

# The Nickel Boys' Elwood through the Scope of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey

Wesley A. Hopkins

Master of Arts in Technical Writing (Pursuing)

University of North Alabama

United States

wahopkins48[at]gmail[dot]com

**Abstract-** *This paper examines The Nickel Boys' main character Elwood, explaining that his story is an accurate representation of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey or "monomyth." It explains the stages of the hero's journey and compares them to moments in Elwood's story.*

**Keywords-** *Hero Journey; Hero Myth; Monomyth; Nickel Boys; Joseph Campbell; Elwood; Colson Whitehead;*

*The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead's 2019 novel, tells the story of Elwood, a Black high-school student who was wrongfully accused of stealing a motor vehicle and sent to Nickel Academy, a Florida prison for juveniles. The story takes place in early 1960s Florida and follows Elwood through his childhood, developing a character who stands out among the other children for his desire to learn and use knowledge as a means of progress, and Elwood did not lack the work ethic necessary to utilize that knowledge in a way that would create a desired change. Making a difference was a realistic possibility for Elwood, but events out of his control took away the possibility of making those changes in his lifetime. Elwood was ultimately murdered, seemingly eliminating all possibility for him to make the changes he desired to see. However, a character introduced as Turner adopts Elwood's name, giving him a second chance to help make a positive difference in the lives of Black people in the United States. The positive difference becomes enlightenment, a recognition of the brutal truth about the violence enacted against the boys at Nickel Academy. Elwood's journey into, through, and out of Nickel Academy can be compared to the "hero's journey," a common theme in ancient mythology.

The phrase "hero's journey" was coined by Joseph Campbell, a scholar who studied mythology. In a conversation between Campbell and Bill Moyers transcribed into one of his books *The Power of Myth*, Moyers asks why the element of the hero's journey is so common in mythology, and Campbell responds, "Because that's what's worth writing about. Even in popular novels, the main character is a hero or heroine who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself" (Power of Myth 151). Campbell's description of the hero is an accurate description of Elwood. In the first chapter of *The Nickel Boys*, we learn that Elwood spends much of his time

listening to Martin Luther King's speech at Zion Hill, "even if the ideas it put in his head were his undoing" (Whitehead 11). In that sentence, Whitehead recognizes that, like Campbell's hero archetype, Elwood gave his life to something bigger than himself. Campbell goes on to say that the usual hero's journey begins with someone who has experienced a loss at the hands of another, or someone who feels as though something is missing from other members of his or her society (Power of Myth 151). There is something that is taken from Elwood, and it is the same right that Black people in the United States have been continuously deprived of throughout history: freedom.

Campbell explains that the hero's journey can vary slightly from story to story, but they almost always follow the same cyclical pattern of steps: the "ordinary world"; the "call to adventure"; "meeting the mentor"; "crossing the threshold"; "tests, allies, and enemies"; "the innermost cave"; "the death and rebirth"; "the resurrection"; and "the return with the elixir." The "elixir" that Campbell mentions is usually information or sometimes an object that is necessary to achieve a highly important goal. The journey takes place in two worlds: the ordinary world and a special world. The journey begins in the ordinary world. The "call to adventure" and "meeting the mentor" happens in the ordinary world. The step of the journey that carries the hero into the special world is crossing the threshold, which is made possible with information given to the hero by the mentor. All of the other steps before the return with the elixir take place in the special world. When the hero returns to the ordinary world, he or she is in possession of the elixir, the information needed to cause a positive change in the ordinary world (Power of Myth 151-205).

Elwood's "call to adventure" occurs with a combination of the record he receives on Christmas Day 1962 and the invitation to Melvin Griggs and inspiration he receives from Mr. Hill. Campbell writes in his first book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that there is a herald or announcer

of the adventure, and the herald is often judged as evil by the world (Thousand Faces 51-53). Elwood's adventure begins during the Jim Crow era, when many Americans viewed civil rights activists in a negative light and laws and institutions were in place that deprived Black people of their basic human rights and therefore dehumanized them. Campbell states that the herald is often a beast in some mythological tales, and the beast is representative of a repressed ability to create new ideas. The beast's true good nature is not allowed to be shown, and he is therefore portrayed to the public as evil (Thousand Faces 53), which was certainly the case of the Black American in the 1960s, and both of Elwood's heralds, Dr. King and Mr. Hill, were teachers trying to convey ideas that the majority of the people in power viewed as radical or harmful. Campbell says that the herald introduces to the hero "the awakening of the self," which results in the hero accepting the call to adventure (Thousand Faces 51) and is represented in Elwood as his realization that he wants to be a part of the Civil Rights Movement and brings him to the protest outside the movie theater.

