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**Reform, Discipline and Control: A Foucauldian Analysis of Institutional Power in
Colson Whitehead *The Nickel Boys* and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times***

D. Durgalakshmi¹, Dr. B.R. Veeramani²

- 1) PhD Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science & Technology (Deemed to be University) Vallam, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: durgadhanraj1996@gmail.com
- 2) Professor, Department of Languages, Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science & Technology (Deemed to be University), Vallam, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: brvmani@gmail.com

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Abstract: *This paper examines how institutions use discipline to control individuals and suppress human agency. It compares *The Nickel Boys* and *Hard Times* through the framework of Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. The study focuses on surveillance, normalisation and punishment as key mechanisms of control. In *Hard Times*, Gradgrind's school trains children to follow rules without question. It values facts over independent thought and discourages emotional response. Pupils learn obedience through routine and constant supervision. In *The Nickel Boys*, Nickel Academy enforces control through physical violence and racial hierarchy. Authorities monitor the boys at all times and punishment is harsh and arbitrary. The institution presents itself as a place of reform but produces fear and silence. The comparison shows that disciplinary power operates across different historical contexts while adapting its method. Victorian education relies on psychological control, while Nickel Academy uses physical force to enforce racial order. In both cases, institutions reduce individuals to complaint bodies. This paper argues that reform institutions function as systems of control rather than care. A Foucauldian reading reveals how discipline sustains dehumanisation across time.*

Keywords: *Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*, *Hard Times*, institutions, disciplinary power*

Introduction

Institutions shape social behaviour and moral values in structured ways. Reform schools claim to educate and correct individuals. Literary texts question these claims by exposing the power structures within such institutions. These representations reveal the power structures embedded within these places. The novels *Hard Times* and *The Nickel Boys* present institutions that regulate bodies and behaviour in the name of progress and reform. Both novels depict discipline as a social practice rather than a moral one. Rules, routines and punishment define everyday life within these institutions. Individuals learn obedience through repetition and fear. These narratives shift attention away from personal failure and toward systemic control. The focus moves from individual morality to institutional authority. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power offers a useful lens for reading these texts. Discipline operates through surveillance, normalisation and correction. It produces compliant subjects rather than ethical



citizens. Applying this framework allows a closer examination of how institutional spaces manage bodies and silence resistance.

A comparative reading of *Hard Times* and *The Nickel Boys* reveals how disciplinary systems persist across historical periods. Victorian industrial society and twentieth-century racial segregation differ in form but share similar methods of control. The novels expose how institutions adapt their techniques while preserving their core function. This comparison foregrounds the enduring relationship between power, discipline and dehumanisation in literary representations of reform.

Literature Review

Critical scholarship on Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* has largely examined the novel as a critique of utilitarian education. The article "Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and The Philosophy of Utilitarian Education" argues that Gradgrind's school promotes fact-based learning at the cost of emotional and moral development. The study highlights how children are trained to value efficiency, obedience and calculation. Education becomes a system that suppresses imagination and individuality. While the study critiques utilitarian ideology, it does not examine the school as disciplinary institution shaped by power and surveillance. Other studies on *Hard Times* also focus on moral failure within industrial society. However, a Foucauldian reading offers a different approach. The article "Metaphorical Imprisonment of Victorian Women in Dickens's *Hard Times*: A Foucauldian Approach" applies the ideas of Michel Foucault's to analyse discipline and social regulation. It identifies how authority, observation and correction shape behaviour within the school and the wider social space of Coke town. However, this study remains limited to Dickens's text and does not extend the analysis to a comparative or cross-historical framework.

Scholarship on Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* focuses mainly on race and institutional violence. The article "Echoes of Injustice: Racism and Institutional Repression in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*" examines Nickel Academy as a site for racial domination. It discusses physical punishment, abuse and the normalisation of cruelty under the guise of reform. The institution appears as an extension of state violence against Black bodies. While the article exposes systemic racism, it treats violence primarily as racial injustice rather than as a disciplinary structure. Another study, "Narrative of Control: Race and Hegemony in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*" examines power relations and ideological control. It argues that Nickel Academy maintains dominance through hierarchy, fear and enforced obedience. The focus remains on racial hegemony and social inequality. The institutional mechanisms of normalisation and surveillance receive limited theoretical attention. Trauma focused criticism further shapes readings of the novel. The article "Exploring Traumatic Experiences in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*" analyses the psychological impact of institutional abuse. It emphasises silence, memory and long-term suffering. Trauma is treated as the central outcome of institutional violence. However, the study does not engage with how discipline operates systematically within the institution to produce obedience and control.

