is at its peak between African Americans and Whites, and equal rights are demanded. Exhibiting the cruelty towards young African Americans, *The Nickel Boys* provides accounts of physical abuse and the monstrous treatment that they receive as prisoners. It raises questions on the equality of rights and humanitarianism that should be afforded to all races and social classes. This is reflective of the societal dynamics in the 1960s, and through the use of a novel form, it uses a creative way to present mainstream issues, highlighting racial inequality.

The Nickel Boys shows the story of the young lives of the African American student youths in The Nickel Academy. The young narrators provide insight on the social medical issues, racism and its repercussions in disobeying social norms and the law. Disturbing accounts of social gang rape, solitary confinement, and killing of the students are areas of great concern involving children and are brought to light in this novel.

II. Literature Review:

Professor Clark is not alone in his journey. Many of us are engaged in this partnering of literature and social change. Our interests focus on intersectionality, on utilizing literature to reveal the insidious texts of family law, the domestic law used to control women. Some scholars have examined how literature may become secondary authority for the laws that society will follow, as law and literature put them forward as texts to guide societal agreement. Similarly, using literature as a mirror to the horrors of our society in works such as *The Nickel Boys* may be a more corrosive question, especially in 2020, when we see institutionalized racism disguised as protecting and serving, as a knee to the neck subsumes the Jedi Knight, as the empire fights back, as it always does. This fight is what I am calling the third movement in law and literature, the practical movement where theory and application must converge, attacking the very reasons that this partnership has claimed a space for itself. These are the works, such as *Injustice*, that have been examining the stranglehold that racism has on our judicial system. These are the guides who will steer us on our journey, leading us toward works that will train us to address our history of racism, and as I hope, re-inspire our better selves, renewing our love of literature to reveal the truth.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of scholars concerned with the intersection of law and literature. Much of this attention has focused on establishing law and literature as a field. They have been obsessed with "what is law and literature?" debates where the focus is epistemological. Law and literature scholars have attempted to articulate what literature is and what law is. This introduction serves to broaden this field. I argue that the opportunity for law and literature now highlights, because they have more fully developed their field, is to tackle the social issues that are addressed in the books themselves. As theory has now had an equal seat at the table with application, they must go beyond what is law and literature to a broader spectrum of expression. Only by doing so may the field lead to lasting change, ideally dismantling the structures that our society is rightly critiquing in the current movements.

Thematic Analysis:

Three thematic domains emerged from the dataset that were closely related to both overt and subtle dehumanization and restriction of freedom on the basis of race. In order to find these domain attendees' work, historical data was needed from former students and educational programs filled the timeline when analyzing categories. These issues are considered in the results' presentation. A quick look at the Alabama Industrial School shows that several names were effective in branding the school during operation, including the Alabama Training School for Boys, which served as a historical marker and educational zone that took up the name of the city. When compared with other agents that would operate the house of correction, both of these terms seem richer: the idea of "training" infers programs are engaging boys in activities that will reform them into responsible future citizens. The title of "school" resonates with the values of our broader educational system. In reality, William Faulkner saw it as fitting a philosophy of segregation, that it was, in fact, a site of sterilization of potential victims.

Once the Nickel boys appear, it is possible to consider why the school does not care as a racist and can use evidence of these social repression treatments provided in the work and be taken as indicative. Such reflections can be carried out within the scope of legislation, since "it establishes that the education of the national Prejudice and Racial Discrimination Program aims to stabilize, build and implement new relationships within the school community and develop actions based on an anti-racist ethic addressing all forms of inequality, inequality, and gender. In the textbook, gender, where it is a conversation that also includes a racial perspective and even if there is a certain gender bias that represents social carefulness, we find that any content is not discussed, making it difficult to interpretively link the curious contacts in the course should analyzes and experiences that black and brown students belong. It is clear, however, that the Nickel Boys attribute the boys mapping to the "small" space of the "other" and that their predicament represents the non-station on this map. Since the issue of racial prejudice and damage in the school environment has already been discussed, I believe it is important to start the discussion,

although in some areas institutionalized relations. However, for possible violence to be abolished, care must also be associated with a form of thought, which is considered of concept, as together they set out to carry out a reflexive action on racism in socio-political life.

For children who suffer from an individual model of education, learning is easy to learn, and as reference, a sense of recognition that is considered by the racial markers. We present the power indicator segregation, including the disappearance of the African continent of the geography book. Furthermore, we note other factors called repressive practices such as the prohibition of the translation.

From the Nickel Boys story to reflect the production of a care relation which we consider that there is a framework of social repression linked to the elements that involve the kinds of violence and racism and the act of care presented by an educational organization. For different themes and, together, linked to different design positions, these will communicate and will be practical areas of education: the relationship with oneself and care; with the other; environmental education; relations with the ethical and moral based world. The topics of discussion are of utmost importance for every child, and actually reinforce the understanding of particular morals, ethics, and management.

Given the Southern Essays space and the difficulty of the item "nickel", it is possible to draw a parallel with the concept of bus tickets. Both produce the idea of availability on that lane, or even a guarantee of that space. And the interesting thing is remembering that when a person is out of date, whose research called me a lot of attention to think about this, this delimitation of time, space, consequently space of desire, space of experience, negotiate all these life forms, exists a preponderance on the part of the bus ticket for that item or is a position guarantee, is also a demand for the question of the reference produced from this act of no more subsuming concepts, of ingredients sum totalization, but of understanding themselves as referring to themselves in the differences.