Elwood's "crossing the threshold" occurs when he is arrested for auto theft and sent to Nickel Academy. The step of crossing the threshold in Elwood's journey carries him from the ordinary world into what Campbell refers to as the special world or the unknown world. Campbell says that there is often a supernatural aid that assists the hero in crossing the threshold into the unknown world, and that the hero is afraid of leaving the comfort of the familiar, ordinary world (Thousand Faces 69-78). In Elwood's case, he is certainly afraid, and the assistance he receives can be considered a supernatural aid, although it is certainly not welcomed. Elwood's assistance in crossing the threshold comes from the car thief and the police officer who arrested them. The aid may be considered supernatural, because the events seemed to transpire in a way that was orchestrated against Elwood. The government and institutions that oppressed Black people in the 1960s must have been viewed by many as an unopposable, seemingly relentless and therefore supernatural force. Campbell says that the unknown world is populated with deceitful and dangerous presences (Thousand Faces 78).

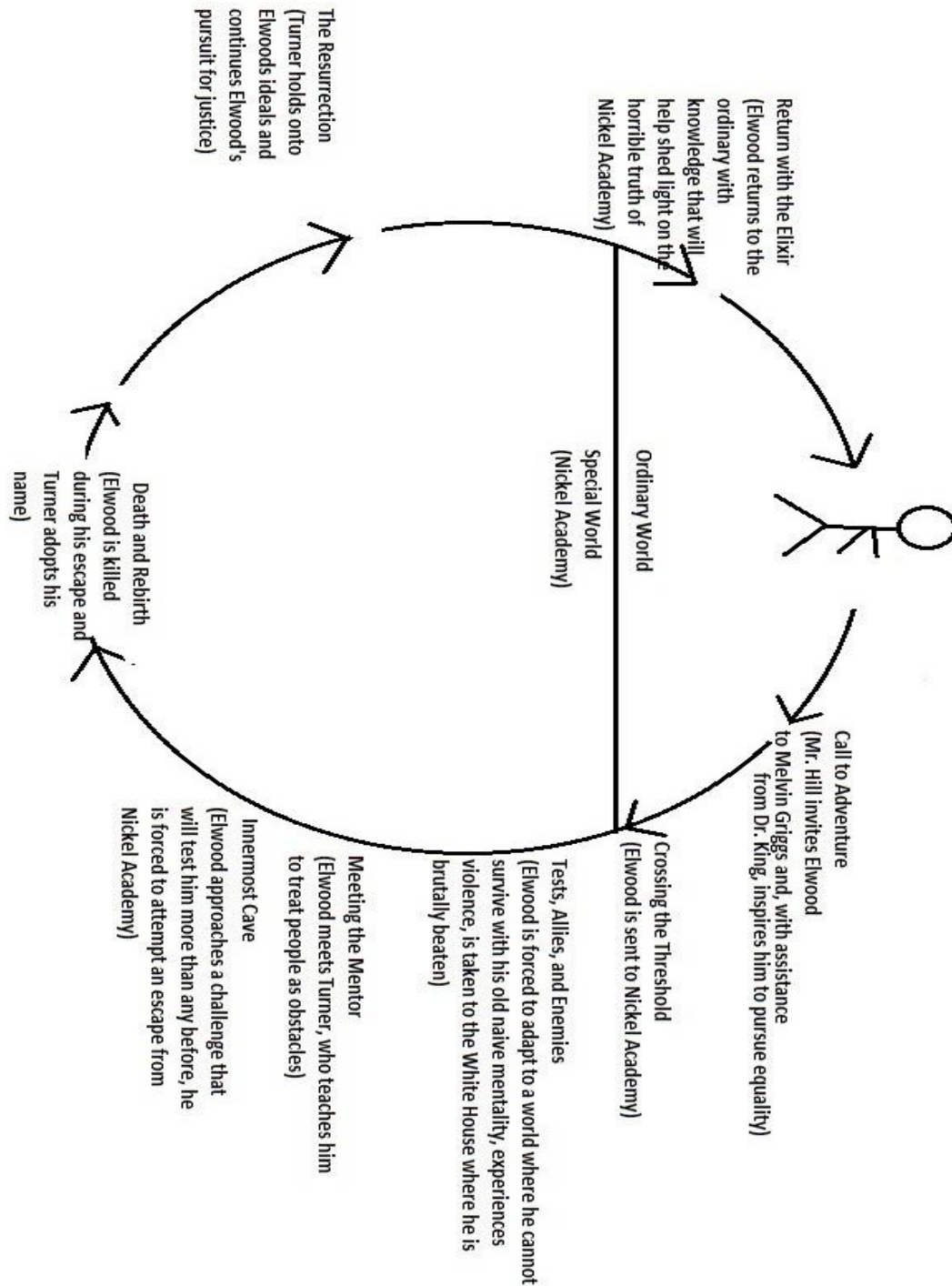
Elwood encounters many tests, allies, and enemies in Nickel Academy. Some of the many tests that Elwood encounters come in the form of deceit, which is a test the hero always faces in the unknown world. Campbell says that the hero is often confronted by a trickster who often poses a trick question to the hero, allowing the hero to continue his journey if he answers the nearly impossible question correctly. Campbell also mentions that the deception the hero encounters is often in the form of an evil entity in disguise, such as a seductive siren that turns out to be a malicious figure who aims to harm the hero (Thousand Faces 79). The boys of Nickel Academy are faced with deceit from the beginning of their sentence and throughout it. Even the name Nickel "Academy" is a deception. Elwood believes he is being sent to a school with a campus where he will learn, but he is instead taken

