



Interpreting the Personality Transformation and Tragic Fate of the Characters in *The Nickel Boys* from the Perspective of Cultural Hegemony

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Abstract Based on actual events in history and taking the Nickel School in Florida, the southern United States during the Jim Crow era as the focus of the narrative, Colson Whitehead's award-winning novel *The Nickel Boys* recreates the actual scenes of racial persecution in history and restores the oppressive nature of cultural hegemony through a detailed description of the survival situation of black characters. At the same time, the author incorporated his thoughts about the present into the book and expressed his profound reflections on the reality in the United States and his political claim to achieve true racial equality.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead; the Nickel Boys; Cultural Hegemonism

1 Introduction

Colson Whitehead is a representative black literature writer of the 21st century, who takes the inheritance and development of black literature as his beginning as a black writer and tries to write black literature in a different way[5]. Mathias Nilges described that his novel "explored history and time through discontinuous and unaccompanied forms that emerged from the racialism and racialized dimension of time"[6]. His novel *The Nickel Boys*, published in 2019, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, this is also the second time he has won this award. In this novel, he told the horrific abuse story that occurred in a juvenile labor camp in the context of racial segregation in the United States based on the historical racial persecution that actually occurred at the Arthur·G·Dozier Boys' School (Retrieved 03/07/2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/20/colson-whitehead-reality-is-kids-shot-by-racist-cops>).

In this paper, cultural hegemony theory is used for analysis. Hegemony has proven valuable in describing social order in which structures of domination are maintained through means other than force, providing a theory for the place of cultural practices in power relations[9]. Cultural hegemonism refers to the use of hegemony by a dominant social group (not only class, but also includes gender, race, and nationality) at a certain phase in history to induce the general population to accept its political, moral, and cultural values in order to ensure that the worldview and dominance it has established in society will not be shaken[3]. Gramsci emphasized that hegemony is not static, but a

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constant struggle and negotiation between two sides for control of a certain field, with one side winning temporarily and becoming the ruling group, and culture also falls under the category of the struggle between two sides.

2 Typical Victim Under Hegemonic Oppression - Grandmother Harriet

Living in American society in the 1960s, grandmother Harriet of Elwood Curtis, the main character of this book, is a typical representative of hegemonic persecution. As a black woman, Harriet's life was difficult. In the first chapter of the book, the author introduced the character in the following way, "His grandmother Harriet had a few gospel records, which she only played when the world discovered a new meaningful way to work on her (11)." The author used it to imply that the life of grandmother Harriet was not satisfactory. Considering the strong racial discrimination against blacks and the disregard for women's rights in American society at that time, it is not difficult for the readers to know about the grandmother's life. In the face of all the unfair treatment, the grandmother felt distressed and annoyed, she chose to listen to gospel records for self-enlightenment, which also reflects the grandmother's personality, she usually digested by herself, and was not good at sharing her thoughts with others, which also lays the foundation for the second half of the book when grandmother was ill and her mental state became worse.

The class that rules the material forces of society is, at the same time, the intellectual forces that rule it [4]. The state mechanism under cultural hegemonism became a tool to protect the racism of "white supremacy" and to exploit the legitimate rights of blacks. "Harriet had worked at the hotel since she was fourteen (13)". The fact that the grandmother began working at a young age had a great impact on her later development of personality and openness of mind. Through the description of Harriet squeezed into the bus every time, "trembled and squeezed into the back with other ladies (33)" fully reflects the grandmother's cautious and timid personality. Due to the blacks have been at the bottom of society for a long time, their status is low and their income is meager, especially the black women's basic right to education is not guaranteed, which makes them unable to change their living standard through their own efforts, so they still suffer from the racial discrimination and persecution of the white people.

