

## **Punishment in The Nickel Boys novel by Colson Whitehead**

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### *Abstract*

*The study aimed to analyze the issue of punishment depicted through the main character and to reveal the impact of punishment on the main character in The Nickel Boys (2019) novel by Colson Whitehead. Punishment is an action given to a person or convicted for the violation that occurred. The form of punishment given to someone can be in the form of flogging, forced labor, and imprisonment. Michel Foucault's postmodernism (1977) described, torture is a form of punishment that is carried out directly on the body that causes pain to the recipient's body. Meanwhile punishment with confinement is carried out by controlling the body, time, activity, and soul so that the violation did not happen again in the future. Thus there was torture and punishment to make humans disciplined. The research method in this study used qualitative method to analyze the occurrence of punishment through the main character in the novel. The results of this study indicated that the practice of punishment that occurred in The Nickel Boys is an act that unfair to the main character. Besides it, punishment also affected the main character's mental condition, which resulted in loss-motivation, anxiety, rebellion and escape.*

**Keywords:** *discipline, punishment, punish, torture.*

### **A. Introduction**

Literature is a collection of works of art formed from well-written words. According to Bertens (2001, p. 177), "literature is not simply a product of history, it also actively makes history." Some writers in their literary works do not only tell stories, but many of them incorporate words based on true stories from historical events to the present. Some of these literary works include poetry, drama, or novels. Furthermore, a novel is one of the literary works that contains the story of the life of a person or group within the surrounding community. "What happens in a society is reflected in literary works in one form or another" (Dubey, 2013, p. 84). Problems in society are very diverse; discipline and punishment are part of minimizing and overcoming these problems. Therefore, the observation of discipline and punishment cannot be separated from the study of problems in society.

Generally, people live in groups closely related to each other by a system of traditions and the same rules. Unity in society is formed by the existence of an interconnected system. The behavior of each individual is reflected in the existence of a system and a society at a low level, where the society is formed to guarantee mutual rights and social order. A people that are disciplined toward the rule and the existence of punishment as a warning for violation is part of the creation of that order. However, society is also an object for the practice of power regulated by law (Dean, 2010). Furthermore, power is the ability to influence others provided by control of the resources that others want or need for the satisfaction of their needs or to achieve their

goals (Turner, 2005). Meanwhile, Foucault (1972) holds that power in the form of law indicates prohibitions or limitations where humans are the object. Therefore, power is the ability of an individual or group to control and direct another individual or group with punishment in a matter based on a specific goal. The punishment can have negative impacts if it occurs with the abuse of power. While the positive impact can occur when punishment is exercised with good procedures, one of which makes individuals disciplined (Yaldi & Ariati, 2020).

According to Foucault (1977), discipline turns individual strengths into talents; on the other hand, it also fosters strict obedience by redirecting the direction of energy from resulting forces. In addition, individuals have basic behaviors that improve if increased discipline is carried out. Furthermore, other influences make the individual under the control or supervision of the ruler, who must comply with the applicable rules and disobedience will result in punishment as a warning.

Punishment is a physical or psychological sanction against an individual or a group of people who violate or disobey the prevailing rules, to make them aware of the wrong done. Punishment is intended to educate, change, persuade, and direct individuals to behave by accepted or tolerated rules or culture (Vaden, 2004). For that when a person commits a violation, punishment will be given as an effort to correct the mistakes. The punishment can be in the form based on the level of the crime committed. Discipline and punishment are two things that support each other if they are applied consistently. Discipline aims to guide and train self-control to manage emotions (Silm, 2013). Meanwhile, Foucault (1977) says punishment serves to prevent crime. Thus discipline and punishment make individuals behave well, obey the rules of a system or culture that applies either from the environment of the family, community, school, academy, or an institution, and also prevent crimes or violations from recurring in the future. Therefore, the writer takes the issue of punishment, where this problem is a reflection of the event in society that is still relevant to be studied at this time.

