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ASPECTS OF IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS *THE BLUEST EYE AND SULA*

Abstract: *This paper analyzes Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1974) from the standpoint of developmental psychology. Morrison's works can be viewed as an amalgam of social and emotional themes which play a major role in the identity construction of the author's characters. The Ecological Systems Theory proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner will thus be engaged to observe how the identities of Morrison's characters are being shaped in the novels. The analyses of the five systems on which Bronfenbrenner's model is grounded will explain what is needed for Morrison's characters to create a sustainable identity.*

Keywords: *ecology, identity construction, psychology, Toni Morrison*

INTRODUCTION

One of the crucial questions in developmental psychology is the question of what, or who, the child itself is? Is it solely a product of nature, a combination of the gene pool inherited from their parents, or is it a product of nurture, a product of the society in which it lives? Could it possibly be the combination of nature and nurture? Urie Bronfenbrenner, developmental psychologist, tackled these issues in his Ecological Systems Theory, which is also used today in modern developmental psychology, and which ties two opposing schools of psychology, the one arguing for nature and the other in favor of nurture. In his explanation of the five systems – chrono, macro, exo, meso, and micro-systems, Bronfenbrenner indicated how a child is the result of the joint work of both genetics and inherited characteristics. These are some of the vital issues that were also tackled by African-American writer Toni Morrison in her novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. The Ecological Systems Theory proposed by

Urie Bronfenbrenner will be employed to closely examine how the identities of Morrison's characters are being shaped in the novels. Morrison's novels have so far received insufficient attention by developmental psychology and Bronfenbrenner's theory, although his views provide an additional and unique perspective in understanding Morrison's characters.

Unlike other major psychologists who developed their theories after conducting experiments in artificially created environments and situations, this acknowledged psychologist argued how only "experiments created as real are real in their consequences" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 4). In other words, Bronfenbrenner highlighted the importance of conducting any research regarding development of a person's identity in, as he stated, "settings representative of their actual world – in other words – ecologically valid settings" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 4). However, in order to understand what he means under the term "ecologically valid setting," one needs to be acquainted with his bioecological model in general. Bronfenbrenner decided to abandon the artificial contexts that laboratory-conducted experiments provided, and instead opted to focus on natural environments. He believed that environment, also called natural ecology, is defined as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2012, p. 17) with "the developing individual being at the center and embedded in several environmental settings" (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010, p. 64). Bronfenbrenner considered his Ecological Systems Theory as representing the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach and that is why he decided to invite not only educators and psychologists but also sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and political scientists who analyzed different levels and environmental effects that could influence development of identity.

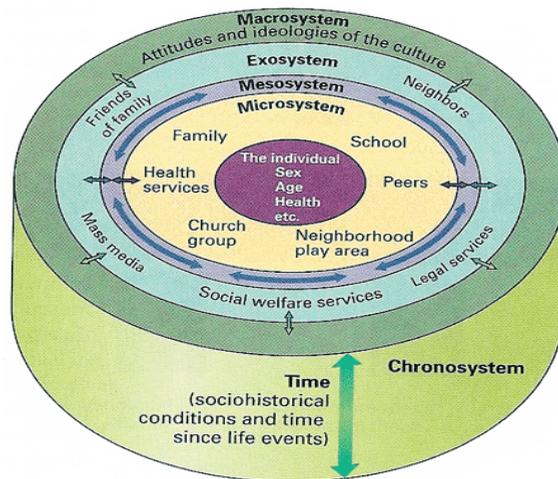


Chart 1 – The bioecological model of development

THE BLUEST “I”

Addressing the problem of identity development and self-hatred of African American characters in Morrison’s first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) can be seen as her boldest exploration of the aforementioned issues. Following the parallel stories of two female protagonists, Claudia MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove, this *Bildungsroman* tackles the (in)ability of self-love and self-acceptance when one is “actually hated – hated for things we have no control over and cannot change” (Morrison, 1999, p. 1). Inspired by the conversation Morrison had with her childhood friend who wished upon having blue eyes, the novel focuses on “the demonization of an entire race” which took roots “inside the most delicate member of society: a child, and the most vulnerable member: a female” (Morrison, 1999, p. 3).

Due to the meso and micro cultural contexts in which black girls Claudia and Pecola are plunged, their coming-of-age process is vastly different. While for Claudia MacTeer this process of maturation means first accepting, and then rejecting the “white is beautiful” propaganda imposed by the American mass media, for Pecola this trial is much more difficult. Having been rejected by the community for their “blackness” and financial status, Pecola’s family, the Breedloves, perched in her the sense of self-inferiority, turning her quest for identity into a complex negotiation between her own race, gender, class, and sexuality and the culturally marked and accepted white – or “cute” aesthetic (Thomson, 1996, p. 185).

THE CHRONOSYSTEM

Taking place in the 1940s in Lorain, Ohio *The Bluest Eye* represents Morrison’s attempt to address “the social forces that drive understanding and definition of cultural constructs such as beauty, normalcy, family, and sexuality” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 46). However, in order to understand how these cultural constructs were defined, one needs to be acquainted with the socio-cultural context that prevailed in America in the 1960s when Morrison was writing the novel. With the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power movement and the corresponding “Black is Beautiful” cultural movement at the full swing, the 1960s appeared to be the time when African-Americans “had begun to express a newfound political awareness” and “celebrate black consciousness” (Bailie, 2013, p. 44). That is why it seems rather peculiar that Morrison chose not to focus on that “celebratory” period in African American history, but opted to place her story two decades earlier when both “nineteenth-century scientific racism and the cultural hegemony of 1940s America” were very much present (Bailie, 2013, p. 43). When asked to explain the reasons behind this decision, Morrison revealed that she believed the history of the Civil Rights Movement was being too glorified, “releasing Black people into their own class society (...) moving

into white neighborhoods (...) and breaking the unity” African-Americans had had before the abolishment of apartheid (Morrison, 2008, p. 224). In the novel, Morrison describes how Pecola's mother, Pauline, had a hard time adjusting to this new “mixed” community: “I weren't used to so much white folks. But they were all over us” (Morrison, 1999, p. 91). Analyzing the Civil Rights movement, the author chose to place the novel in the 1940s, rather than “in the positively charged atmosphere of her contemporary world” in order to penetrate the “complexities of personal and class relationships” for Black community itself (Baillie, 2013, p. 43). Speaking of the 1940s, the community in Lorain, Ohio is presented as being blinded by the culture and the cult of whiteness promoted by the society and the mass-media.