In Chapter 7 of the book, the story of grandmother Harriet who experienced three separations from her loved ones in her life was described, but "rarely did Harriet make proper goodbyes to her loved ones (70)," which undoubtedly led to her hatred of racism and fear of hegemonic oppression. The first time was Harriet's separation from her father. Her father eventually died in prison because a white woman "accused him of not getting out of her way on the sidewalk (70)". The second time was Harriet's separation from her husband Monty. Her husband stepped up to protest one of Simone's dishwashers from three white men and got hit in the head with a chair while breaking up a scuffle, but the real killers - the white men - were not brought to justice. The third time was Harriet's separation from her daughter Evelyn and son-in-law Percy, a black soldier who fought in the war, but he could not get the same discharge treatment as the white

soldiers and even became the target of attack of the white boys in town for a long period. Finally, Percy couldn't bear such a depressing life and decided to take his wife Evelyn to leave the town.

These three separations from her family were undoubtedly devastating to Harriet, and made her fearful and confused about any protests that required "stepping up". Harriet didn't understand the point of protests and thought they were chaotic, ineffective, and dangerous for the town. Grandmother's painful experiences throughout her life were related to the ideological emancipation of blacks. Her husband and son-in-law made different choices from other blacks in the face of difficulties and transitions because they "got too many ideas", and they paid the price for it. Thus, Harriet wanted Elwood to be knowledgeable, but feared that he would be harmed by it. She wanted to keep Elwood through hard work, so that he would not have time to attend the protests, just as "Duty might protect him, as it had protected her (34)."

Harriet is the most typical victim in the book, and her whole life is spent under the oppression of cultural hegemony. It seems that Harriet was not persecuted by any harsh racism in the book, and she was the same as the blacks living in American society at that time, her life was a bit harder and she was subject to more restrictions, but it was not unsustainable, which reflects the cultural hegemony can satisfy the needs of the oppressed to a certain extent in order to maintain the essence of their exploitation. In the sense of legitimation, the privileged class succeeds in connecting and functionalizing the themes, issues and ideas of pre-existing cultural elements that have taken root in the lower classes[7]. But her personal misfortune is the epitome of the whole society. No oppressed person can be truly happy under the double persecution of racial discrimination and cultural hegemony. Harriet's misfortune is shown through her entire family, including her father, husband, daughter and son-in-law, and grandson Elwood, and she also had to bear the consequences of the injustice that had happened to her family. The four separations eventually knocked her down, especially after hearing about Elwood's death, and we can imagine how hard it is for a grandmother who has focused her entire life on her grandson after hearing about his death. Harriet's experience is a true reflection of the situation of black women's lives in American society at that time, and there is a weak side and a tough side in her personality[8]. Her personality is inseparable from her historical background and personal encounters.

3 Unwilling Follower Under Hegemonic Oppression - Friend Turner

As Elwood's best friend after entering Nickel School, the author described Turner in detail. In terms of personality and interaction with others, Turner and Elwood formed a stark contrast. He came to Nickel School earlier than the main character and had a better understanding of the rules and order here, thus, he came into contact with the darkest side of human nature earlier than the main character. These experiences made Turner show both resistance and obedience to everything in Nickel School, and become an unwilling follower under the hegemonic oppression.

Turner always gave a sense of detachment of "inside and above at the same time; a part and apart (57)", he seemed to be among the boys but did not belong here, and also highlighted the character's cold and quiet personality from the side. And then, Turner helped Elwood when Griff tried to make difficulties for Elwood, but did not ask Elwood to say thanks, which reflects his real personality of cold appearance and warm heart.

Turner's two-sided personality was more clearly revealed in the following story. Turner may look cold, but he still had good intentions inside, but at Nickel School, he can only show good intentions for others within his limits and without hurting himself. After Elwood was physically punished by Spencer for helping his classmate Corey and was hospitalized with serious injuries, Turner made himself come to the hospital to "take a vacation" by eating soap powder. On the one hand, he was trying to escape the heavy workload at school, on the other hand, he was out of concern for his friend, and this was the turning point for the two to become good friends. After Turner knew that Elwood wanted to leave Nickel School as soon as possible, he started to help Elwood and recommended him to join the work group.