The case of punishment to discipline can be seen in educational institutions, one of them is at an elementary school in Northern California. The school implements grants to improve service to students who mostly come from low economic environments. The school prepares a prison cell for a boy aged approximately eight or nine years, due to problems with his behavior. The teacher will visit to see the academic development of students. The school believes that while it is not in the best interest of students and an extreme law but it is best for school, which shows that schools deal with problematic discipline (Noguera, 2010). The application of this punishment to discipline can also occur in the academies depicted in literary works, one of which is a novel by Colson Whitehead.

Colson Whitehead is an American novelist who has won several awards. His works include *The Intuitionist* (1999) and *The Underground Railroad* (2016), he won National Book Award for Fiction 2016 and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2017. Then in

2020, he won again the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, for *The Nickel Boys* (2019). It tells about a black teenager who is smart and hard-working. He is Elwood, working in a shop. Elwood gets an offer to continue his education at university, but Elwood was involved in a juvenile delinquency case. Elwood is sent to Nickel Academy for punishment and coaching (Whitehead, 2019).

Finally, the study aims to analyze and reveal the phenomena of punishment that occur in educational academies as an effort to reduce cases of juvenile delinquency in the city in historical fiction novels, with the entitled "Punishment in *The Nickel Boys* Novel by Colson Whitehead".

## **B. Method**

The research focuses on analyzing punishment in Colson Whitehead's novel, *The Nickel Boys*, using qualitative methods. Qualitative research, as Cathryne and Palmer (2006) explain, aims to interpret meanings and behaviors within social phenomena through participants' subjective experiences. Data analysis centers on interpreting phenomena within the novel through character experiences, as outlined by Foucault's theory (1977). Sources primarily include quotes from *The Nickel Boys* and supplementary materials such as books and articles. Data collection involves thorough reading, issue identification, marking relevant passages, and selecting data aligned with Foucault's theory. The qualitative approach facilitates understanding and interpretation, leading to an essay presentation of analyzed findings.

## **C. Findings and Discussion**

### **1. The Impacts of Punishment**

Punishment is given to the convict or the perpetrator of the violation in the hope that the violation will not occur again in the future, either by the convict or other people. However, punishment can have a different impact on each individual who receives it. In this novel, there is a phenomenon of the impact of punishment that occurs on Elwood and Turner, where they receive punishment treatment at Nickel Academy that is not by government regulations.

#### **1.1 Losing motivation**

Loss of self-motivation happened to Elwood as the main character when he was subjected to torture by Spencer, this can be seen from the quotation below: "And 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, p.119)

Based on the quotation, losing motivation occurred to Elwood after being tortured by Spencer Nickel Academy officers. It can be seen from the sentence "Elwood's beating at the White House" showed that Elwood became the object of torture by Nickel officers. In addition the sentence "It had weeviled deep into his personality" indicated that torture was not only felt on Elwood's body but also affected his soul. Furthermore, the sentence "The way his shoulders sank when

Spencer appeared, the flinch and shrink” showed that Elwood was afraid to see Spencer coming to him and resigned himself to what had happened to him. From this explanation, the quotation above reveals that the Elwood’s mental state is demoralized. Where the experience of confinement and torture results in Elwood feeling unable to fight and achieve the goal of being free from Nickel. Besides it the analysis supported by the quotation below: “He could only stand so much talk of revenge before the reality grabbed ahold of him” (Whitehead, 2019, p.120)

Based on the quotation, Elwood is feeling hopeless. It can be seen from the sentence “He could only stand so much talk of revenge” indicated that Elwood felt that he didn’t have the passion to take any action after being beaten by Spencer. The thought of revenge was only stuck in his mind. Furthermore the sentence “before the reality grabbed ahold of him” showed that Elwood was resigned to what would happen to him again due to spencer’s cruel treatment. Thus the quotation above reveals that the torture and confinement carried out by the Nickel people make Elwood despair in his life, and resigned himself to whatever the officers do to him.