Existing scholarship treats *Hard Times* and *The Nickel Boys* within separate critical approaches. Dickens is read through utilitarianism and moral education, while Whitehead is examined through race and trauma. The separation limits a broader understanding of how disciplinary power persists across texts and contexts. A Foucauldian approach that places both novels in dialogue examines institutions as enduring sites of dehumanisation. This study addresses this gap by offering a comparative Foucauldian reading of both texts, focusing on disciplinary power as a shared structure of control.



Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on close textual reading of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* and Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. It focuses on selected key passages that represent institutional spaces and their mechanisms of control. The study is grounded in Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, particularly his ideas of surveillance, normalisation and correction as discussed in *Discipline and Punish*. These concepts are used as analytical tools to examine how institutions regulate behaviour, shape individuals and produce obedience. A comparative method is employed to place the two novels in dialogue across different historical contexts. The analysis explores how disciplinary mechanisms operate in both Victorian industrial society and twentieth-century racial segregation, while adapting to different social conditions. The study focuses on key characters such as Gradgrind, Sissy Jupe and Louisa as well as Elwood and Turner to understand how individuals experience and respond to institutional control. Through this approach, the study demonstrates how disciplinary power functions as a persistent structure across time, while transforming its methods according to context.

Theoretical Framework

Disciplinary power shapes individuals through subtle, continuous mechanisms rather than direct force. Michel Foucault explains that institutions treat the body as an object to be trained, shaped and controlled producing obedience and skill (136). Power operates not by force alone but by creating conditions where bodies internalise rules and conform to expectations. This idea of the docile body forms the foundation for understanding institutional control in both *Hard Times* and *The Nickel Boys*.

Schools, reform homes and prisons function as systems organised to maximise efficiency. Foucault describes the school as a machine where each pupil, each level and each moment are coordinated to serve the broader system of control (165). In such spaces, time, activity and attention are regimented. Students and inmates are continuously monitored and every action is used to reinforce the institution's objectives. This form of regulation transforms individuals into manageable units. As institutions grow in scale and complexity, supervision becomes essential. Foucault notes that increasing numbers of individuals and division of labor make constant oversight necessary (174). Surveillance ensures compliance even when direct punishment is absent. Authority becomes internalised and those subjected to it adjust their behaviour to avoid correction. This principle explains how Gradgrind's students maintain rigid obedience and how Nickel Academy enforces control over its boys.

Foucault identifies "infrapenality" where institutions define and punish behaviour that falls outside conventional legal boundaries (178). Schools and reform institutions establish rules that govern daily life and punish deviations from expected norms. This mechanism of control highlights the capacity of institutions to enforce order independently of external oversight. In addition, penal institutions combine deprivation of liberty with systematic correction. Foucault emphasises that prisons serve both juridical and disciplinary purposes, simultaneously detaining and reforming individuals (233). This dual function parallels reform schools, where control is presented as moral or educational improvement. In *The Nickel Boys*, punishment and surveillance operate under the guise of rehabilitation, while Gradgrind's school presents discipline as more instruction. Both cases show how institutional power disguises control as a legitimate social function.

Applying Foucault's concepts allows a comparative reading of *Hard Times* and *The Nickel Boys*. Both novels depict institutions as structures of power that regulate behaviour, shape



bodies and produce compliance. Discipline functions through observation, normalisation, routine and correction. These mechanisms reduce individuals to manageable units, eroding autonomy and enforcing conformity. By focusing on disciplinary power, the study moves beyond moral critique or historical analysis to reveal the systemic nature of institutional control and dehumanisation.

Institutional Discipline in *Hard Times*

Thomas Gradgrind's school in *Hard Times* functions as a disciplinary institution that regulates bodies, thought and conduct. Read through Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, the school appears not as a neutral place of education but as a system designed to produce obedience and compliance. Discipline operates through routine, supervision and normalisation rather than overt punishment.

