

Received: 11 September 2023, Accepted: 15 November 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/rr.vx9il.37>

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND PSYCHIC DISINTEGRATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS: AN ANALYSIS OF COLSON WHITEHEAD'S THE NICKEL BOYS FROM DU BOIS'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This qualitative research explores Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) in the light of Du Bois's theorization of double consciousness and psychic disintegration in African Americans. African Americans confront two worldviews, i-e., Eurocentric worldview and African worldview. In order to navigate in American social life and manifest a presentable persona vis-à-vis the prevalent oppressive environment and racism, they undergo psychic disintegration thereby giving rise to double consciousness. Elwood, the protagonist of *The Nickel Boys* confronts double standards of the society. He undergoes a radical change in his identity from Turner to Elwood. This paper argues that Elwood and Turner are the two sides of the same coin. Idealist Elwood who tries his best to conform to Eurocentric oriented social norms turns to skeptical Turner while violent nature of Turner ends with Elwood's naïve character in the process of adaptation to oppressive social paraphernalia. Instead of reformation, the original self of Elwood is lost in the *Nickel Academy*.*

Introduction: Freud's approach of ontogeny locates the disintegration of psyche inside individual themselves (see Freud, 1964, for more detail); Jung's phylogenetic approach explores it in the collective unconscious (see Jung, 2014, for more detail); while Du Bois's and Fanon's approaches of socio-diagnostics trace it in the social apparatus (see Du Bois, 1903/2015; Fanon, 1952/2008 & 1961/2004, for more detail). On the other hand, scholars of the late 20th century and 21st century, for example, Baldwin and Bell (1985), Nobles (1986), Cross (1991, 2001), Spencer (1995, 2006), Bashir (2003), Gilmore (2009) and Parham (2009) try to combine two or all of these approaches when they investigate the psyche of the African Americans. Regarding the American context, the analysis of Du Bois occupies the central place in academia not only because of the originality of Du Bois's insights but also because he was the first African American who presented a subversive model in face of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist model whereby Washington advocated assimilation. Therefore, this study invokes Du Bois's theorization articulated in *The*

Souls of Black Folk (1933/2015) and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940/2007) for the analysis of Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019).

Colson Whitehead is an acclaimed African American author of *The Intuitionist* (1999), *John Henry Days* (2001), *Zone One* (2011), *The Underground Railroad* (2016), *The Nickel Boys* (2019) and *Harlem Shuffle* (2021). He was awarded 2016 National Book Award for Fiction, and was also awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction twice in 2017 and 2020 both for *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys*. As opposed to speculative realism and anachronisms of *The Underground Railroad*, the plot of *The Nickel Boys* oscillates between 1960s and present-day America in the tradition of realism. Quest for identity foreclosure is the main thrust of *The Nickel Boys* (2019). There are also traces of the slave narratives and (neo)slave narratives in the novel.

Plot of the novel revolves around Elwood Curtis, a black child brought up by his grandmother in 1960s in Florida. He is hardworking and intelligent “and a credit to his race” (Whitehead, 2019, p. 22). At Lincoln High School, he is held in high esteem because of “his cool temperament” (p. 29). *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* is the only album he owns and he has taken Dr. Martin Luther King's words “*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*” to heart (pp. 24-25; emphasis in original). After school hours, he works at a hotel which is named Richmond. At Richmond, he earns a set of encyclopedias in dishwashing competition. However, he is disappointed when he finds that the pages of the books are blank (p. 15). Afterwards, he starts working at a tobacco shop on Macomb Street. Elwood's teacher, Mr. Hill recommends him to Melvin Griggs Technical which is “the colored college just south of Tallahassee” (p. 37).

Elwood is eager to visit Melvin Griggs even before the commencement of classes. Therefore, he sets out for the college early. He is given lift by a black driver—Rodney—who turns out to be a car thief and the car was stolen. Elwood is arrested along with Rodney for stealing the car. However, Elwood is sent to a juvenile facility instead of prison. Thus, instead of college, Elwood arrives at the Nickel Academy. This juvenile facility was opened by the state of Florida in 1899 with the purpose that “the young offender of law, separated from vicious associates, may receive physical, intellectual, and moral training, be reformed and restored to the community with purpose and character fitting for a good citizen, an honorable and an honest man ...” (p. 74). However, in reality, this reform school is a nightmarish upside-down world. Here “work, comportment, demonstration of compliance or docility” are standards of good behavior (p. 56). Anyone who resists the corrupt depravity of the school administration is likely to disappear. Despite these odds, Elwood clings to Dr. King's assertion “Throw us in jail, and we will still love you” (p. 170).