The personalities of characters are closely related to the social environment in which they live and their personal growth backgrounds. Turner had lived with Aunt Mavis since childhood, and had the best relationship with Aunt. At the age of eleven, Turner witnessed Aunt Mavis' boyfriend Ishmael beating Mavis, and Ishmael bought off Turner with ice cream in order to make him keep the secret, which was the first time Turner realized that "adults are always trying to buy off children to make them forget their bad actions (126)". Later, he came to a bowling alley as a pinsetter, and under the stimulation of an old employee, he got into trouble with a white customer, and was eventually arrested by the police and sold to Nickel School, which was Turner's second time to see the interpersonal rivalry and suspicion, but also made him enter into the gloomier and lawless Nickel School. A series of changes during growth and premature exposure to the ugliness of human nature shaped Turner's indifference, calmness, and a sense of emotional detachment.

In Chapter 9 of the book, Turner overheard Spencer's unreasonable request for Griff to "take a dive" (103) during the match and threatened Griff to "take him out back" (103) if he did not do so, Turner felt very angry but could do nothing about it. After the match, although Griff won the championship, he did not return to Roosevelt, and this was undoubtedly a major mental blow for Turner, making him understand even more that he couldn't resist the rulers of Nickel School. Although Turner was indifferent to everything on the surface, he was not indifferent inside, but individual power or the power of all the black boys were too weak to fight against these hegemonists, which is the reason for the weak and compromised side of his personality.

Turner knew that Elwood still held hope for fairness and justice. On the one hand, he admired his friend's persistence in believing in the law and keeping his principles in such a difficult situation, and on the other hand, he hoped that Elwood could learn to obey and follow the laws of survival of Nickel School because he could better protect himself in this way. Turner was honest with his friends, he truly cared about Elwood and wanted him to escape from Nickel School, but he was also cautious and unwilling to get into any trouble in Nickel School because he knew that he could only rely on himself here. From the analysis of the character's environment and historical

background, Turner's multiple personalities have their own inevitable factors of creation and existence, the character is a combination of contradictions, but unexpectedly more understandable and acceptable to the readers.

In the last two chapters of the book, Turner's personality changed obviously, from initially unwilling obedience, cold appearance, and warm heart to a brave resistance to oppression in the later stages. The transformation began in Chapter 14, Elwood decided to escape from Nickel School and wrote a letter to the state supervisor to report the crimes of Nickel School. Turner was originally opposed to this approach, but he eventually decided to help his friend, not only out of love for his friend, but also because Turner hoped Elwood could succeed from the bottom of his heart. Even though he seemed to be obedient and follow the rules of Nickel School, this was actually a disguise for him to protect himself. It was Elwood's constant pursuit of fairness and justice that promoted a spirit of rebellion that was still fragile until now, he wanted to try to overthrow the hegemonic oppression while ensuring his own safety. It failed finally. It was difficult for the boys, who did not receive any capital support, to try to find conscientious members of the hegemonic group to solve the problem under the double oppression of racism and cultural hegemony. Later, the report letter was discovered and Elwood was taken away by Spencer and others. Although the attempt failed, Turner's courage to fight against Nickel School didn't weaken and was strengthened by the idea of trying to rescue his best friend.

Turner decided to rescue Elwood and escape from Nickel School with him. At this point, Turner was resolute and determined to leave Nickel School, his previous compromise with the violent oppression of the hegemonic rulers had disappeared. For the sake of his friends and his future life, he decided to take a risk and try. Then the development of the storyline in the book came to the climax, but also the most dramatic transformation of Turner's personality. He was no longer an unwilling follower under the hegemonic oppression, it can be seen that he was firm and brave when he decided to break through the hegemonic persecution to help his friends out of danger. Through the description of Elwood suffering injustice, a major change in Turner's personality was promoted, so that this character became richer and more vivid. In the last chapter, the two men helped each other during the escape, Elwood was shot and fell to the ground when there was just a step away from success. In the end, only Turner left Nickel School.