However, one of the signs of a loss of motivation can also be indicated by negative self-talk, such as considering himself unworthy to do something, it can be seen from the quotation below:

“That was it,” Turner said. “Tonight or not at all.”  
“But why are you coming with me?” He could have pointed Elwood in the right direction and wished him luck.  
“They snatch you up in a hot minute, dumb as you are.”  
“You said don’t take anyone with you,” Elwood said. “On the run.”  
“You’re dumb, and I’m stupid,” Turner said. (Whitehead, 2019, p.196)

Based on the quotation, losing motivation occurred to Turner and Elwood at Nickel when they were planning to escape. It can be seen from the sentence “You’re dumb, and I’m stupid” the sentence indicated that Turner felt unable to do something by telling himself stupid. Furthermore, the sentence “dumb as you are” showed that Turner’s negative statements to Elwood were a form of feeling angry as an outlet for doubts about what he would do. Moreover, the sentence “You said don’t take anyone with you” indicated that there was confusion and unsure about the escape that was planning to make, so what Turner said against Elwood didn’t match his actions when it was about to take place. One of the causes of loss of motivation is the emergence of a sense of doubt. The explanation of the quotation above reveals that there are doubts in Turner and Elwood to run away from Nickel. So that when the action is carried out, they feel unsure of the success of the escape attempt.

While on the run, Elwood also feels doubt about himself doing that. As show in the quotation below: “The sun came up. Elwood was heading home. He knew he couldn’t stay but it would calm him to be in his city again after these white streets.

He'd go wherever Turner instructed and when it was safe, put it all down on paper again" (Whitehead, 2019, p.197)

Based on the quotation, Elwood lost motivation on the run with Turner from Nickel Academy. It can be seen from the sentence "He'd go wherever Turner instructed" which indicated that when on the run from Nickel Elwood only relied on instructions from Turner for his actions to be free from the pursuit of officers, in this case signaling Elwood's lack of confidence. Furthermore the sentence "put it all down on paper again" showed that Elwood could only write to narrate all the events that occurred. Thus the explanation of quotation above reveals that Nickel cruel punishment treatment makes Elwood's soul full of fear. Even in the escape action, Elwood only follows Turner's steps.

## 1.2 Anxiety

Emotions are characterized by physical change, feelings of tension, and thoughts of worry are signs of anxiety in a person. The practice of punishment that occur at Nickel Academy conducted by the officer against Elwood led to feelings of anxiety in Elwood. As illustrated in the quotation below: "The more routine his days, the more unruly his nights. He woke after midnight, when the dormitory was dead, starting at imagined sounds—footsteps at the threshold, leather slapping the ceiling. He squinted at the darkness—nothing." (Whitehead, 2019, p.153)

Based on the quotation, Elwood feels anxious when he is imprisoned by Nickel's officer. It can be seen from the sentence "He woke after midnight" the sentence indicated that feelings of anxiety arise in Elwood when punished in a dark room. He always wakes up in his sleep in the middle of the night. This means shows an uneasy mind in him. Furthermore the sentence "The more routine his days, the more unruly his nights" showed that Elwood experienced detention from day to day which made him feel miserable being in that room.

Thus, the quotation above reveals Elwood's uneasy feeling about his imprisonment and torture which has no end. So it makes him feel suffer to be in Nickel. However, Elwood's anxiety also arises when Harriet tries to free Elwood from Nickel Academy. It can be seen from the quotation below: "Elwood reached across the table and grabbed Harriet's hands. He'd never touched her like that before, as if reassuring a child. "Grandma, what is it?" (Whitehead, 2019, p.155)

"I let you down, El," she said.

"I'm okay," he said. "I just made Explorer." He kept his head down and was rewarded. Just like they wanted. (Whitehead, 2019, p.156)

Based on the quotation, Elwood's feelings of anxiety arise towards his grandmother Harriet over her efforts to free Elwood. It can be seen from the sentence

“Elwood reached across the table and grabbed Harriet’s hands” which indicated that Elwood’s attitude towards his grandmother named Harriet by grabbing her hand indicated that Elwood felt anxious about his grandmother who was trying to find a way to free Elwood from the Nickel Academy. Furthermore the sentence “He’d never touched her like that before” showed that Elwood’s attitude towards Harriet was unheard of before Elwood’s time at Nickel. Meanwhile the sentence “I let you down, El” indicated Harriet’s unsuccessful attempt to free Elwood from Nickel.