THE MACROSYSTEM

When it comes to the cultural context in *The Bluest Eye*, it can easily be seen how socio-economic status, ethnicity, and mass-media play an important role when in the creation of the identity of Morrison's characters. Looking at Pecola Breedlove and the rest of her family, it is evident how they are made victims of the aforementioned factors. Even though the 1940s marked the beginning of “modest racial integration and anti-segregation,” the Breedloves still feel and still are segregated from the rest of white middle or upper class society (Feagin & Ducey, 2018, p. 398).

Starting with the “head of the family,” Cholly Breedlove, Morrison explains how he suffered both verbal and physical injuries due to the color of his skin as “insults were part of the nuisance of life, like lice” (Morrison, 1999, p. 120). However, the climax and also the turning point in his life occurred after being harassed and humiliated by two white hunters while having a sexual intercourse when he was merely a teenager. Due to the inherited racism and self-hate, Cholly “never did once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters” because they were white and strong and he was “small, black, helpless” (Morrison, 1999, p. 118). Instead, he projected his anger towards his own family by neglecting his wife or abusing his daughter

Cholly's wife, Pauline, seemed to have suffered the similar fate. Having moved to Lorain, Ohio, she was ashamed of her looks, which did not match the white beauty standards promoted by the mass-media of that time. She was also ashamed of her daughter Pecola, who was teased by her peers about, as Morrison said, “matters over which the victim has no control – the cooler of her skin” (Morrison, 1999, p. 50). What is interesting is that the boys that mocked Pecola were black as well and they seemed to display the same patterns of behavior as Pecola's father – projecting hatred and anger onto those who are perceived as weaker and less-worthy. Morrison describes how the boys “seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely

learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness (...) that had burned for ages (...) and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path” (Morrison, 1999, p. 50).

It is through the actions undertaken by Cholly Breedlove who raped his own daughter and the words of community members who disliked people darker than them that Morrison portrays the failure of the entire African American community to connect and to sympathize with one another. The community failed to help Pecola, doing nothing but being “disgusted, amused, shocked” upon finding about Pecola’s rape, the event that ultimately triggered her demise (Morrison, 1999, p. 190). These issues which are rooted in, and stem from, the macrosystem will be looked at more closely in the sections that follow.

THE EXOSYSTEM

Considering the role of society and the mass-media in *The Bluest Eye*, the reader can easily spot how the workplace and mass-media play a vital role in shaping the identity of Pecola’s mother, which will later influence Pecola’s coming of age. Morrison writes how, while growing up, Pauline Williams “never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace,” due to which she turned to escapism – dreaming and fantasizing about “men and love and touching” (Morrison, 1999, pp. 86–87). Upon seeing Cholly, she projects these dreams onto him, envisaging him as the combination of all the things she was ever fond of: “When I first seen Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that (...) berry-picking after a funeral and I put some in the pocket (...). I could feel the purple deep inside me. And that lemonade Mama used to make Pap (...). Cholly was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green (...) all come together” (Morrison, 1999, p. 90). After they had moved to Lorain, Ohio, Pauline started taking jobs as a day worker while constantly feeling rejected by her colleagues and the white women in town. The latter, brainwashed by the standards of beauty promoted by the mass-media, also drove Pauline to change her appearance: “Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking (...) and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes (...) and even a few new things for the apartment” (Morrison, 1999, p. 92). Although Pauline later stops trying to recreate her own identity – imitating “the appearance of movie stars (...) and the beauty ideals of dominant culture,” she continues to impose these on her daughter Pecola (Gillespie, 2008, p. 50). Namely, working as a maid in the “white people’s” home, Pauline Breedlove gave up on trying to make her own house a home, finding “beauty, order, cleanliness and praise” in the Fisher’s home (Morrison, 1999, p. 99). She was also “smitten” by the little Fisher girl – to whom she was more a mother than to her own daughter. For Pecola, her mother was a stranger, for the white children Pauline seemed to be an ideal servant, even a friendly figure: “Another door opened, and in

walked a little girl (...). She wore a pink sunback dress (...) her hair was corn yellow (...) calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove seemed reason enough to scratch her” (Morrison, 1999, p. 84). While Pauline attempted to secure her acceptance in the community, she simultaneously also destroyed Pecola's chance to feel and to be accepted (Beaulieu, 2003). This is perhaps the most visible in the scene in which Pecola attempts to become white by eating white-identified food: “Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary-Jane for whom the candy is made. Smiling white face. Blond hair (...) blue eyes (...). To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (Morrison, 1999, p. 38).

Unlike Pecola whom this idea(l) of whiteness prevented from creating her own selfhood, Claudia MacTeer, used the mass-media to help her shape her personality in a positive way. Even though both her sister Frieda and Pecola adored the “big, blue-eyed Baby Doll” they got for Christmas, Claudia felt “revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair” (Morrison, 1999, p. 13). Contrary to Pecola and Pauline, she wishes to be nothing like women adored by and promoted in the magazines and on television: “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasured (...). I destroyed white baby dolls (Morrison, 1999, p. 15). This strong sense of identity Claudia is displaying throughout the novel, and it has very much to do with her microsystem, i.e. her supportive parents Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer.