Elwood's friend, Turner does not agree to Elwood's idealism. Turner is of the opinion that the world is crooked. The only way to survive in such a cruel world is to emulate the brutality and cynicism of the oppressors. Elwood tries to inform the outside world about the cruelty and corruption of the Nickel Academy administration by giving a written note to one of the inspectors. To punish him for his audacity, Elwood is shifted to the White House—torture room of the Nickel Academy—where he is severely tortured. He was shifted to the torture room earlier but this time they decide to kill him by fastening him to the Oak Tree. Turner persuades Elwood to escape. In

their escape, Elwood is shot dead while Turner succeeds in saving his life. Afterwards, Turner assumes Elwood's name and resides in New York with a successful business. However, nostalgia of the past haunts him.

Statement of the Problem: The term 'post-racial America' triggers what Festinger (1957/1968) terms "cognitive dissonance" (p. 3). In the face of tall claims of democracy, equality and more importantly the 13th amendment to the US constitution, African American still feel they are segregated (Usman & Ashfaq, 2022). Alexander (2010/2012) terms this phenomenon "The New Jim Crow". Blacks are pressurized to conform to the Eurocentric social norms. Thus, African Americans confront two worldviews: Euro-American worldview and African worldview. The imposed order makes them develop what Du Bois (1903/2015) terms "double consciousness" (p. 5) in which the psyche of an individual splits into two. This study explores how psyche of an African American undergoes a change in the process of adaptation to oppressive social order as is manifested in the change of identity of the protagonist of *The Nickel Boys* in the course of narrative. Elwood turns to skeptical Turner while Turner assumes Elwood's identity. This study argues that Elwood and Turner are the two sides of the same coin. These two characters in the novel are personifications of the two sides of the psyche of the same individual—a black person in America. Therefore, Du Bois's analysis of black experience is an appropriate lens to study the novel.

Literature Review: *The Nickel Boys* (2019) has attracted a number of scholars to explore this novel from different perspectives. Hopkins (2020) investigates the character of Elwood. Hopkins asserts that Elwood's journey is the representation of Campbell's (1991) hero journey or monomyth.

Martín-Salván (2021) analyzes *The Nickel Boys* through the lens of "tension between concealment and unveiling" and its bearing on the novel's "rhetorical, narrative and ideological structure" (p. 1). Martín-Salván's methodology combines "stylistic and narratological analysis with sociological and ideological contextualization" (p. 2). In this regard, this scholarly work on *The Nickel Boys* is an intersection of Derridean ethics of secrecy and literature, Foucauldian study on prison, and James Phelan's narratological work. Martín-Salván opines that narrative of the novel exposes a façade in American society; the appearance of equality in the Nickel Academy is illusory because racism in form of new Jim Crow can be found outside in the society despite tall claims of post-raciality. "A key aspect emphasized in the text is how the correctional system allows to make visible the buried persistence of racial supremacism which was openly practiced in slavery" (p. 4).

Likewise, Junior (2023) explores the novel from the perspective of Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics. Junior argues that "discovery of bones outside Boot Hill uncovers another scandal: it exposes the necropolitical nature of incarceration in the United States" (p. 295). Junior opines that The White House, the oak trees, and the dark cell represent Mbembe's concept of third places whereby sovereignty and racialized form of terror are exercised on the marginalized (pp. 298-99).

Another study, Strickland (2021), asserts that *The Nickel Boys* serves a political purpose and it has critical hope. Strickland says, "Learning as much as we do about Elwood's character, alongside the triviality of the "crimes" committed by the other boys, highlights the fact that crime, in reality and in fiction, is not the problem; blackness is" (p. 72). Thus, Whitehead through his narrative brings forward another remnant of the past in form of convict-leasing as evidence of new form of slavery.