However the sentence “I’m okay” and “He kept his head down” showed that Elwood hid his sad feelings in front of Harriet for unsuccessful attempts to free him. This means that the quotation above reveals Elwood’s hope to soon be free from Nickel with the help of Harriet. But that does not work so it is a worry for Elwood to stay on Nickel longer with the punishment he is given. Because Nickel’s officers give him an unfair punishment. Moreover, when Elwood feels bad punishment in the Nickel Academy environment he tries to report but anxiety arises in him. As can be shown in the quotation below: “What’s wrong with him?” Harper asked Elwood. Turner was mum, a conspicuous turn. Elwood shook his head and looked out the window.

His thoughts prowled and roved after midnight. Turner’s angry question joined his host of worry. It wasn’t, what did he think the white men were going to do but did he trust them to do it? (Whitehead, 2019, p.172)

Based on the quotation, Elwood’s anxiety arose when he was trying to report the practice of punishment at the Nickel Academy that he experienced. It can be seen from the sentence “It wasn’t, what did he think the white men were going to do but did he trust them to do it?” the sentence indicated that Elwood was worried about reporting the arbitrary punishment that happened to him at Nickel, Elwood doubted the positive response he got from the central government for his report. Furthermore the sentence “His thoughts prowled and roved after midnight” showed that Elwood also felt that feeling of worry at nightfall, his emotions of high anxiety with what would come from his reporting efforts on improper punishment in the Nickel environment, making many things what he thought.

Moreover the sentence “Elwood shook his head and looked out the window” indicated that Elwood doesn’t want bad things to happen and hopes for a good response to his reporting efforts. Therefore, the quotation above reveals the fear in Elwood while he tries to report the harsh laws in Nickel environment. As a black person, Elwood is hesitant to get justice from the government. Because the government is dominated by white people like Nickel employees. Where white people often give a negative view of black people. Meanwhile, there is also anxiety in Turner after escape with Elwood from Nickel. Because in the escape only he survives while Elwood is shot dead. It can be seen from the quotation below: “Flying to Tallahassee,” Turner said. “Last name Curtis.” “Identification?”

He was due for a new driver's license, now that he shaved his head every other day. He didn't resemble the picture. The old him. Once he got to Tallahassee he wouldn't need this license anyhow. It was history. When the owner of the diner asked him his name, two weeks out of Nickel, he said, "Elwood Curtis." First thing that popped into his head. It felt right. (Whitehead, 2019, p.200)

Based on the quotation, Turner's anxiety is felt after being free from Nickel. It can be seen from the sentence "Last name Curtis" which indicated that Turner used Elwood's last name as his identity, indicating that he always thinks of Elwood. Furthermore, the sentence "two weeks out of Nickel, he said, "Elwood Curtis" showed that Turner, who always used the name Elwood, indicated that he felt uneasy about his life being free from Nickel because his friend Elwood did not survive the escape attempt with him. He used the name 'Elwood' as a form of respect for Elwood. However the sentence "It felt right" indicated that Turner felt there was peace in using the name Elwood for his identity. Based on the explanation of the sentence, the quotation above reveals that Turner as a friend of Elwood fellow Negro feels uneasy over Elwood's death by Nickel's officers on the run. The escape occurs as a result of Nickel's cruel and unjust punishment against them. Although Turner himself survives to escape and be free from Nickel, his life is overshadowed by Elwood.