THE MESOSYSTEM AND THE MICROSYSYSTEM

Regarding the mesosystem and microsystem, or the relations and interactions between different systems, the novel displays that the most defining bonds are those between each individual in the family in which the identity of each member of the family becomes – through a relationship or a lack thereof – intertwined with the collective, family identity. That is why both the mesosystem and the microsystem will be studied and analyzed under the same section. Also, it is important to notice that here Morrison seems to agree with the Chicago School sociologists and their statement that the sets of beliefs shared by the individuals result in their desire to be around people with similar lifestyles, while avoiding those people with different lifestyles. This was particularly the case with Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, whose ideals of beauty and lifestyle coincided with the ones imposed by the “white” community, leaving their family shattered.

Looking at the dynamic of the MacTeer family, Morrison gives the readers an impression of their stability, despite the challenges they have to face as African Americans. Starting with Daddy, or Mr. MacTeer, both his physical

appearance and his demeanor towards his family convey a notion that he is indeed invested in the well-being of his family (Gillespie, 2008, p. 60). Therefore, his daughter Claudia sees her father as the protector, describing him as “wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills” (Morrison, 1999, p. 48). Even though he does not have the central role as Mrs. MacTeer has, he indeed shows his ability to protect the rest of his family after Frieda, his older daughter, was molested by Mr. Henry. When it comes to Mama or Mrs. MacTeer, she is often perceived by Claudia as too abrupt and straightforward, even willing to punish her daughters based on a gossip she heard from her neighbor (Gillespie, 2008). However, just like her husband, Mrs. MacTeer will stop at nothing in order to keep her daughters safe – as is seen in the incident that occurred between Frieda and Mr. Henry. That very incident shows just how close MacTeers are, since they all joined together in order to protect a member of their family. Frieda tells Claudia how Mr. Henry was exiled from their home: “I told Mama, and she told Daddy (...) and when Daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off (...). Then Mama hit him with a broom (...). Then Rosemary came out and said that Daddy was going to jail, and I hit her” (Morrison, 1999, p. 77). Having a strong and supportive micro-system, both Frieda and Claudia develop a strong sense of identity and a strong character. Claudia completes her process of maturation by rejecting the beauty norms imposed by the dominant white community, by breaking the white dolls and by accepting both her inner and outer selfhood. Frieda, who once identified with the “Hollywood” beauties, also learns not only how to stand up for herself but also, as Gillespie (2008) maintains, shows enormous strength of character by defending others. This again is a direct result of their family functioning as, in pedagogical terms, a selectively permeable membrane. To be more specific, MacTeers seem to be open to and have influence upon the exosystem – the community itself, while also protecting the identity of their own family from the negative influences coming from the outside. Both Claudia and Frieda learn from the voices of adults, learning to distinguish between what is said and what is meant. Therefore, not only do women of the MacTeer family – Claudia, Frieda and Mrs. MacTeer – learn from and find solace in the female community, but they also seem to support weaker females in it (Sertel, 2014, p. 113). That is why Frieda defends Pecola when she is teased by the boys, and Mrs. MacTeer acts as Pecola’s stepmother, meeting her emotional and physical needs.

In comparison to the house in which the MacTeer family lived, the one that belonged to the Breedloves was described as anything but home. Morrison portrays it as “an abandoned store” which makes visitors “look away when they pass it,” with “the only living thing in the Breedloves’ house being the coal stove, which lived independently of everything and everyone” (Morrison, 1999, pp. 24-27). Similar to that stove, members of the Breedlove family are anything

but what their last name suggests. Morrison describes them as living independently, not taking care of each other, with their focus being on things, values, and beauty found outside their “four walls.” That is why, before analyzing the rape incident one needs to analyze each member of the Breedlove family in order to gain better understanding of their mentality. As mentioned earlier, Cholly Breedlove appears to have pointed his anger towards weaker, dependent members of his family and the African American community. Nevertheless, despite being portrayed as a father-rapist in the novel, Cholly was once capable of love and affection. Morrison describes how Cholly befriended a man he met at his job whose kindness stuck with Cholly for a long time: “Cholly loved Blue. Long after he was a man he remembered the good times they had” (Morrison, 1999, p. 104). However, left behind by his mentally unstable mother and rejected by his runaway father, Cholly had no proper model to identify with. He felt abandoned and betrayed by everyone. To him even God seemed unreliable, and thus he decided upon “siding up” with the devil: “God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes (...). He never felt anything thinking about God, but just the idea of the devil excited him” (Morrison, 1999, p. 105). Later in life, this sense of being rejected by everyone, and not having anyone with whom he felt at home, left him an emotional cripple, which also gave him a false sense of freedom. Being completely alone and free of obligations or responsibility towards anyone, Cholly began to reside “outside the boundaries of human interaction, and with no moral framework, (...) inevitably doomed to be a destructive force in the lives of others” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 51). Speaking of Cholly's incestuous rape of his daughter Pecola, some critics argue it was the result of his hating women's body, ever since his incident with the white hunters humiliating him during his first sexual intercourse: “Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it (...) he hated her so much” (Morrison, 1999, p. 116). However, as Andrews (2010) has insightfully noted, if Cholly really had felt repulsed by a female body, he would not have had sexual intercourse with his wife, Pauline. Furthermore, the sexual act can be seen as representing him having nothing to offer due to being an emotional cripple. Furthermore, on several occasions Morrison hints how Cholly, when looking at Pecola, sees himself. Both are rejected by their parents, and both feel unwanted and not important. Cholly knows that he had not provided his daughter the love she needed and feels frustrated. Looking at her, he feels disgusted both by his own past and with himself (Andrews, 2010, p. 141).