The opening classroom scene establishes the body as an object of control. Gradgrind enters the classroom with his command, "NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts" (Dickens 9). Children sit in rigid rows, arranged by number rather than name. Gradgrind addresses one student as "girl number twenty" before knowing her name is Sissy Jupe. This numerical system reduces children to manageable units within the institutional machine. The scene reflects what Foucault describes as the production of docile bodies, where individuals are shaped, trained and rendered useful through discipline (136). Physical restraint supports mental obedience, as children learn to associate learning with immobility and submission. The exchange between Sissy Jupe and Bitzer demonstrates how discipline produces specific types of subjects. When asked to define a horse, Sissy cannot answer despite living her entire life among horses at the circus. Her experience holds no value within the system. In contrast, Bitzer recites a mechanical definition, "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forth teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive" (Dickens 13). Gradgrind praises Bitzer's response as the model of proper learning. The scene reveals how the school normalises a particular mode of thinking while punishing deviation. Sissy's inability to perform is considered a deficient. The school doesn't recognise her knowledge because it cannot be quantified or reproduced mechanically. Foucault argues that normalisation operates by establishing standards and measuring individuals against them (184). Those who fail to conform become targets for correction.

Education in Gradgrind's school functions as a machine. Lessons follow fixed patterns. Time is divided into precise segments. Each child occupies a designated place within the classroom order. The teacher M'Choakumchild has been trained in the system himself, equipped with

some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs (Dickens 17).

This description reveals the mechanical reproduction of authority figures within the disciplinary apparatus. Teachers are products of the same system they enforce. Foucault describes the modern school as a disciplinary machine in which every moment and every individual is utilised efficiently (165). Gradgrind's assertion on facts, calculation and repetition transforms learning into a mechanical process. This represents what Deacon describes as "a new moral orthopedics that was intended to fashion the future more than punish the past" (182). Individual thought and imagination become obstacles to institutional efficiency.

Surveillance plays a central role in maintaining discipline. This mirrors what scholars describe as institutional design "where there is no rule-gap, strict discipline prevails and no one



can escape surveillance” (qtd. in Çeven et al. 154). Gradgrind doesn’t limit his authority to the classroom. He extends observation into his children’s private lives. When he discovers Louisa and Tom peeping at Sleary’s circus, he confronts them with disapproval. Louisa responds without defiance, “Father, I have been tired a long time” (Dickens 23). Her submission reveals the success of disciplinary training. She accepts her father’s judgment and internalises rules that govern her behaviour. Foucault argues that supervision becomes essential in institutional systems where power must operate continuously (174). Discipline is internalised. The school also functions through infra-penalty. It establishes narrow standards of acceptable behaviour. Any deviation from these standards is punished, even if it is not a legal offense. Imagination, curiosity and emotional expression become infractions. Foucault identifies infra-penalty as a mechanism where institutions define and punish behaviour outside conventional legal boundaries (178). Gradgrind’s school governs not only actions but thoughts and feelings.

The long-term effects of this disciplinary training appear in Louisa’s life. When her father arranges her marriage to the industrialist Josiah Bounderby, she doesn’t protest. She asks only, “What does it matter!” (Dickens 125). Her response reveals the destruction of will and desire. Discipline has created a subject who cannot imagine resistance. Louisa’s eventual emotional collapse exposes the violence underlying Gradgrind’s system. She confesses, “All that I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me” (Dickens 264).

Tom Gradgrind’s corruption offers another example of institutional failure. He becomes selfish, manipulative and morally empty. He steals from Bounderby’s bank and allows an innocent man to be accused. The system that claimed to produce virtue has produced vice.

... the existing educational institutions were perceived as poorly regulated, arbitrarily managed, abusive, ineffective, generating resistance, depriving parents of income, exacerbating labour shortages and producing delinquents. (Deacon 179)

Foucault emphasizes that disciplinary institutions claim to reform individuals while often serving other purposes (233). Gradgrind’s school presents itself as a place of moral improvement, but its actual function is the production of compliant subjects who accept authority without question.

Hard Times exposes the mechanisms of institutional discipline within Victorian industrial society. Gradgrind’s school regulates bodies, normalises specific forms of knowledge and punishes deviation. Through the fates of Sissy, Louisa, Bitzer and Tom, Dickens reveals how disciplinary power shapes individuals while claiming to improve them. The institution fails because its true function is control rather than care and education.