### 1.3. Escape and Rebel

The term of a convict's punishment is generally clear with a set time for the day of his release, but in the case of a punishment that occurred to a Nickel Academy student, it is not clear with the end of the punishment will be. Elwood and Turner as Nickel students are treated like convicts but they experience the injustice of punishment in the Nickel environment and do not get clarity at the end of their punishment, thus making rebellion and escape as a way out. It can be shown from the quotation below:

"I've been writing everything down," Elwood said.  
"Everything what?". "The deliveries. The yard work and chores. The names of everybody and the dates. All our Community Service." (Whitehead, 2019, p.171)

Based on the quotation, Elwood's effort rebellion against Nickel begins by revealing all the unfair treatment at Nickel Academy. It can be seen from the sentence "I've been writing everything down" which indicated that Elwood fights against Nickel officers by recording all incidents of bad treatment by Nickel officers towards him and other male students to be reported to high officials by writing as a form of rebellion. Furthermore the sentence "The deliveries. The yard work and chores. The names of everybody and the dates" showed that Elwood attempted to send a report on all the cruel and unfair punishment treatment within Nickel's circle. Which occurred to him and other Negro students. This is done by Elwood to oppose the injustice of the Nickel officers' legal actions, in the hope that Elwood can be released.

This means that the quotation above reveals that the rebellion occurs based on injustice in the punishment that occurs against the Negro teenagers. Nickel officers

treat black boys harshly but not white boys. In this case, Elwood tries to fight for justice in the way he can. Beside it, Elwood's rebellion is also supported by Turner. This can be seen from the quotation below: "That letter you got in your pocket," Turner said. "I'll get it to them, fuck it. Look at you—you look sick." Elwood searched for a tell. But Turner stood with the con men of the world and the con men never betray the game. "I said I'll do it, I'll do it. You got someone else?" (Whitehead, 2019, p.180)

Based on the quotation, Turner helps Elwood's rebellion attempt through a note in a letter. It can be seen from the sentence "I'll get it to them, fuck it" indicated that Turner tries to help Elwood to send a letter containing the bad treatment of Nickel officers to be conveyed to the central government. Furthermore the sentence "Elwood searched for a tell" showed that Elwood did not easily believe in helping him in the Nickel Academy environment. However the sentence "I said I'll do it, I'll do it. You got someone else?" this showed that Elwood doubts Turner's help, but Turner tries to convince Elwood to help send a letter that Elwood writes as a form of resistance to the practice of punishment that occurs in the Nickel Academy environment.

Thus the quotation above reveals that Elwood's rebellion through a letter of complaint receives support from Turner a fellow Negro teenager. But Elwood is lack trust in Turner's help. It means that Elwood's soul is traumatized after being treated badly and cruelly by Nickel environment. Therefore he is not easy to trust other, even though Turner is a fellow black student. However, after an unsuccessful letter reporting attempt, Elwood and Turner try to escape from Nickel. It is seen in the quotation below: "They hurried, as quietly as they could, down and around the next flight of stairs. "We going to walk straight past," Turner said, and Elwood knew he meant past the rec room to the back entrance of Cleveland. The lights were on all night on the first floor. Elwood didn't know what time it was—one in the morning? two—but it was late enough for the night supervisors to be deep in some illicit shut-eye. (Whitehead, 2019, p.195)

Based on the quotation, there was an attempt to escape Elwood and Turner from Nickel Academy. It can be seen from the sentence "We going to walk straight past" which indicated that Turner, as the man who led the escape attempt with Elwood to leave Nickel. Furthermore, the sentence "The lights were on all night on the first floor" showed that the escape action from Nickel was carried out at night to avoid the officers' surveillance. However the sentence "Elwood didn't know what time it was" indicated that it was difficult to know the state of the time in Nickel's imprisonment, as well as the punishment that Elwood experienced, was unknown when it ended, so Elwood and Turner take a way to escape to be free from Nickel's punishment.