When it comes to Pauline Williams Breedlove, one discovers how she also felt abandoned and unloved throughout her childhood. Due to her crooked foot, she was often neglected by the rest of her family: “she alone of all the children had no nickname, why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one never remarked on her food preferences”

(Morrison, 1999, p. 86). Later, her teenage dreams of finding a man who will save her from her misery are shattered after Cholly decided to turn to alcohol and violence: “Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other” (Morrison 1999, p. 32). Having realized that she cannot find happiness in her dysfunctional marriage Pauline finds another form of escapism in the mass media. Her almost obsessive movie-going exposes her to the white beauty standards that neither she herself nor her family possess. That is why she directed her affections towards the Fisher family where she works as a servant (Bloom, 2009, p. 98). They represent for Pauline the ideal of what a family should look like. After breaking her tooth, she gives up on trying to create both her own and her family’s identity. All the energy she once put in making herself and her home presentable is now directed towards the Fisher home, “a place where she finds order and respite from the dysfunction and chaos of her life with her own family” (Gillespie, 2008, pp. 62-63). While she showers the little Fisher girl with love and affection, both her son Sammy’s and her daughter Pecola’s emotional needs are left unattended.

Pauline’s oldest child, Sammy Breedlove, displays delinquent behavior typical of unloved and unwanted children – especially teenage boys. Morrison thus describes the fourteen-year-old Sammy as a boy who “cursed for a while, or left the house, or threw himself into the fray. He was known, by the time he was fourteen, to have run away from home no less than twenty-seven times” (Morrison, 1999, p. 32). Moreover, due to transgenerational transmission of violence, just like his father Cholly he is no stranger to violent outbursts, or as Bloom calls it, “bursts of murderous rage” (2010, p. 38). While Pecola suffers internally, Sammy lashes out to the extent that he even proposes to his mother to kill Cholly during an argument. Like the rest of his family, Cholly is burdened by the imposed sense of ugliness and consequent unworthiness, which incapacitates him from establishing viable relationships with his mother, father, and Pecola.

In such surrounding, Pecola spends most of her time suffering internally – in the silence of her own troubled mind. Just like her brother, she was perceived as inferior both by her family and her community. Throughout the novel Morrison describes numerous occasions in which Pecola was abused – the incidents included the “black boys” who called her ugly and accused her father of sleeping naked, and her friend Maureen Peel who “jumped on hate wagon” while calling her poor and dark-skinned. In school Pecola did not feel at ease either, often being mocked by her peers: “She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy (...) she could say ‘Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove’ and never fail to get peals of laughter (...) and mock of anger from the accused” (Morrison, 1999, p. 34). Unlike Claudia and

Frieda, whose hardships were alleviated by the adults in their community, for Pecola adults were not much better in their treatment than her peers.

Similar incidents included the salesman who did not want her hand to touch his while she handed him the money for the candy she was buying and Miss Geraldine who saw Pecola as “dangerous intrusion into her neatly arranged life” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 63). Pecola never really developed a relationship with her mother because she could not attain the looks her mother considered worthy. Similarly, the relationship with her father was also non-existent since she reminded him of his past and his failure as a man and as a father. Throughout the novel, it can also be argued how she does not even possess a sense of having her body, which is why she would gladly and easily trade it for a “white” one. Therefore, she longs to have blue eyes: “each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she prayed (...). To have something as wonderful as that happen (...) (Morrison, 1999, p. 35). Moreover, having assimilated to the white beauty norms, she concluded how her physical appearance is to blame for her misery: “If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different (...). If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too” (Morrison, 1999, p. 34). Having embraced the “white narrative,” Pecola becomes obsessed – just like her mother once was – with trying to achieve it. However, unlike Pauline Breedlove, who stopped trying to recreate her identity in accordance to this white narrative after breaking her tooth, Pecola stopped at nothing – not even after her father raped her. Having unsuccessfully tried to “consume” the new identity after eating candy Mary Janes, Pecola turns to a local pedophile, fortune-teller Soaphead Church, and asks him for blue eyes. Here again one can see the failure of the community, since Soaphead does nothing to stop her due to his internalization of the racial hierarchies where white people are on top (Kolmerten et al., 1997). In addition, this self-proclaimed spiritualist “grants” her wish by tricking Pecola into killing his master’s dog. Upon that incident, Pecola’s personality breaks at last (Kolmerten et al., 1997, p. 121). Morrison lets readers into her broken psyche at the very end of the novel, where Pecola, conversing with her alter-ego, talks about the events that followed after Cholly’s sexually assaulting her.

Pecola reveals not only that Cholly raped her while she was washing dishes but also reveals that it was not an isolated incident: “I don’t mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch. I wasn’t sleeping! I was reading!” (Morrison, 1999, p. 158). The reader also learns that her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, did nothing to protect her: “She didn’t even believe me when I told her. So that’s why you didn’t tell her about the second time? She wouldn’t have believed me then either” (Morrison, 1999, p. 158). Pauline’s relationship with Pecola did not change, not even when Pecola “got” her blue eyes: “When you’re in the house with me, even Mrs. Breedlove doesn’t say anything to you. Ever. Sometimes I wonder if she even sees you”

(Morrison, 1999, p. 156). In fact, the relationship between Pecola and the rest of the community has not changed at all by the end of the novel. However, her internal defense mechanism prevents her from seeing the truth, believing that no one pays attention to her because they are jealous and full of prejudice towards her blue eyes: “They all try to pretend they don’t see them. Isn’t that funny? (...) Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they’re prejudiced” (Morrison, 1999, pp. 154–155). The conversations Pecola has with herself describe and reaffirm her constant insecurity about herself, even after she had been granted blue eyes. At the end of the novel, Claudia is comparing Pecola to marigolds and provides a sad insight into Pecola’s family, and the entire community: “I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture (...) and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (Morrison, 1999, p. 164). Morrison’s concluding lines, as well as her entire novel, present a very strong criticism of African-American communities who have readily accepted the racist standards and who readily discriminate against other members of their communities, especially those who they consider to be “too black” or “too weak.”