Studies reviewed here show that *The Nickel Boys* has not been explored from the perspective of Du Bois's "double consciousness" and psychic disintegration. Therefore, this study contributes to the exploration of the novel and discussion of African American psychology.

Theoretical Framework: Du Bois's analysis of black experience in American society can rightly be termed as socio-diagnostics. Blacks are not responsible for the predicament they find themselves in. Likewise, their genes which they inherit from their forefathers are not responsible for this conundrum. In other words, blacks being a cause of the problem is not an ontological reality. Instead, the problem is phenomenological. The existential deviance imposed upon blacks is the main cause of the problem. Thus, a researcher neither needs to investigate the individual psyche nor genetic make-up of a black subject to trace the root cause of the race issue in the US. Rather the cause of the malaise needs to be investigated in the social set-up. A black subject is confronted with numerous social pressures; they are expected to conform to Euro-American norms vis-à-vis their African world-view. Blacks consider themselves Americans, however, they are denied this identity and they are unheard. As such, the psyche of the black subject is disintegrated and they develop, as Du Bois (1903/2015 & 1940/2007) termed the phenomenon, "double consciousness" (p. 5).

Methodology: This study is qualitative and descriptive in nature. Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) is explored through the lens of Du Bois's sociological concept of double consciousness and psychic disintegration. Three main components of Du Bois's concept of double consciousness—The Veil, Twoness, and the Second Sight—are traced in the narrative of the novel. Relevant parts of the novel, through close reading, are analyzed to find out societal pressures on the main character of the novel and to trace out the result of these pressures in form of his psychic split and transformation in his identity.

Discussion and Analysis: Tension in the novel is developed from the very first sentence of the novel; "Even in death the boys were trouble" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 1). It sounds like an echo of Du Bois's (1903/2015) central question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (p. 4). Du Bois's reaction is that being a problem is better than being nothing else. But it gives only temporary satisfaction. Du Bois in his oeuvre tries to prove that the question of being a problem is wrong. It is not an ontological reality that blackness is the problem. Rather social conditions imposed upon blacks are the main cause of the problem. Elwood, the protagonist of Colson Whitehead's novel encounters adverse social forces at every step of his journey from his childhood to adulthood. These adverse social forces are bent to keep him down. From Du Bois's perspective, racial veil is already set to separate him from the mainstream social world. What is Elwood's response to deal with the racial veil? Racial veil refers to tangible boundaries between whites and blacks which not only separates them but also affects their perceptions.

The first encounter with these forces is in form of his winning a set of encyclopedias in a dishwashing competition. He is very happy. However, when he unpacks these books "He paused with *Ga*, curious to see how the smart men at the Fisher company handled *galaxy*. The pages were blank—all of them" (p. 15, emphasis in original). This episode also alludes to the blackness of 13th amendment and civil rights acts in America. Civil rights movement and more particularly the election of a black president earned America the title of post-racial community. "However, social and economic fetters still chain the blacks" (Usman & Ashfaq, 2021, p. 2733). Du Bois

(1903/2015) proclaimed that “color-line” is the main problem of the 20th century (p. 32). It seems that problem of 21st century is also the color-line.

Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* case mandated schools to be desegregated. However, Elwood’s grandmother is suspicious, “Jim Crow ain’t going to just slink off ... [his] wicked self.” She is of the opinion, “It is one thing to tell someone to do what’s right and another thing for them to do it” (p. 16). In Du Bois’s words, the presence of the veil will always separate whites from blacks.

From his childhood, Elwood feels “his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois, 1903/2015, p. 5). On one hand, Elwood tries to cling to Dr. King’s assertion about having a “sense of dignity” and a “sense of somebody-ness.” On the other,

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*. The encyclopedias are empty. There are people who trick you and deliver *emptiness* with a smile, while others rob you of your self-respect. You need to remember who you are. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 25, emphasis added)

American society as depicted in *The Nickel Boys* is infested with racism. In Lincoln High School, black boys are too poor to buy their own books. Therefore, students receive secondhand textbooks from the white high school. “Knowing where the textbooks were headed, the white students left inscriptions for the next owners: *Choke, Nigger! You Smell*” (p. 27). The first thing the black boys are supposed to do is to strike out all these racial slurs. According to Du Bois, the presence of the veil prevents recognition of blacks’ humanity. As such, genuine communication is impossible between the races. Du Bois (1940/2007) is of the opinion that whites do not hear or completely misrecognize what blacks try to convey from behind the veil (p. 66). Du Bois further investigates the effect of lack of recognition on blacks. He says, “Then the people within may become hysterical. They may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in” (p. 66). In this way, pathology resides in the American social order.