From the explanation above, the quotation reveals Elwood and Turner's attempt to leave Nickel Academy secretly. This occurs due to the cruel treatment from Nickel officers and punishments that violated government regulation. It means that the practice of punishment in Nickel Academy is unfair, and escape is an option to get



free of the punishment. Moreover, the cruel punishment behavior also makes Elwood and Turner try to escape. As can be seen in the quotation below:

“They were going to kill me and bury me out there,” Elwood said. “Sure as shit.”  
“You got me out,” Elwood said.  
“Yup,” Turner said. He started to say something else, but stopped. “Can you ride it?”  
“I can do it.” (Whitehead, 2019, p.197)

Based on the quotation, Elwood and Turner escape due to the punishment given by Nickel’s cruel officers. It can be seen from the sentence “They were going to kill me and bury me out there” which indicated that Elwood is threatened his safety with the harsh legal treatment of Nickel officers so that he ran away. Furthermore, the sentence “Sure as shit” showed that Turner was very aware of the plan to kill Elwood by Nickel’s officers. Moreover, the sentence “You got me out” and word “Yup” indicated that cared about Turner a friend Negro, for the atrocities he had experienced, thus Turner is helping Elwood to escape with him.

This means the quotation above reveals the escape from Nickel as well to avoid a longer punishment up to the killing by Nickel officers. In this case, Elwood and Turner’s concern for fellow blacks is also seen to help each other to be free together with from the cruel Nickel environment. However, their escape attempt discovers by Nickel’s officers. It can be seen in the quotation below:

Turner took a peek. “Faster!”  
Down the slope lay another fence, and then trees. “We got it!” Turner said. Elwood panted, his mouth agape.  
The first shotgun blast missed. Turner checked again. It was Hennepin. Harper stopped next. (Whitehead, 2019, p.199)

Based on the quotation, Turner and Elwood’s difficult escape attempts to avoid Nickel’s officers. It can be seen from the sentence “Turner took a peek” indicated that in his escape attempt Turner kept on to be aware of his surroundings. Furthermore the word “Faster!” indicated that Turner and Elwood continued to run to avoid the pursuit of Nickel’s officers. Moreover, the sentence “Down the slope lay another fence, and then trees” showed that many obstacles had to be overcome to successfully get out of the Nickel environment. However the sentence “We got it!” indicated Turner was well aware of the road conditions around Nickel’s area that could prevent him from escaping. This means that Elwood and Turner find it difficult to escape Nickel. The security is so tight that their escape attempt is known by officers. Even though Turner knows Nickel’s environment.

Meanwhile the sentence “Elwood panted, his mouth agape” shows that Elwood feels exhausted from his escape attempt with Turner, who continues to run to escape

the pursuit of officers Hennepin and Harper. Moreover, the sentence "The first shotgun blast missed" indicated that the pursuit of Elwood and Turner by Hennepin and Harper continued and the officers did not hesitate to kill Elwood and Turner with gunfire. Thus, the quotation above reveals the cruelty of the punishment carried out by Nickel officers against black boys. Elwood and Turner's resistance and escape make officers anger even crueler and killing. This means that Spencer as a white person wants black boys to obey his rules and orders without exception.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The study found that the practice of punishment as a discipline causes injustice to racial differences. In the novel, the punishment is more severe for Negroes. This was reflected when Elwood was accused of being involved in theft without proper evidence, he was immediately found guilty and sent to Nickel Academy. Punishment more often occurs with stereotyping and discrimination against Elwood. In Nickel's environment, the officers inflict confinement and harsh torture on Elwood as a Negro student. This is illustrated when Elwood is put into a dark room after trying to prevent the officers from beating a Negro student. In addition, the punishment was carried out by abuse of power to imprison Elwood. It is also illustrated when confinement in a cell is not given an end limit. Punishment is also made a separator between blacks and whites. It was reflected when it was time to eat, Elwood was not given a place to join the other students. Finally, punishment also has an impact on Elwood's mental condition as revealed in the novel as a victim who causes fear and trauma. This is to the detriment of recipients who receive cruel and unjust punishments. As explained in the previous chapter. The negative impact is a loss of motivation, when a person experiences a cruel punishment it creates fear and hesitancy to do something. Punishment makes anxiety, it is illustrated when Elwood experiences confinement in a dark cell. He always wakes up in his sleep in the middle of the night with bad thoughts. Running away and rebelling also have an impact when the law and the torture felt by the victims did not end. In addition, punishment is also something that makes the treatment of African Americans inhumane, so Turner feels haunted that Elwood was killed by officers while on the run.

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