SULA

Morrison’s 1974 novel *Sula* can be seen as a continuation of her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. Just like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* represents Morrison attempt to tackle the problem of coming of age of two main female protagonists – Sula Peace and Nel Wright. However, it can be said that Morrison’s first novel dealt more with the issues of the (im)possibility of this process of maturation due to the obstacles in both macro, exo, and microsystem. On the other hand, *Sula* places emphasis on the role of family and their style of parenting, community and the process of assimilation, but it also explores new themes which have not been as represented in *The Bluest Eye*. These themes include the issues of morality, female friendship and emerging sexuality as two main protagonists undergo the process of maturation. In Morrison’s words, in *Sula* she leaves spaces for readers making them consider just “how ‘moral’ the characters are (...) What is friendship between women when unmediated by men? What choices are available to black women outside their own society’s approval? What are the risks of individualism in a (...) racially uniform and socially static, community?” (Morrison, 2004, p. 5). The author also speaks about the subject which was considered to be a “taboo” at the time – and that is the question of both gender and sexuality, since “female” freedom always means sexual freedom” (Morrison, 2004, p. 5). *Sula* explores these themes while following the process of maturation as well as the friendship of the protagonists, while simultaneously showing

how “the differences in the girls’ correspond to the pressure to conform to the norms of their community” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 189).

CHRONOSYSTEM

Sula primarily focuses on the microsystem – the two individuals during their developmental journey, or in Hinds’ words on “complex characters and relationship between characters” (Hinds, 2012, p. 50). However, concerning Morrison’s statement that art and politics cannot go one without the other, *Sula* should not be read without taking a larger context of time, history and culture into consideration. Morrison becomes very specific when it comes to the years the novel covers, and that is a time frame between 1919 and 1965, with each chapter carrying a specific year in its title. Starting after World War I and ending in the 1960s amid the Civil Rights movement, the novel reflects how these major turmoils in the United States reflected on the mind and the behavior of both the community and individuals (Hinds, 2012, p. 50).

Starting with the chapter titled “1919”, Morrison first captures the horrors World War I inflicted upon the individuals through the characters of Shadrack and Plum. Shadrack, a shell-shocked veteran, returns from the war with numerous traumas and memory loss, and is thus perceived as a man who is robbed of his own identity. Morrison describes Shadrack as a “twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t even know who or what he was (...) with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, (...), and nothing, nothing, nothing to do” (Morrison, 2004, p. 12). Similarly, in chapter “1921” readers can notice how, Eve Peace’s son, Plum, is facing similar difficulties when assimilating into the society. While Shadrack develops a paranoid fear of death and his hands become monstrously large, Plum’s traumas turn him into a heroin addict. Plum faces the same feeling of being disoriented and lost: “He wrote letters (...) full of promises of homecomings, but there was obviously something wrong. Finally, after Christmas he returned home completely changed. His hair had been neither cut nor combed in months, his clothes were pointless and he had no socks” (Morrison, 2004, p. 28). From this it can be seen how both Shadrack and Plum mirror and reflect the situation that struck America in the years following World War I. Namely, while many veterans were being uncertain about how to integrate back into society, that same society had same struggle of finding ways to help them in that process as well (Gillespie, 2008; Hinds, 2012). And the latter can be seen in *Sula*, with Eve not knowing and not being able to help her son in any other way but setting him on fire in order to provide him dignified death.

Apart from this issue of assimilation, Morrison also ponders tackles upon the question of segregation which was a common practice in the post-war years. When it comes to the problem of segregation, Morrison first approaches it

from the level of the communal exosystem that then reflects upon individuals. Speaking of the space dimension, the novel is set in the town named Bottom which was founded as a result of that very segregation, or as Morrison says, “a nigger joke” (Morrison, 2004, p. 8). Namely, the town was founded after a slave-owner, not wanting to give a good land to a “nigger” tricked his slave into believing how he is giving him a land that is prosperous – “bottom of heaven”. Confirming Chicago School sociologists’ proposal, Morrison writes how the two towns, Bottom and Medallion, resided next to each other, but never resembling one another; “Medallion residents live in a relative comfort, while many of the people living in the Bottom live or have lived in poverty” – their only comfort being “taking small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks” (Hinds, 2012, p. 51; Morrison, 2004, p. 9). However, Morrison also provides the example of how this segregation practice affected the individual, and the family microsystem as well, through the characters of Helene and her daughter Nel Wright.

MACROSYSTEM

Addressing widely shared cultural values, customs, laws and beliefs, the novel captures the changes that struck the United States of America in the period of around forty years. Racial segregation practices were still ongoing after the war has ended, which affected both the “colored” community and the individuals of color. Therefore, Helene Wright who in the town of Bottom enjoyed the status of “impressive” woman (...) graceful, beautiful wife” loses that status the moment she leaves the town (Morrison, 2004, pp. 15–17). Having entered the wrong coach intended for “whites only” on her way to New Orleans, Helene is scolded and humiliated by the white conductor. Furthermore, due to the fact that African Americans had no bathrooms on the train stations, Helene is forced to relieve herself in the field. This scene also has a major impact on her daughter Nel. Seeing her usually proud mother becoming as she says “really custard” in front of men, this quiet and obedient daughter promises herself she will “be on guard – always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or unmarbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (Morrison, 2004, p. 17).

In chapter “1922” Nel and Sula both experience similar kind of humiliation when being teased by the white Irish boys. What is interesting is that Nel – who once was afraid of becoming timid as her mother Helene was, while confronted by white men, displaying almost identical behavior in the similar situation: “These particular boys caught Nel once, and pushed her from hand to hand until they grew tired of the frightened helpless face. Because of that incident, Nel’s route home from school became elaborate” (Morrison, 2004, p. 33). Sula, on the other hand, displays more aggressive approach, scaring the boys away

by cutting the tip of her own finger. However, the type of behavior the two protagonists displayed, directly reflects the dominant values in their family microsystems.