The death of Turner's best friend brought a huge blow to him, which made his newly-established spirit of resistance crumble and doubt the efforts he had made before. Turner was guilty of Elwood's death and felt that "He should have burned it and talked him out of that fool plan instead of giving him silence (207)." He could have persuaded his friend to give up this plan, but instead, he kept silent and even took on the task of helping his friend send the letter. Elwood's tragic death made Turner realize that individual power cannot fight against the rulers who discriminated against and persecuted the Nickel boys, and that obedience and compromise were the rules that allowed him to survive in society. After escaping from Nickel School, Turner was more indifferent and became a typical unwilling follower under hegemonic oppression.

4 **Brave Resister Under Hegemonic Oppression - Elwood Curtis**

Elwood, the main character of this book, is the core of the book and a typical representative of the resistance against the dark oppression of the hegemonic rulers. In order to make the image of the main character more vivid and concrete, the author described Elwood's personality in detail and comprehensively showed the changes in the character's mentality and personality after a series of dramatic changes. Elwood was a high-spirited black student, but he was forced to come to Nickel School for labor reform because of an unwarranted charge, during which his life experience can be roughly divided into two stages to analyze in detail: first, before entering Nickel School; second, after entering Nickel School. Similarly, Elwood's short life can be divided into two different periods. As a student, even living in an American Society where racism and cultural hegemony were rampant, Elwood had the ambition to change his oppressed fate and live a happy life through study. After coming to Nickel School, Elwood also believed that he could return to his original life if he completed the requirements of the school and upgraded to ACE (49), but the hardships in the life gradually destroyed Elwood's previous beliefs, and eventually, he was not able to get rid of the control of Nickel School and return to his family and friends.

The first three chapters of the book focus on Elwood's childhood and school years before coming to Nickel School. In these three chapters, the author described the contradictory nature of Elwood's personality through different aspects. At the beginning of the novel, Elwood's life is closely linked to the "resistance to hegemony and the struggle for black liberation" movement. At the early stage of his self-resistance, Elwood considered Martin Luther King as his inspirational teacher, he believed the words Martin had told his daughter - "Even though you can't go to Fun Town, I want you to know that you are as good as anybody who goes into it (12)." (Due to racial segregation in American society at the time, black children were not allowed to enter the amusement park in Fun Town) Elwood agreed with Martin that he was no worse than any white boy, and he was even better than them in many ways. Elwood's identification with Martin Luther King's idea that "everyone is equal" never changed, "even if the ideas it put in his head were his undoing (11)".

In the main character Elwood's growing experience, dignity is something he had always insisted on and longed for. However, there is not only the pursuit of personal dignity and social value in his mind, but also the desire for the dignity and social value of the black race group. In American society at that time, blacks suffered from the double oppression of cultural hegemony and racial discrimination, and the social status of blacks and their education level were low. Due to the pressure of life and various restrictions on the black community, some blacks took stealing as a way of resistance, and coupled with the misguidance of the cultural hegemony in education, the black community implicitly denied their own value and dignity and took stealing and other practices as legitimate behavior, which also gave the white rulers an excuse to intensify discrimination and exploitation of blacks. Elwood believed that these black children blatantly stealing candy in front of him was not only a violation of his personal dignity but also a desecration of his own dignity, an act he couldn't tolerate. He believed that

even if blacks were not respected by the white community, they should not voluntarily give up their dignity. The author then used different events in Elwood's life to highlight the distinctive characteristics of his personality - kindness, perseverance, strong self-esteem, and the spirit of never giving up.

Elwood's experiences in his early childhood made him appreciate his time in school because he knew how valuable learning opportunities were for black children and that learning was the only way to change his destiny. During his few school years, Elwood participated in the "Emancipation Day play (31)" for three consecutive years, played the role of a national leader of the Tennessee negro slaves liberation movement, and then participated in several black rights protests at the invitation of his history teacher Mr. Hill. A series of social practice activities allowed Elwood to gradually recognize his mind: he wanted to have a colorful life like whites, and he wanted to contribute to the social status of blacks on the basis of living his life well.