to a prison with guards where he will work, providing free labor in a time when slavery is illegal. The boys of Nickel Academy and their parents are deceived again when they are told that boys in the infirmary are sick, recovering from a mere cold, when in reality they have been badly beaten and are recovering from wounds inflicted on them by the Nickel workers. The boys and their parents are deceived further when they are beaten so badly that they are killed and their deaths are disguised as escapes. The other boys and the parents of the victims are told that the victim ran away. The boys are deceived again and again when their exploitation is disguised as a means of reform. They are deceived when they are shown the graveyard and not the secret graveyard. Trickery and deceit are common motifs in African mythology (Oforiatta-Ayim 440), and so common that the hero often utilizes deceit to outwit enemies (Ross 207-209). The tests Elwood faces comes in more forms than that of deception. He is faced with physical struggles, deprivation, isolation, and many forms of violence. The enemies Elwood encounters come in the form of Nickel workers such as Spencer, who treated Elwood and the other Black inmates inhumanely and operates the beating machine in the White House, and other Nickel inmates such as Lonnie, Black Mike, and Griff, who bully Elwood. Most of Elwood's allies in the unknown world are other inmates such as Desmond, who helps Elwood by teaching him things about what it is really like at Nickel and by teaching him things that help him acclimate and survive. One of Elwood's greatest allies is Turner, who helps Elwood by teaching him to relinquish his naive, childlike attitude, to stay out of others' way inside and outside of Nickel Academy, and to treat others as obstacles.