Institutional Discipline in *The Nickel Boys*

Nickel Academy in *The Nickel Boys* operates as a disciplinary institution that claims to reform troubled youth. However, it functions as a site of racial terror and systematic violence. The reform school presents itself as a place of rehabilitation and education. However, its structure of surveillance, punishment and physical control destroys rather than improves the boys. Reading the institution through Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power reveals how reform becomes a cover for domination. Reform schools function as

relatively artificial enclaves where students are expected to absorb socially desirable modes of behaviour and forms of knowledge before being recuperated into society (Deacon 184).

However, at Nickel, this recuperation never occurs. The institution presents itself through the official rhetoric of reform and education. Staff members claim to operate a legitimate school. As Spencer states, “This is school, and we’re teachers. We’re going to teach you how



to do things like everyone else” (Whitehead 46). This rhetoric conceals the reality of systematic abuse.

Elwood Curtis arrives at Nickel Academy as an idealistic believer in justice and progress. He has been wrongly arrested while hitchhiking to college. Despite his innocence, the court sends him to Nickel for reform. Elwood enters the institution expecting fairness and education. He believes in the American promise of equal opportunity. His faith in institutional authority makes him vulnerable to the violence that follows. Turner, in contrast, has learned survival through obedience and silence. He understands that the institution does not exist to help the boys. Elwood idealism conflicts with Turner’s pragmatism, but both responses emerge from the same disciplinary system.

The institution regulates bodies through strict routines and spatial control. It organises space according to racial hierarchy. “the white boys went down the hill and the black boys went up the hill” (Whitehead 48). Boys wake at fixed times, eat at designated hours and move between assigned locations under supervision. Through such mechanisms,

power relations based on discipline and subjectification, regulate and reshape bodies, actions, attitudes, and daily behavior patterns of individuals (qtd. in Çeven et al. 155).

At Nickel, boys are assigned to work details that exploit their labour.

Whatever the life stories, whatever they’d done to get sent to Nickel, the boys were chained together in the same fashion and headed to the same destination (Whitehead 44).

The school presents this work as vocational training, but it functions as unpaid labour that enriches the institution. Surveillance operates continuously at Nickel Academy. Staff members monitor the boys at all times. Director Hardee maintains the public image of reform while Spencer enforces discipline through fear. Boys know they are being watched. This constant observation produces self-regulation. However, unlike Gradgrind’s school where surveillance produces internalised obedience, Nickel’s surveillance creates terror. Foucault argues that supervision becomes necessary as institutions grow more complex (174). At Nickel, supervision ensures control through the threat of violence.

The boxing match between Griff and Big Chet reveals how the institution manipulates bodies for entertainment and profit. School staff organise matches and place bets on the outcomes. They order Griff to lose deliberately. Griff refuses and fights to win. After the match, Griff disappears. “They came for Griff that night and he never returned” (Whitehead 112). Turner later confirms that he was killed. Griff’s death demonstrates the institution’s response to disobedience. The school eliminates those who refuse to submit. The White House functions as Nickel’s primary instrument of discipline.

The beating room had a bloody mattress and a naked pillow that was covered instead by the overlapping stains from all the mouths that had bit into it (Whitehead 67).

Students are sent there for punishment and beaten with leather straps until they lose consciousness. Elwood experiences this violence after being falsely accused of stealing. The physical pain is severe, but the psychological damage lasts longer. Foucault identifies how institutions use physical punishment to enforce control (Foucault 178). However, the violence at Nickel exceeds disciplinary correction. It becomes racial terror disguised as reform.

The institution operates through infra-penalty, creating its own system of rules and punishments outside legal oversight. Staff members decide who gets punished and how severely. The boys have no rights. Spencer enforces arbitrary rules that serve institutional



power. Boys are punished for talking, for slow work, for perceived disrespect. Foucault describes infra-penality as a mechanism where institutions define behaviour outside conventional law (178). At Nickel, this mechanism operates without restraint. The discovery of a secret graveyard decades later exposes the ultimate truth of Nickel Academy. Investigators find unmarked graves containing the bodies of students who died at the school. Official records claim these boys ran away. The institution concealed their deaths. Foucault emphasises the institutions claim to reform individuals while serving other purposes (233). Nickel Academy claimed to rehabilitate Black youth, but its actual function was the enforcement of racial hierarchy through violence. The boys were not reformed. They were brutalised, exploited and murdered.