Elwood in this period perfectly illustrated a high-spirited young man, he was kind, confident, brave, and determined. Even in the face of adversity, he still aspired to the light. The injustices he experienced during his growth did not make him give up hope but rather ignited his fighting spirit. He not only focused on personal happiness, but also on the dignity of the group, and he was eager to do something to improve the living standards of blacks so that they can live with more dignity.

The most remarkable thing about the personality of Elwood is that he has a strong faith, which supports him to fight against hegemonic oppression and strive for the legitimate rights of blacks, which is also the most significant difference between him and other characters in the book. And when everything was going in the right direction, the author changed the direction, Elwood was convicted of slander and imprisoned in Nickel School, and his life had taken an unexpected path.

From Chapter 4, the author began to focus on the series of encounters that Elwood had after entering Nickel School. On his first day of taking college courses, Elwood mistakenly took a lost car, so he was falsely accused of car theft and sent to Nickel School for labor reform. This so-called "school" had a strict hierarchy and impenetrable bottom line, and the "teachers" tried to hide the truth about Nickel School. Unlike other schools, the "students" here do not need to have their own thoughts, obedience is the first rule of survival at Nickel School. At this point, Elwood thought of his grandmother's tears when leaving and the unfamiliar things here, which made him full of anxiety about his future.

At Nickel School, every child was required to work, and they spent most of their time working. Although Elwood was aware that he could not live the same life as before and could not have the opportunity to study college courses, he was still positive and optimistic and did not give up his vision of the future, believing that "it will enrich your spirit as nothing else can (64)", and since he was already stuck here, he would try his best here and graduate from Nickel School successfully.

When Elwood just entered Nickel School, it could be seen that he was a little worried about his future, but his positive personality and firm beliefs inside had not changed. With this persistence, Elwood got through the period of his first arrival at Nickel School, until he intervened in the fight in the bathroom, but also the beginning of his personality transformation.

Elwood did not know much about Nickel School, but he believed that even though Nickel School was not the same as a normal school, as long as they could follow the basic code of conduct, work hard, study hard, and try to improve their rank, they would be able to leave without any problems. Thus, when Elwood saw Griff bullying Corey in the bathroom, he couldn't stand by, and "stepped up when he saw something wrong (64)" like his grandfather because what Griff did was contrary to Elwood's personal principles. But what Elwood couldn't understand was why the victim was punished more severely than the perpetrator, while he, who reached out to the victim, nearly died because of Spencer's physical punishment! Perhaps it was then that Elwood realized that there was no real fairness at Nickel School. Elwood's values were violently shaken, and he was filled with doubts and fears about Spencer's punishment, as well as doubts about Nickel School's stated educational goals. This incident had a great impact on Elwood's personality transformation later, and Elwood was no longer as naive as before, and no longer had illusions about Nickel School. He questioned the principle of fairness at Nick's College and understood that "violence is the only lever big enough to move the world (85)" at Nick's College. Elwood wanted to escape as soon as possible and return to his original life, but he could only choose to give in to the hegemonic forces and follow the rules of Nickel School. Even if something was against the law and his inner code, Elwood could only choose to be silent and nothing could be changed.

What is the nature of Nickel School? It is said that Nickel School allow the boys to change their bad habits, learn some essential survival skills before entering society and requires them to undergo labor reform, but the labor reform is actually used as an excuse to force the boys to serve as free labor, while the so-called managers profit from it, making a lot of money. In order to maintain their dominance at Nickel School and to make greater profits, the administrators established strict "graduation" requirements, making it basically impossible for the children to leave but to work hard every day. Even if they were able to leave, they were not really free but were sold from the school to other factories in the town, where their lives would be even more miserable - "work like a slave, live in their basement or whatever. Beat you, kick you, and feed you shit. (93)". Entering Nickel School is like entering an endless loop, and even if they managed to "graduate" from it, they would not be able to regain their freedom, not to mention that the way to escape is even more difficult.

