

American Literature
SUMMER 2021 READING ASSIGNMENT:
Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

NOTES

The Nickel Boys by Colson Whitehead – ISBN: 978-0345804341

All students will be required to **purchase a hard copy of the novel** to read over the summer and for use during class discussion.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Zisselsberger via e-mail:
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colson Whitehead is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Underground Railroad*, which in 2016 won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction and the National Book Award and was named one of the Ten Best Books of the Year by *The New York Times Book Review*, as well as *The Noble Hustle*, *Zone One*, *Sag Harbor*, *The Intuitionist*, *John Henry Days*, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, and *The Colossus of New York*. He is also a Pulitzer Prize finalist and a recipient of the MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellowships. He lives in New York City.

ABOUT *THE NICKEL BOYS*

In this Pulitzer Prize-winning, *New York Times* bestselling follow-up to *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead brilliantly dramatizes another strand of American history through the story of two boys unjustly sentenced to a hellish reform school in Jim Crow-era Florida.

When Elwood Curtis, a black boy growing up in 1960s Tallahassee, is unfairly sentenced to a juvenile reformatory called the Nickel Academy, he finds himself trapped in a grotesque chamber of horrors. Elwood's only salvation is his friendship with fellow "delinquent" Turner, which deepens despite Turner's conviction that Elwood is hopelessly naive, that the world is crooked, and that the only way to survive is to scheme and avoid trouble. As life at the Academy becomes ever more perilous, the tension between Elwood's ideals and Turner's skepticism leads to a decision whose repercussions will echo down the decades.

Based on the real story of a reform school that operated for 111 years and warped the lives of thousands of children, *The Nickel Boys* is a devastating, driven narrative that showcases a great American novelist writing at the height of his powers and "should further cement Whitehead as one of his generation's best" (*Entertainment Weekly*).

ASSIGNMENT: In connection with your reading of Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, **complete the following for the FIRST day of school:**

Elwood's Journal Entries

Use your imagination to fill in the holes of Elwood's story with a series of journal entries recording his thoughts about the people he meets, reflections on situations/events with family members and students and staff at the reform school, his reactions to things he hears and sees (for example, listening to MLK speeches) and his desires for the future. **Each entry will be written in first person as if you are Elwood writing in his diary.** (NOTE: This means that you should use "I" as you create each journal entry.)

REQUIRED ELEMENTS – PLEASE READ CAREFULLY:

Your journal entries **MUST** include the following:

__ Both a recap of the events AND the thoughts that Elwood has about them.

__ You should focus on events and/or concerns in the text NOT already covered in great detail; however, in general, you should go by what speaks to you the most, or moves you the most. For example, for chapter one you could focus on Elwood's thoughts and emotions while listening to the MLK record.

__ Include TWO quotes directly from the book AND a matching page number citation that relates to the topic of each entry.

(NOTE: Either start the entry with the quote and pick up where he left off or add it to the bottom of the new entry — refer to the example on the next page.)

__ Write at least 14 entries (12 sentences per entry minimum, NOT including the original quotes from the book). EACH entry MUST be based on a DIFFERENT CHAPTER. There should not be any entries for the same chapter.

__ Please identify each entry by putting the entry and chapter number at the top. Example (see also model below): Entry 10 / Chapter 12.

__ The entries themselves should be written PURELY in YOUR VOICE and YOUR WORDS; you should NOT include any paraphrases or quotes in the entry itself.

__ MUST be TYPED, in a legible font, with proper spelling/grammar. Handwritten versions will NOT be accepted. → Writing that has clearly not been proofread and is full of spelling/grammar/spacing errors will receive a 25-point deduction.

Upon your return to school in the fall, be prepared for the following additional assessments: Comprehension quiz on the plot, characters, and themes of *The Nickel Boys* as well as an essay.

EXAMPLE OF A JOURNAL ENTRY:

NOTE: The following excerpts were written by Johann Wagener (John Wagner) who in 1958 was sentenced to serve a term at the Florida School for Boys (FSB) for the crime of running away with his childhood sweetheart. Nickel Academy is a fictional school based on the Florida School for Boys, also known as the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys.

Source: <https://theofficialwhitehouseboys.org/2020/08/johann-wagener-john-wagner/>

As a reminder, your journal entries will be written from Elwood's perspective.

Entry 10 / Chapter 12:

“Fourth: Finally, you could run. Make a run for it and see what happened. Some boys escaped into silent futures under different names in different places, living in shadow...Most often runners were captured, taken for a tour of the Ice Cream Factory, and then ushered into the dark cell for a couple weeks of attitude adjustment” (Whitehead 146).

“How could a boy look past the school's property line, see that free and living world beyond, and not contemplate a dash to freedom. To write once own story for once. To forbid the thought of escape, even that slightest butterfly thought of escape, was to murder one's humanity” (Whitehead 146).

My memories of the white house are vivid and stark. I can remember holding on to the bars with all my might and waiting for the first blow. The first was the worst. I remember the jolt and the intensity of the pain that ran through my body. The flash of what seemed to be white light igniting my brain is something I will never forget. I remember that the blows that followed were not as bad as the first one and the pain seemed to diminish with each subsequent stroke as the numbness set in. I quickly learned to go with the flow; when to brace, when to relax just by listening for the sound of what seemed to be a foot dragging across the floor, followed by a soft but distinct whooshing sound before the paddle found its mark. Then there was the walk back to the dorm. I remember feeling some sick and distorted sense of pride, thinking that I was now one of the select few who went into that place and walked out unassisted or on a stretcher.

➔ SCROLL DOWN FOR SOME IMPORTANT INFORMATION ON ACADEMIC HONESTY, PLAGIARISM, AND OTHER FORMS OF CHEATING

A NOTE ON ACADEMIC HONESTY & PLAGIARISM:

The work for your summer reading assignment **MUST** be the product of **YOUR OWN READING, CRITICAL THINKING, and WRITING**. Using someone else's ideas, copying another student's assignment, copying materials from online sources, or collaborating with another student is considered plagiarism and cheating.

Violations of academic honesty will result in a ZERO on the assignment and a referral to the Principal.

Assignments that violated academic honesty cannot be redone.