EXOSYSTEM

Morrison's second novel also places great emphasis on the role of the community – the values and morals it preaches and inflicts upon the individuals living in it. As Hinds (2012) states, in *Sula* community is a character itself, reflecting not only struggles African-Americans faced throughout the history of change during that period, but also playing an important role in (re)construction of the identity of the female protagonists. Upon returning to Bottom, adult Sula discovers just how scrutinizing the local people can be towards anyone and anything that is perceived as different. Walking around with her “black purse with a beaded clasp and (...) a red leather traveling case”, that attracted the gazes of the people, Sula soon realized how she became “the personification of all that is bad and wrong to the community that needs to objectify evil and, (...) one who does not conform to their ideals of normalcy” (Beaulieu 2003; Gillespie, 2008, p. 191). Thus, Sula's death in “1941” is seen as a good omen by the superstitious citizens.

Speaking of the community of the Bottom, the reader can see how, as the novel progresses, the town goes through the major changes until its final extinction. Namely, due to the white people's wish to build a golf course in Bottom, its people were forced to move to Medallion, ending its “whites only” tradition. In the final, “1965” chapter, Morrison comments both on the issue of World War II and the end of segregation through the character of Nel. Morrison believes that the Civil Rights movement needs to be analyzed and criticized as any other social activism, revealing that while bringing justice to the African Americans, it also shattered their own “thing” by forcing them to assimilate with the dominant white culture. Therefore, in *Sula*, adult Nel sees how once “white” Medallion is swerving with the “black” people who are now working “behind the counters, even handling money with cash-register keys around their necks. And a colored man taught mathematics at the junior high school (...)” (Morrison, 2004, p. 90). Nel also comments how things were only seemingly better now. Namely, she believes it was this change that made young people in particular became less vital and powerful than the youth back in her days, saying how even “the whores were better then: tough, fat, laughing women with burns on their cheeks and wit married to their meanness: or widows couched in small houses in the woods with eight children to feed and no man. These modern-day whores were pale and dull before those women” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 193; Morrison, 2004, p. 90). Thus, the story not only becomes the story of Sula's (and Nel's) life and death, but it also becomes the story of the birth and

the death of the black community – their own social structures and culture (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 381).

When it comes to this third layer in Bronfenbrenner's theory, in *Sula* a parent's workplace plays a major role in constructing identity – both of the parent, but also the child's. In case of Helene and Nel, the past of Helene's mother turns her into the person she is now – “a manipulative and overprotective housewife and mother” (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 383). Namely, Helene Wright became “righteous” due to the fact that she was a daughter of a Creole prostitute working in New Orleans. Due to that, she was taken away from her and raised by her grandmother which Morrison describes as “a multicolored Virgin Mary” who was “counseling her to be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother's wild blood” (Morrison, 2004, p. 15). That is why the combination of her strict upbringing and the fact she spent most of her life running away from the legacy of her promiscuous mother, turned Helene to become a “Virgin Mary” too – even joining the Bottom's most conservative church (Beaulieu, 2003; Gillespie 2008). Her upbringing is also reflected in her motherhood, where she constantly places an emphasis on Nel's manners and social conduct, while monitoring Nel's enthusiasm and imagination: “Under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground” (Lister, 2009; Morrison, 2004, p. 15). Not only was she a demanding mother, but she also demonstrated the identical behavior towards her husband, ship's cook Wiley Wright: “She loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband. She would sigh sometimes just before falling asleep, thinking that she had indeed come far enough away from the Sundown House” (Morrison, 2004, p. 15). And despite Nel's attempts to become autonomous, later in the novel it is revealed how Helene achieved her goal: “Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” (Morrison, 2004, p. 47).

Speaking of the local environment, in the novel it is also shown how it influences Sula's process of maturation. However, one has to first look into the role Eva Peace – Sula's grandmother, plays in Sula's coming of age. The part Eva plays can be perceived as dual. First, as her Biblical name suggest, she is considered to be the first mother, the dominant maternal figure to her three children – Hannah, Pearl and Plum (Eckard, 2002). Living by her name, she later becomes not only a mother to her own children, but she also becomes a governess, a foster parent – taking in abandoned and neglected children and even alcoholic outcast named Tar Baby, “a beautiful, slight, quiet man who never spoke above a whisper” (Eckard, 2002; Gillespie, 2008; Morrison, 2004, p. 28). However, the irony of her last name, Peace, becomes prominent in the second part of the novel when she sets her son on fire in order to save him from drug addiction. Later, her role as a mother is questioned again when one finds out that for her, “the doctrine of survival took precedence over emotions

and displays of affection" (Roberson, 2003, p. 159). This "pragmatic love" is perhaps the most visible in her relationship with her daughter Hannah. Despite Eva's attempt to demonstrate her love and affection she feels towards her daughter while risking her own life to save Hannah from fire, Hannah's previous question "Mama, did you ever love us" is nevertheless answered unsatisfactorily (Morrison, 2004, p. 29).

Despite the fact that Eva's husband BoyBoy abandoned them, Eva as the dominant maternal figure did not feel the urge to provide her children a stable or constant "fatherly figure". Namely, the men she took "under her wing" were not seen as a replacement for a missing father, husband or a grandfather but simply because, as Morrison wrote, "the Peace women (...) loved maleness, for its own sake (Morrison, 2004, p. 27). Later, after Eva sets her own son on fire, it can be observed how this "love for maleness" is transformed into both Hannah and Sula viewing men as something dispensable and replaceable: "Hannah simply refused to live without the attention of a man, and after Rekus' death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors (...) she rippled with sex" (Gillespie, 2008; Morrison, 2004, p. 27). Observing her mother, Sula's attitude becomes not much different when it comes to both men and sexuality in general. Seeing her mother "step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent" (Morrison, 2004, p. 28). It is this attitude and the behavior that was accompanied by it, that will later prove to be Sula's downfall.