Apparently, Elwood is not affected by these adverse forces and he continues to outshine in his studies. However, he is not satisfied with the state of affairs. One day he joins a protest of the black community. The protest is in response to a movie, *The Ugly American*, shown in the Florida theatre. The protesters are chanting slogans like EQUAL TRAETMENT UNDER THE LAW, and “What do we want? Freedom! When do we want it? Now!” (Whitehead, 2019, p. 33). Elwood’s grandmother disapproves of his taking part in the protest. However, “after a week, things in the house [are] back to their routine, but Elwood [is] changed. *Closer*. At the demonstration, he [felt] somehow *closer* to himself. For a moment” (p. 35, emphasis in original). Elwood is not sure about his motive in taking part in the protest. However, he receives a copy of James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* from his school teacher, Mr. Hill. After reading this book, he comes to the conclusion that he did not march “on the Florida theatre in defense of his rights or those of the black race of

which he was a part; he [marched] for everyone's rights, even those who shouted him down. My struggle is your struggle, your burden is my burden. But how to tell people?" (p. 35). These lines aptly show double consciousness and psychic disintegration of a black individual in America. Blacks consider themselves American; however, they are denied to be considered Americans. Blacks try to present themselves articulately, clearly, and sincerely. But they are unheard.

Elwood's first impression of the Nickel Academy is that it is not a bad place. "He got a look at the school and thought may be Franklin was right—Nickel wasn't that bad" (p. 45). However, it dawns upon him later that it is, as Junior (2023) puts it, "a microcosm of plantation slavery" (p. 300). Elwood observes segregation of the white boys and the black boys. Black boys are kept in Cleveland dormitory while white boys are kept in Roosevelt dormitory. "It was swiftly clear that outside was one thing and inside another" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 50). Physical torture both for white boys and black boys is different. Therefore, the torture room is termed as "the Ice Cream Factory" by white boys while it is termed as "the White House" by the black boys (p. 64). Description of the White House conjures up Foucauldian concept of panopticon. "This place was why the school had no wall or fence or barbed wire around it, why so few boys ran: It was the wall that kept them in" (p. 65). Disparity between the outside appearance and inside reality is conveyed in these words, "All the violence roiling beneath that makes the world above" (p. 75). Turner puts it in these words, "In here and out there are the same, but in here no one has to act fake anymore" (p. 79).

Elwood receives his first severe physical torture in the White House when he interferes in the quarrel of two other boys. The torture makes him remain silent. He wants to tell his grandmother about the severe punishment but he remains silent. However, he feels that his repressed energy/violence comes to surface in form of attacking the grass when he joins the yard crew after he is discharged from the Academy's hospital. This violence will go a long way in his life. In this episode "two-ness" of Elwood is at peak. His childhood dream is to become a great man. Now he wants to be discharged from the reformatory school and start his college education. All this amounts to his behavior to remain silent. But, on the other hand, he is unable to process the injustice he meted out in the school.

Du Bois's analysis of the racial question is not limited to the description of the oppressive character of the racialized society. A constant striving of blacks to define their world is also at the center of his oeuvre. They shape their own world with dignity, self-assertion and creativity with such striving. Elwood perceives another corruption in the administration of the Nickel Academy. Food supplies for black boys sent to academy by the state of Florida are sold. He also notices that boys are sexually abused. Though he remains silent, he is constantly noting the supplies which are sold in a note book. Du Bois (1903/2015) proposes three modes of responses of blacks to deal with the veil. One response to the veil is self-assertion despite oppressive environment. Second response is outright rebellion. Third response is assimilation (p. 37). Regarding Elwood's response to the veil, his is neither assimilation nor rebellion. He tries to correct all the wrongs with dignity by asserting his humanity despite the inhuman behavior of the Nickel administration.