The Nickel Boys reveals how disciplinary institutions function as sites of racialised violence under the guise of reform. Nickel Academy regulates bodies, enforces obedience through terror and eliminates resistance. Through Elwood, Turner and Griff and the unnamed boys in the secret graveyard, Whitehead exposes how institutional power operates without accountability. The school functions exactly as designed to control Black bodies and maintain racial hierarchy through violence disguised as care.

School, prison, is exactly the same, you know what I mean? The only difference is in the school, lads, you could come home from school to your family... In prison, it was still like school (qtd. in. Liston 259).

Nickel Academy exemplifies this convergence of educational and carceral institutions.

The persistence and Transformation of Disciplinary Power

Both *Hard Times* and *The Nickel Boys* reveal how disciplinary institutions persist across different historical periods while adapting their methods to serve specific forms of social control. Gradgrind's school in Victorian England and Nickel Academy in twentieth-century America operate through similar mechanisms despite their distinct contexts. Surveillance and normalisation function in both settings. However, the intensity and purpose of discipline transform according to the power structures each institution serves. Comparing these texts exposes how disciplinary power maintains continuity in its core practices while changing its targets and techniques.

Surveillance operates as a constant mechanism in both institutions. Gradgrind monitors his students continuously. Students internalise this observation and regulate their behaviour. At Nickel Academy, surveillance functions similarly but with greater violence. Spencer enforces discipline through fear and physical punishment. The consequences differ. In *Hard Times*, observation leads to psychological damage. At Nickel, observation leads to beatings and death. The mechanism persists, but its application intensifies in the racialised context of Jim Crow America.

Normalisation functions through the establishment of standards and the punishment of deviation. Gradgrind's school defines proper knowledge as mechanical fact-based learning. Sissy Jupe fails because her experiential understanding does not conform. Bitzer succeeds because he reproduces required definitions. Nickel Academy establishes standards of acceptable behaviour. Elwood fails because he questions authority. Turner survives because he performs compliance. Both institutions punish those who fail to conform for many students in punitive institutions, "being excluded from school was highlighted as a particularly significant critical moment in their lives" (Liston 257). Despite these continuities, key transformation occurs. Gradgrind's school operates through psychological control. Discipline produces emotional death. Nickel Academy employs systematic physical violence. Boys are beaten and



killed. This transformation reflects the difference between class-based discipline in industrial England and race-based discipline in segregated America. Gradgrind's school produces workers who accept their positions. Nickel Academy enforces racial hierarchy through terror.

The comparison reveals that disciplinary power maintains core mechanisms while adapting to serve different forms of domination. As Deacon observes,

The twentieth-century shift from traditional didactic or teacher-centred to more co-operative or child-centred instructional formats has not dissolved or tamed power relations but merely reformulated them (185).

Victorian industrial society required psychological discipline. Jim Crow America required physical terror. Both systems claim to improve individuals while producing damage and death. Institutional dehumanisation is a structural feature of disciplinary power that adapts to preserve inequality.

Conclusion

This study examines how disciplinary power operates in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* and Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* through Michel Foucault's theoretical framework. Both novels expose institutions that claim to reform individuals but function as sites of dehumanisation. Gradgrind's school and Nickel Academy employ surveillance, normalisation and the rhetoric of improvement to control bodies and suppress resistance.

The analysis identifies key findings across both texts. Both institutions regulate bodies through constant observation and strict routines that produce self-regulation. Normalisation establishes narrow standards and punishes deviation from expected behaviour. Gradgrind's system produces emotionally damaged individuals who lack independent thought. Nickel Academy brutalises and murders its inmates under the guise of reform. These mechanisms appear in both Victorian industrial society and the context of Jim Crow laws, confirming that disciplinary power persists across historical contexts. However, significant transformations occur in how power operates. Gradgrind's school relies on psychological control to produce compliant workers for industrial capitalism. Discipline operates through emotional suppression and internalised obedience. Nickel Academy employs systematic physical violence to enforce racial hierarchy and white supremacy. The intensity of punishment increases when disciplinary power intersects with race. This comparison reveals that institutions adapt their techniques while preserving their core function of social control. Both *Hard Times* and *The Nickel Boys* challenge readers to recognise how institutions maintain power through everyday practices of surveillance and normalisation. Recognising these patterns is essential for understanding how power operates in both literary texts and social reality. This study positions disciplinary power as a continuous structure that adapts across historical and racial contexts.



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