MESOSYSTEM AND MICROSISTEM

In *Sula*, Morrison again stresses the importance of kinship and informal networks when it comes to the construction of one's identity. However, the most important relationship in the novel is the one that forms between the girls themselves: "Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on" (Morrison, 2004, p. 31). And since this very relationship plays the vital role when it comes to the development of both Sula's and Nel's identity, the development of these two microsystems will be analyzed under the same section.

As it was stated earlier, at the beginning of the novel, Nel is described as a "quiet and obedient" daughter of her strict, religious mother. However, the first glimpses of her autonomy are seen in the first chapter, right after their trip to New Orleans. Namely, having seen her mother standing still after being humiliated by the white conductor and the soldiers, triggered a spark of rebellion in Nel: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me. Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear" (Morrison, 2004, p. 20). And it was this "spark of rebellion" that led her to befriend her total opposite, Sula. Despite coming from different households

– one “of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors” and another of “the oppressive neatness”, they were soon bonded through loneliness “so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream” (Morrison, 2004, pp. 21-31). However, their adventures and childish dreams of a prince saving them from their troubled young lives, were soon after destroyed, and replaced with the secret that marks the start of their transition from their childhood to adulthood. Namely, Sula’s accidentally killing Chicken Little firstly marked her as an individual, which becomes even more prominent later in the novel – after she does nothing to help her mother who is being caught by fire: “Sula was probably struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (Morrison, 2004, p. 45). However, the incident with Chicken Little, also marked her friendship with Nel – now strengthened with a secret that will bond them as long as they are alive. Their friendship seemed not to be shaken, not even after Nel married Jude, as Morrison writes how even as adults “they never quarreled, those two, the way some girlfriends did over boys, or competed against each other for them. In those days a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other” (2004, p. 48). And it is why it seems rather Peculiar why Sula decides to leave the town right after the wedding, and not to return for the next ten years. And while some critics, such as Napier (2000), attribute Sula’s act and acts that followed to her being jealous of Jude, thus providing “homosexual explanation” of the novel and “Sula’s meanness”, the reason behind her act and the acts that followed may not be neither inherently lesbian nor “evil”.

As it was stated in the previous sections, Sula’s household can be, in the mildest terms, described as unconventional. Having no fatherly figure, with both her grandmother and her mother having nonchalant relationships towards men, it is then quite possible how this “nonchalance” was also transferred on women, as well. It was even said that Hannah’s friendships were fragile due to her being a “homewrecker”. Hannah’s friendships with women were, of course, seldom and short-lived, and the newly married couples whom her mother took in soon learned what a hazard she was” (Morrison, 2004, p. 28). Learning by example set by her mother, Sula does the same thing to Nel. However, Sula’s sleeping with Jude is by her perceived not as a betrayal but as her way to explore herself through sexuality – as she previously proclaimed how she is not interested in reproducing, but in producing her “self”: “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you.”– “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (Morrison, 2004, p. 51). And after the incident with Jude, the friendship between Sula and Nel goes awry, since their differences are

finally being brought up to the surface. Nel accuses Sula of taking away everything she ever had, loved or was, imposing herself as the righteous one – just like her mother always did. Namely, Nel is afraid of life without Jude through whom she identified herself. Scared of change and disorder – Nel concluded how “hell is change” before opting to freeze her life and hold onto the “gray furry” remains of the life she once had (Gillespie, 2008; Morrison, 2004, p. 61).

On the other hand, adult Sula represents Nel's total opposite, since for her hell means stasis, or as Gillespie (2008) said, stagnation without permanence. This can be also used to explain why her leaving the town after Nel's wedding was not due to the romantic feeling she had towards Nel as Napier (2000) proposed. Her leaving could also be seen as wanting to leave the community that was to repressive for her adult self, for “a woman who is sexually, psychologically, and culturally liberated in a time and space where there is no place for a free woman” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 192). Going back to her affair with Jude can then be explained not as her revenge as the jealous and betrayed lover, since for her sexuality is not the act of union, but as it was previously said, it represents an attempt of self-affirmation (Duvall, 2000; Gillespie, 2008). When it comes to the only non-superficial relationship Sula has in the novel– the one with Ajax, it also serves to explore furtherly herself and her mind. Namely, unlike the rest of the men in the community who perceive her as the embodiment of everything that is evil, Ajax “did not speak down to her or at her, nor content himself with puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities” (Morrison, 2004, p. 71). Ajax thinks of Sula in terms of mind, rather than the body, treating her like she is his equal, even providing Sula with a complete sense of self (Duvall, 2000). With Ajax she also discovers her expressive form, which leads her to imagine herself as a sculptor of Ajax's identity, imagining how she is shaping each layer of both his body and mind one by one; “If I take a chamois and rub real hard on the bone, right on the ledge of your cheek bone, some of the black will disappear. It will flake away into the chamois and underneath there will be gold leaf. I can see it shining through the black. I know it is there...” (Duvall, 2000; Morrison, 2004, p. 72).

Despite the “masculine” role Sula played during their love-making where she penetrated his mind and body, Morrison again re-affirms her femininity. And so, Sula decides to become, as Duvall, conventionally feminine, dreaming of possessing him: “Sula began to discover what possession was (...) First there was the morning of the night before when she actually wondered if Ajax would come by that day. Then there was an afternoon when she stood before the mirror finger-tracing the laugh lines around her mouth and trying to decide whether she was good-looking or not” (Duvall, 2000; Morrison, 2004, p. 73). However, merging her identity with his proved to be fatal for Sula, since her own mind begins to fall ill upon finding out that Ajax lied to her about his name: “I didn't even know his name. And if I didn't know his name, then there is nothing I did

know and I have known nothing ever at all since the one thing I wanted was to know his name so how could he help but leave me since he was making love to a woman who didn't even know his name" (Morrison, 2004, p. 75).