Superintendent of the Nickel Academy, Spencer, wants a black boy, Griff, to lose a boxing match to a white boy. However, Griff knocks the white boy down in the final round and the white boy loses the match. Turner tells Elwood that Griff is going to be taken "out back" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 102). Elwood does not understand the meaning of 'taking out back.' Turner shows him two oak

trees on one side of the horse stables and says, “This is *out back*. ... They say 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.” Elwood asks whether white boys are tied to the oak trees. Turner replies, “The White House, they got that integrated. This place is separate. They take you out back, they don’t bring you to the hospital. They put you down as escaped and that’s that, boy” (p. 103). Cruelty towards black boys is manifest from this description of the oak trees. Afterwards, Griff is taken “out back” and he never returns. It is told in the narrative that the state of Florida dug him up in 2014. Forensic examination revealed through his broken bones that Griff was subjected to violence before he died.

There are numerous examples in the narrative which show that administrators of the school have close links with Klan members. However, the gruesome face of the Academy is shown in the description of the dark cells which are meant for solitary confinement. The examples of new forms of slavery are mentioned in the description that white people leased paroled students of the Nickel Academy. Elwood breaks his silence. He decides to inform the outside world of the corruption in the school. He writes a note and gives it to one of the inspectors during the state inspection of the school. He expects that soldiers of the National Guard would descend in the school as they did in 1957 during the Little Nine Crisis. However, instead of soldiers, guards of the academy come and take Elwood to the White House. After the torture he is shifted to the dark cell from where he is supposed to be tied to the oak tree. Here, in the dark cell, Elwood thinks that it is “A jail within a jail” (p. 193).

So far Elwood’s response to the veil was self-assertion with dignity. But here his response changes to rebellion when he is confronted with life and death issue. Therefore, he escapes, trespassing the boundaries that power dynamics have set for him. But this incident makes him realize another harsh reality; being black, he cannot withstand repercussions of rebellious impulse vis-à-vis the oppressive character of the environment. His second sight—awareness of his invisibility—leads him to change his identity. In other words, he decides to assimilate the oppressive Euro-centric norms set for blacks. He becomes docile and sheds off his subversive nature. With this, he is able to live a successful life in New York. Elwood’s assimilation is not his choice, but it is imposed upon him. However, second sight offers him an opportunity to stand abreast of the modern business world. Du Bois concept of second sight offers blacks to conceptualize white supremacy as well.

Du Bois (1940/2007) offers an analysis of the world of whites. Whites presuppose themselves as ontologically superior without acknowledging their part in suppressing blacks (p. 71). Another point is that whites live in a perpetual incongruity between their ideals of justice and equality on one hand and their injustice toward blacks on the other. They constantly seek justification of their unjust order of white supremacy. With this Du Bois tries to prove that race is a social construct. It is a result of social interaction and institutionalized power dynamics. Subjectivities construct a social order and social order constructs subjectivities. Mentality of the white supremacist in the novel is conveyed through these words, “Their daddies taught them how to keep a slave in line, passed down this brutal heirloom. Take his away from his family, whip him until all he remembers is the whip, chain him up so all he knows is chains” (Whitehead, 2017, p. 189). These words show whites’ subjective evaluation of blacks learned from the social order.

Conclusion: Colson Whitehead tries to convey the message that docility and naïveté are the standards for blacks to live in a racist society like America. Their skepticism and subversive nature are not tolerated. Skeptical and subversive nature of the protagonist is killed and it is with docile and naïve character that he passes from childhood to adulthood. However, he is not satisfied despite his success in New York. His psyche is split between Elwood and Turner and he is doomed to live with a double consciousness. This study reveals the blankness of the promises of equality and post-raciality for blacks in American society. Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, reminds the readers that there is the grim face of racism behind the post-racial assertion. In this regard, Du Bois's declaration that color-line is the central problem of twentieth century is still relevant. Though a lot has been done regarding race in America, this study finds that they still need to answer the racial question which has stifled the spirit of freedom.

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