Turner is a special ally in Elwood's hero's journey. Turner acts as the mentor in the step of the journey Campbell calls "meeting the mentor." According to Campbell, the universal journey's hero must undergo a change. In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell says that in order to overcome the ultimate trial the hero must undergo a transformation of consciousness. He says, "What all the myths have to deal with is transformations of consciousness of one kind or another. You have been thinking one way, now you have to think a different way." He says that the hero's consciousness is transformed either by the trials he faces in the unknown world or by "illuminating revelations" (Power of Myth 155). Elwood's consciousness is transformed by a combination of the trials he has faced at Nickel Academy and illuminating revelations. Seeing the acts of senseless violence by Griff, Lonnie, and Big Mike opens Elwood's eyes to the evil that can live within other people, and Elwood is pushed to the brink when he is mindlessly beaten by Spencer's machine in the White House. He then begins to realize the world is not as innocent as he thought and asks himself how people can be so evil. After Elwood is released from the infirmary, he has already begun his transformation; he finds himself subconsciously swinging his tool much more violently when he is performing his work duties. His

teacher doesn't recognize him when he's first released from the infirmary. He becomes more aggressive. He reaches a point where he can listen to Turner's "illuminating revelations." The revelations he gains from Turner come from information Turner bestows upon him while they share a room in the Nickel Academy infirmary. Turner tells him that the world is not on their side, that they are at odds with the other people inside and outside

Nickel, and he teaches Elwood to stay out of everyone else's business and treat others at obstacles. Turner's name is appropriate because he actually turns or changes Elwood's worldview, consciousness, or way of thinking. After Turner's revelations, Elwood changes from the naive boy that entered Nickel Academy to the hero who had the courage to escape when he learns of the plan to kill him.





When Turner reveals that he believes Elwood is going to be killed, Elwood's approach to the "innermost cave" is signaled. The "innermost cave" is the point in the hero's journey where he faces his biggest challenge yet and usually experiences some form of death, whether it's literal or metaphorical. Campbell says that the entrance to the innermost cave denotes a "life-centering, life-renewing act" (Thousand Faces 92). In Elwood's case, he is forced to escape or die. Although Harper shoots Elwood during his escape attempt and he does die, Turner is able to escape, and Turner's escape would not have been possible without Elwood's life being threatened, which forced him to plan the escape.

Elwood's "death and rebirth" occurs when he is killed and Turner adopts Elwood's name as a way of honoring him. Throughout Turner's adult life, he does not talk about his experiences at Nickel Academy. Turner's refusal to revisit the trauma that he and Elwood went through together can be thought of as "the refusal of the return," which Campbell says often happens in the hero's journey before the "return with the elixir" (Thousand Faces 193).

Elwood's "resurrection" occurs years later when archaeology students from the University of South Florida excavate the secret graveyard where Elwood was buried.

In the prologue of *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead writes, "When they found the secret graveyard, he knew he'd have to return." Turner decides he has to return to Nickel Academy, give Elwood a proper burial, and tell his story to the world (Whitehead 8). Elwood's story of the real atrocities at Nickel Academy is Joseph Campbell's "elixir." When Turner decides to tell his story, that is the "return with the elixir."

When Turner and Elwood are in the Nickel Academy infirmary, and Turner tells Elwood that the outside world is no better than the world inside Nickel, Turner is recognizing that the two worlds are actually the same. Campbell explains this same sentiment by saying that the two worlds can only be pictured as distinct from each other, but the two kingdoms are actually one. "The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know. And exploration of that dimension, either willingly or unwillingly, is the whole sense of the deed of the hero" (Thousand Faces 217).

Although any victory for the advancement of equality in America is a monumental accomplishment, because Black Americans have always been met with absolutely powerful resistance, Elwood's victory did not save the world. Black people in America are still targets of discrimination, injustice, and bigotry. The idea of there needing to be another hero and another is noticeable in the cyclical nature of the hero's journey. "The boon brought from the transcendent deep becomes quickly rationalized into nonentity, and the need becomes great for another hero to refresh the world" (Thousand Faces 218).

## Works Cited

- [1] Campbell, Joseph, et al. *The Power of Myth*. Anchor Books, 1991.
- [2] Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.
- [3] Oforiatta-Ayim, Nana. *Essential Visual History of World Mythology*. National Geographic, 2008.
- [4] Ross, Mabel H., and Barbara K. Walker. "On Another Day ...": *Tales Told Among the Nkundo of Zaire*. Archon Books, 1979.
- [5] Whitehead, Colson. *The Nickel Boys: a Novel*. Doubleday, 2019.

## Author's Biography

Wesley Hopkins is a tutor and freelance writer in Florence, Alabama. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in professional writing from the University of North Alabama and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in technical writing.