

The Crown: Syracuse Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 1

Article 5

12-15-2023

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Recommended Citation

Moses, Amani (2023) "An Analysis of The Nickel Boys: Deviance in the Jim Crow South," *The Crown: Syracuse Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/thecrown/vol1/iss1/5>

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An Analysis of *The Nickel Boys*

Deviance in the Jim Crow South

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sociology and marketing, 2024

Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the deviance found in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, a 2019 historical fiction novel that chronicles the hardships of a group of Black boys growing up in an abusive reform school during the height of the Jim Crow era. Throughout the text, multiple forms of deviance are displayed that reflect the nuanced nature of life for the Black community during the 1960s. These examples of deviance found in Whitehead's book range from acts of protest to era-specific social offenses and help contextualize the social environment that the main character, Elwood Curtis, had to navigate through his childhood in the reform school. By evaluating the varying examples of deviance found in Whitehead's narrative, it becomes clear the ways deviance is weaponized to support or subjugate groups of people throughout history.

Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys* chronicles the trials and hardships of a group of boys attending the Nickel Academy, which is a reform school in Florida during the height of the Jim Crow era. The story follows a young Black boy named Elwood Curtis who tries to hitchhike his way to Melvin Giggs Technical for college and ends up being arrested—along with the driver—for car theft, which lands him at Nickel. There, he meets a host of other boys that help him learn more about the academy and how to navigate it, including a boy named Turner who ends up sticking with Elwood until his ultimate demise during an escape attempt. Elwood's time at Nickel is one embedded with racist mistreatment and abuse reminiscent of slavery as he tries to understand and fight back against the unjust system. Whitehead discusses multiple forms of deviance throughout the book that illuminate the complexities of life for Black boys in this microcosm of the Jim Crow South. The themes of deviance consistently discussed are positive

deviance, deviance from societal norms at the time, and deviance from the institutional norms within Nickel.

Since the book takes place largely during the 1960s, a central tenet is social activism with Martin Luther King Jr. being quoted several times throughout the text. One element of positive deviance is seen in Elwood's high school days, before being sent to Nickel, where he attends a protest urging the local theater to open its seats to the Black community in 1963. Whitehead (2019) writes, "A college girl in a tight blue sweater handed him a sign that said I AM A MAN and when the protest moved to the State Theatre, [Elwood] held it over his head and lent his voice to the proud chorus," (35). Here we can see Elwood fighting against the societal norm of segregation, which wasn't abolished until 1964 with the passing of the Civil Rights Act. While his act of protest was deviant in that it went against the legal rules in place at the time, this act was a form of positive deviance since he was rebelling in the name of equality for all races. Another example of positive deviance happens later in the story when Elwood devises a plan to expose the abuse at Nickel by giving a journal account of his experience to a group of state inspectors visiting the academy (Whitehead 2019:173-174). When describing the risk associated with sending the narrative, Whitehead (2019) explains, "He had to trust a stranger to do the right thing. It was impossible, like loving the one who wanted to destroy you, but that was the message of the movement: to trust in the ultimate decency that lived in every human heart" (175). Despite being surrounded by authoritarian figures infringing on his human rights, Elwood deviated from the path of submission and attempted to expose Nickel's wrongdoing, depending on the White inspectors to overlook the racial tension of the era and focus on the inhumanity of the institution.

Another major theme in the text is deviance from societal norms on both a minor and major scale, which were heavily racialized and enforced the stratification of White people above all other communities of color. An

example of this can be found in chapter three when it was explained that Elwood's school, Lincoln High School, received second-hand books from the local White school. Whitehead (2019) writes, "Knowing where the textbooks were headed, the white students left inscriptions for the next owners: Choke, N*gger! You Smell. Eat Shit" (29). This example illustrates societal deviance on a minor scale. On a personal level, the spewing of racial insults and slurs is a display of deviance since it is generally accepted that you should not do that to people. However, in the context of the Jim Crow South, this form of deviance would not be publicly admonished during this period since discrimination against Black people was commonplace among the White majority. Another example can be seen in chapter seven, as Harriet's familial misfortune is described. Whitehead (2019) writes, "Her father died in jail after a white lady downtown accused him of not getting out of her way on the sidewalk. *Bumptious contact*, as Jim Crow defined it" (70). This idea of "bumptious contact" reflects the transient nature of deviance in society, since this act would not be considered legally, nor socially deviant today. In that period, hallmarked by the racially segregated nature of society, something like not stepping out of a White person's way was deemed an act of deviance worthy of jail time.

Lastly, the book showcases deviance within the confined spaces of the Nickel Academy that does not perfectly align with what is considered deviant in the broader society. A prime example occurs in chapter nine of the story when the Superintendent, Spencer, tells the strongest boy in the Black dorms, Griff, to throw the annual boxing match between him and the strongest White student, or else he will be beaten to death "out back" (Whitehead 2019: 102-103). Ultimately, Griff ended up winning the match by mistake and was taken "out back" as promised (Whitehead 2019: 114). This example is important because it showcases the clash that occurs when Spencer asks Griff to intentionally act deviant, and deviance from this directive results in punishment. This example shows that there are complex levels of normative behavior that may conflict with each other, and it is up to the individual to decide which level of authority they will follow and the associated consequences.

Throughout the text, we see varying examples of deviance that result from the power dynamics at play. One major concept that explains this deviance is conflict theory as it was described in Richard Quinney's article "Conflict

Theory of Crime" (1975). Quinney (1975) writes, "Definitions of crime are formulated according to the interests of those who have the power to translate their interests into public policy" (65). This definition is clearly visible in the power dynamics at the Nickel Academy. Regardless of what behavior is considered deviant in the general society, the heads of Nickel create their own normative behaviors and rules and force the students to obey using severe corporal punishment tactics. We see this in the encounter between Superintendent Spencer and Griff where throwing the boxing match was coded as normative behavior despite its opposite connotation amongst the general population. The rulers of Nickel created an environment where they could exercise their will over the students with little oversight, allowing them to freely define and enforce deviance in the academy and benefit from their manual labor.

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* is a poignant story that highlights the complexities of being Black during the Jim Crow era. From living under layered institutions of authority with varying measures of deviance to forming a unified opposition to these practices and protesting for equal rights, the story shows the multifaceted and ever-present nature of racism during the 60s and the ways that the Black community overcame these hurdles. Society can use the events of the story to ensure that institutions like Nickel have more government oversight so that they are not committing human rights violations.

Bibliography

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