Interestingly, both Nel's and Sula's relationship with men – Jude and Ajax can be interpreted as their wish to reconnect with each other, and consequently with themselves. And so, at the beginning of the novel there is a scene where Ajax addresses then teenage Sula and Nel, calling them "pig meat" marking the start of their awareness of their evolving sexuality, in a time when "their intimacy marks them as almost identical" (Duvall, 2000, p. 193). And as Duvall (2000) speculated, if the novel is to be looked as an analysis of both conscious and unconscious, then Sula's conscious relationship with Ajax can also be interpreted as her unconscious attempt to recover her relationship with Nel. And in the very moment of Sula's passing, this desire of hers to reconnect with her lost friend is prominent even in her death – when she is literally unconscious: "She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. "Well, I'll be damned," she thought, "it didn't even hurt. Wait until I tell Nel" (Morrison, 2004, p. 83). However, this desire to rekindle the relationship with the lost friend, and with the lost self is perhaps even more prominent in Nel's case.

Namely, when it comes to Nel, upon finding out about Jude's adultery tries to cling onto the events that bonded her and Jude. However, in her mind and her words it is Sula that keeps reappearing, as well; "Why, even in hate here I am thinking of what Sula said (...) to lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it" despite the fact that "it was Sula who had taken the life from them and (...) both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (Morrison, 2004, pp. 61–63) it was actually Sula who she truly missed. And this is confirmed at the very end of the novel, where Nel finally breaks her "gray fur of sorrow" representing Jude and realizes how, throughout all these years it actually was not her husband it represented – but her friend – a friend who now was apart from her, but will always remain a part of her: "A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. We was girls together" (Morrison, 2004, p. 96).

CONCLUSION

Looking back at the question posed in the introductory part of the paper – whether a person can finish his/her developmental journey successfully, one can see that the answer is anything but simple. Analyzing Morrison's novels through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model seems to confirm the complexity on which one's success, or failure, depends. However, looking at the journey of Morrison's characters throughout the two novels, one can draw a conclusion that Morrison perceives microsystem and its mesosystemic relations with the

exosystem as layers which play the crucial role for developing a healthy and stable identity. In *The Bluest Eye* some black families started to function as selectively “permeable membrane” – opening themselves to the members of the family and the black community. Unfortunately, Pecola had no such luck. With each member of the Breedlove family operating as a separate microsystem – being occupied with their own traumas which were not communicated neither with the family members nor the community, it remained an “impermeable membrane” that slowly but surely started collapsing within itself. Having no adult within her family or the community who would care enough about her, Pecola's story is read as an anti-bildungsroman with Pecola not being able to “transcend the enervating image imposed on minorities, to derive strength (...) and to develop a strong self-image, a whole” (Carmean, 1993, p. 30). As the novel progresses the main character's path to self-construction transforms into one of self-destruction, with Pecola having gone completely mad by its end.

Finally, it can be said that *Sula* stands as the witness to the complexity of the multisystemic interrelationships. In this 1974 novel the relations between different systems are seen as both creative and destructive forces in which identities of the main characters, Nel and Sula, are found, lost and then found yet again. Unlike *The Bluest Eye*, in *Sula* each character's identity seems to be completely dependent upon the aforementioned microsystemic relations and so-called learning by model – even if that learning sometimes means learning from someone else's mistakes.

In *Sula*, Nel's mother Helene constructs a completely different identity than her mother had. Later, we can see how Nel also imitates Helene, since she is also trying to “break free” from the identity her mother created for her. In case of Sula, there is almost a textbook example of this learning by imitation, which is the most visible in the relationship she has with men, and which mimics the kinds of relationships both her mother and grandmother had with the opposite sex. However, identity construction and deconstruction occur most intensely in the relationship between the two girls. Despite coming from different backgrounds, Sula and Nel's identities on numerous occasions mirror each other, and sometimes even merge with each other. That is until the very end of the novel, when Nel is finally able to construct her persona anew – setting herself free from her mother, her estranged husband and her best friend Sula. However, despite breaking free and successfully finishing her process of identity construction, Nel still recognizes the vital role her relationship with Sula played in forming her own persona. Having abandoned the identity she created for herself upon discovering Sula's and her husband's affair, Nel “undergoes a fortunate fall and finally embraces the spirit of Sula” she knew was there all along (Connor, 1994, p. 204).

Having analyzed the complexity of Morrison's characters through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, perhaps the best conclusion that reflects

the ideas of the two novels is summarized in a single Bronfenbrenner's statement which emphasized the role each of the five systems plays in shaping of a persona: "We as a nation need to be reeducated about the necessary and sufficient conditions for making human beings human. We need to be reeducated not as parents – but as workers, neighbors, and friends; and as members of the organizations (...) and the informal networks that control our social institutions and thereby determine the conditions of life for our families and their children" (Sell, 1995, p. 152). This process is far from being completed in Morrison's novels and that is why the author insists on revising our opinions and attitudes. At the same time the author wants to educate her readers about the horrors of slavery, both institutionalized and tacit, presenting in her novels the need to protect the most vulnerable members of society – children.

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ASPEKTI IDENTITETA U ROMANIMA *THE BLUEST EYE* I *SULA* AUTORICE TONI MORRISON

Sažetak: U ovom se radu romani *The Bluest Eye* (1970) i *Sula* (1974) autorice Toni Morrison razmatraju sa stajališta razvojne psihologije. Djela autorice Morrison možemo sagledati kao ispreplitanje društvenih i emocionalnih tema koje imaju primarnu ulogu u stvaranju identiteta autoričinih likova. Teorija ekoloških sustava koju predlaže Urie Bronfenbrenner primjenjuje se u ovome radu da pokaže kako se identiteti Morrisoninih likova stvaraju u njezinim romanima. Analiza pet sustava na kojima se temelji Bronfenbrennerova teorija objasnit će što je potrebno kako bi Morrisonini likovi mogli stvoriti održiv identitet.

Ključne riječi: ekologija, konstrukcija identiteta, psihologija, Toni Morrison