The victim's compromise may have been "fabricated" by a plethora of lies, disinformation and propaganda, and consent would likely have been revoked if the truth had been known. Of course, when persuasion fails to produce the desired result, the overlord or its allies will often resort to pure force [2]. After experiencing a series of injustices, Elwood saw the nature of Nickel School, but he still believed he could leave and return to his original life. Thinking that his grandmother's health might not last long enough for him to leave Nickel School, Elwood decided to report Nickel School by writing a letter. At this point, he still believed in the existence of fairness and justice. Although he was very scared, he still chose to try to change his fate. Unfortunately, it failed and Elwood was shot dead on his way out. Finally, Elwood did not wait for the fairness and justice he believed in, but died unjustly at his best age.

In fact, the people who gained actual control within Nickel School were racists who believed in white supremacy, and the so-called school was only the operating mechanism they used to exercise cultural hegemony. In this mechanism, all the rules are freely set by the rulers and changed at will. Due to they were unregulated, these principles could prevail here even if they ran counter to state laws and universal values. In such an environment, everyone reveals who they really are, and "no one has to act fake anymore (81)". Some people are extremely greedy, some advocate violence, and of course there are people as kind as Elwood and Turner. Nickel School could also be considered as the epitome of American society at the time, where white children were treated very differently from children of color. The white children could attend classes while working relatively easy jobs, Nickel School was a purely reform school. But it was not the same for the black students, who made up the largest number of colored students at the school, who not only had to work hard at the school but also in the homes of the school board members. Even so, they were fed and clothed in the worst way in the whole school. As a typical representative of the social mechanism, the school is supposed to be neutral and not biased in favor of any one side, but it was clear that Nickel School did not fit this profile. The hegemonic rulers had carefully decorated the appearance of Nickel School to make it deceptive and to hide the interests of the ruling group in the interest of the public, which was used to maintain the durability of their dominance.

Elwood is the main character of the book and the author described him in detail. Throughout his short life, it can be seen that a young man full of enthusiasm changed from ambitious to despondent. The changes in his life hit him hard, and what supported him at Nickel School was his original dream and belief, which made him believe at his last moments that someone will come to their rescue, but his hopes were dashed once again. Faced with hegemonic oppression, Elwood compromised to protect himself. Instead of giving up the fight, he chose to follow his heart, challenge the power, and end his tragic fate as a brave resister.

5 Conclusion

The Nickel Boys focuses on the Jim Crow period, a key point in the racial movement in American history. Whitehead placed the issue of race in a historical perspective and linked cultural hegemony to the racial politics of slavery through literary processing[10]. He rejected the post-modern attitude of the past and brought history to readers by describing the misery of blacks under hegemonic oppression.

What needs to be challenged in the fight against the hegemony of culturalism is not the validity or relevance of the concept of culture but the epistemology of abstraction, which turns culture into an alien force over the living [1]. The tragic end of characters in the book is closely linked to their personalities, which are shaped by their historical background and social environment. The influence of Nickel School "doesn't end when you leave, it crushes you in every way until you can't adapt to a normal life, because you have already become tame and distorted inside when leaving Nickel School". Thus, even though the black children left Nickel School, they were still anxious every day,

and the darkness of Nickel School became a nightmare that haunted them for the rest of their lives. Analyzing the impact of social environment on the fate of individuals from the perspective of cultural hegemony will give readers a deeper understanding of the disasters and persecution of blacks in different geographical spaces, revealing that racism is not a confrontation between people of different colors, but between good and evil, class, money and morality. In the historical depiction, the author flays racial injustice, criticizes contemporary political discourse, and constructs a counter-discourse historical narrative, so that the textual significance of *The Nickel Boys* does not only remain on a literary level but enters into the actual power operations. In 2020, when the "Black Lives Matter" movement was in full swing, the award of *The Nickel Boys* echoed the movement, and they are both important symbols of the failure of the lie of racial equality. Racism in the US has not changed significantly, and the way to racial equality is arduous and long.

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