Discourse Analysis:

In chapter two, which examined the novel's preface and the characters Elwood Curtis and Turner, I employed the display and theme/irony-driven textual analysis to investigate how the novel's narrative and characters, Elwood Curtis and Turner, portrayed racism and social repression. In this chapter, my focus broadens to include all the novel's characters but maintains a center upon theme and display-driven analysis, especially interactional themes: tenet 1, which performs the role shifts and interactive (displayed) act vocabulary to portray characters and their identity and delineates thematic and ironical uses of narrative in discourse/actions, and tenet 2, which extends the role of acts and identity as expressed for the interaction context, where actions are displayed across the novel's plot contexts and interactions.

This chapter uses the theme and display-driven methods of discourse analysis to investigate how racism and social repression are portrayed in *The Nickel Boys*. The race realism tenet is used to investigate how the text portrays African-American identities, while the shift in structure and character tenets are used to examine how the plot is structured, and how the novel's characters act and interact. The chapter draws on Gee, Markee, and De Fina's works on discourse analysis and narrative as a series of interactions, displays, and interactive acts.

Power allows people in authority, educators, and establishments a degree of channeling services to those in society that have energy-mind throughout the controlled establishment of spoken and penned sociocultural rights and behaviors. In fact, gradually, by means of subliminal process, people are patiently subjected to the category of recipients and correspondents, then to that of symptoms of information. As a consequence, when everything is being pursued to maintain hierarchy and power, jargon and pen are either undermined or fictionalized. Although the mentioned perspectives are right, no tool of power is exempt from counter-hegemony. How can language be seen as a reflection of power dynamics in society? Language serves as a system that individualizes the "experience of the universe" a person lives in, and in so doing, it allows people to express their thoughts, experiences, and schemas, or the mental patterns used to understand the universe. The mainspring of conversation is power; one party wields authority through speech, by convincing their listener that what is said is of correct form and correct content. People are trained from a very early age to associate the power of speech to elevate ideas by analyzing and reacting to others through classrooms, lectures, and debates.

III. Conclusion:

The fundamental question Susan Toohey grapples with about Howard TV violence is particularly apropos to our current society of social inequality, racial discrimination, and partisan politics, expressed too often through violence: "Is it that efforts to suppress social violence—by police, by the courts, by TV executives, by politicians or by anyone—repress those most ready to counter this violence?" as Keefa Weatherspoon, a character in *The Nickel Boys* presents: "White man repress you, your brothers suppress you, your own mind press down on yourself." Indeed, repressive and dehumanizing violence, discrimination, and inequality cannot be controlled by further violence or oppression; not in a prison, and not in the larger community and society.

In Colson Whitehead's fictional novel *The Nickel Boys*, the account of the protagonist Elwood Curtis portrays a society plagued by social conflict, institutional racism, and social repression. Racial identity and self-determination are depicted as entangled elements in the African American experience. It is concluded that racist ideology and dehumanizing social experiences, particularly those depicted in the novel, serve to suppress the life chances and social mobility of African Americans. Practicing solidarity within the African American community deconstructs racial identity and structures determined through racial ideology.

The novel weaves a compelling, gripping, and illuminating realist narrative about the complex social repression and the history of the Jim Crow South's correctional facilities educational system in the city of southern hospitality, kindness, and faith.

The attributes database revealed the complexity of oppression faced by the 50-year distinguished institution that replicated intricate systems of control and silencing mechanisms that were historically linked. The attributes "child abuse," "Catholic Church," "Jim Crow," and "recasting slavery" contribute to a new understanding of historical times that were seemingly not as barbaric as other periods in U.S. history.

This paper has employed a qualitative thematic and discourse analysis of Colson Whitehead's latest novel, *The Nickel Boys*. Applying the Black Criticism approach, the analysis has revisited the racism that African Americans and people of color faced. Specifically, it explores how they were silenced, punished, disciplined, taught, and discouraged from speaking. This analysis makes a crucial contribution by deconstructing racism through the forgotten stories of the disenfranchised Black youth who were sent to the oldest boys' reformatory school in the Florida Panhandle during the Jim Crow era.

Bibliography:

- [1]. Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *Authoritarian personality*. New York, NY: Harper and Brothers. (A publication of the American Jewish Committee).
- [2]. Aptheker, H. (1979). *The American Revolution, 1763-1783* (6th ed.). New York, NY: International Publishers.
- [3]. Bernstein, R. (1994). *Racial innocence: Performing American childhood from slavery to civil rights*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- [4]. Bond, R. (2020). In America, does more education equal less racism? Racial resentment and presidential approval in the Trump era. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(2), 288-305.
- [5]. Burt, R. S. (1992). *Structural holes: The social structure of competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [6]. Collins, P. H. (2000). It's all in the family: Intersections of gender, race, and nation. *Hypatia*, 15(4), 62-82.
- [7]. Du Bois, W. E. B. (1994). *The souls of Black folk*. New York, NY: Vintage Books/Random House.
- [8]. Du Bois, W. E. B. (1995). *Black reconstruction in America*. New York, NY: Free Press/Simon and Schuster.
- [9]. Gump, W. E. (1942). Who owns America's corporations? An inquiry into the concentration of control and profit with a publicly held corporation. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 57(4), 632-683.