

# Ecological Systems Theory: (Re)Constructing Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Source / Izvornik: **Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta u Splitu, 2020, 111 - 130**

**Journal article, Published version**

**Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

<https://doi.org/10.38003/zrffs.13.5>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:172:284885>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2023-05-31**

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UDK 821.111(73).09-31  
Izvorni znanstveni rad  
Primljeno 5. svibnja 2020.  
DOI: 10.38003/zrffs.13.5

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## ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY: (RE)CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

### Abstract

In this paper, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) will be considered from the point of view of developmental psychology. Morrison's works can be seen as representing an intertwinement of social, historico-political and emotional themes which play a crucial role in the identity construction of the author's characters. Therefore, 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 novel. The usage of the five systems on which Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model is based- chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem and microsystem, will provide an often missing holistic approach necessary for better understanding of how and why Morrison's characters are (un)able to complete their developmental journey of identity construction successfully.

Key words: Toni Morrison, Urie Bronfenbrenner, ecological systems theory, identity construction, holistic approach

"The Child is father of the Man" wrote English Romantic William Wordsworth in his 1802 poem "My Heart Leaps Up". While Wordsworth's poem may be more than two centuries old, the importance of its message did not lose its value. On the contrary, the perception of childhood as a period that plays the central role in the development of an individual seems to have gained proper recognition only a few decades ago, peaking in the 20th century – now often called The Century of the Child. Before one deals with how this child "gives birth" to a man, the question is what, or who, the child itself is. Is it solely a product of nature – a combination of the gene pool inherited from their parents? A chance winner of the race within the reproductive system whose life, behavior and physical and mental state will depend merely on the aforementioned inherited gene combination? Or is it a product of nurture – a "tabula rasa" incapable of proper thought before society instills in it laws, beliefs, culture –

transforming it, thus, from savage to human? Or is it perhaps that both nature and nurture are working together, joining their forces in this developmental journey of becoming not only human, but humane?

If these questions are being posed to Urie Bronfenbrenner, Russian-born American developmental psychologist, it is safe to say that he would side with the third proposal. As it will be explained later in the paper, his Ecological Systems Theory which is also used today in modern developmental psychology, serves as a bridge connecting two opposing schools of psychology – one arguing for nature and the other advocating for nurture. In his description of the five systems – chrono, macro, exo, meso and microsystems, Bronfenbrenner showed how a child is the result of the joint work of both genetics and inherited characteristics. In addition, he also highlighted the role the environment plays in shaping an individual, saying “how in order to develop normally, a child required progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults (...) Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last and always” (Allerd 2007: 51).

When it comes to the Chicago School of Sociology, it seems to be sharing Bronfenbrenner’s point of view when it comes to this “nature-nurture” debate. Its systemic approach and holistic aspect align them with the ecological perspective that followed later. Transferring the latter issue to the context of 20th century America, they also add another important dimension into Bronfenbrenner’s model – the question of black identity formation. While studying black and white communities residing in Chicago, discoveries made by Chicago School sociologists opened additional questions, not only those that are in direct relation to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, but also those which are central part of what Toni Morrison explored in her writing. Namely, Morrison’s works not only can be perceived as a continuation, but also a literary exploration of both Bronfenbrenner’s and Chicago School sociologists’ work, since many of her characters, especially children, feel not only ashamed of their skin color, but also feel excluded from the white community. Consequently, the aforementioned spatial relations in her works indeed do become social relations, in which black individuals – as microsystems, actively engage in forming black meso, exo and macrosystems, with their own distinct values and beliefs, which exists both within but also outside the systems created by whites.

What occurs when a child is not perceived as a child? Or as a human? What if a child is seen as nothing but a commodity to be used as one pleases from the day it is born? As it was mentioned earlier, these are some of the vital questions that not only the Chicago School of Sociology posed, but which were also tackled by the African-American writer Toni Morrison. And even though it can be said how every single piece of her writing deals with these issues, these themes perhaps seem to be the most prominent in her novels *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. The aforementioned works can be perceived as bildungsromane, tracing not only the development of individual African-American identities, but also how national and communal identities are being formed and transformed. Generally speaking, the bildungsroman is a novel that focuses on a person’s formative years and development. However, in an attempt to depict how racism has influenced African-Americans, Morrison has extended the African-American bildungsroman by transforming a traditionally personal and privatized genre into a

political and national one. In *Beloved*, we follow the progress of the girl called Beloved from childhood to womanhood and at the same time we witness her emancipation from servitude and the fate that was ascribed to her by the slave masters. In order to explain Morrison's life-long dedication and investment in the topic of the black identity construction from one's childhood to adulthood, author Timothy Powell (1990) uses a myth proposed by ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Namely, Plato in his metaphor of a soul imagined one's soul as a white horse, "a follower of true glory" which has to overcome another part of the soul, black horse – forcing soul to do "terrible and awful deeds" (Powell 1990: 747). And it was this metaphor, this myth, that became a reality for African-Americans in America, a country in which slavery and segregation laws and practices lasted for centuries. In white ethnocentric America, African-Americans were perceived as "black horses" – both figuratively and literally, who had to be tamed, if the whites are to "live in the light always". It is in this "symbolology of light and dark" as Powell refers to it, in which "blackness becomes the archetype of absence, negation, (...) evil" (Powell, 1990: 747), that this idea of a child being father to the man becomes an issue. Bearing that in mind, it seems how both Morrison and the Chicago School of Sociology decided to pose a question – asking what kind of (hu)man will this child "give birth" to? Will the "newborn" man be a human or a closer to a beast? And is it even going to be possible for a black child to go through and to finish this developmental journey from, as Montaigne would say, a "noble savage" to a man successfully? (Powell 1990: 747).

When it comes to the theme of this paper, perhaps the most important figure might be George Herbert Mead. Mead was a social psychologist, who collaborated with the Chicago School, not only directly but conceptually as well, since his definition of the "self" was the core of how the Chicago School sociologist understood the interactions (Wallace and Wolf 2005: 38). Mead's concept of "self" becomes also important when it comes to the ways in which Morrison builds and sustains the identities of her characters. Namely, Mead believes that a person is not merely a passive entity being led by outer structures such as laws (macrosystem), but rather an active and creative agent which participates in the behaviors of others, and which provides a response according to perceived behaviors. It is a two-way process, through which an individual becomes both the subject and the object, making him/herself visible through the eyes of others (Wallace and Wolf 2005: 38).

However, the reason why this paper will focus on this pedagogical approach is due to the fact that most when, researching Morrison's work, usually decide to focus on three aspects, or common themes, often found in her novels: cross-cultural, historico-political and emotional. These themes are – in most cases, then analyzed separately from each other, without any serious attempt of finding common links between them. This lead some critics such as Furman (1996: 3) to believe that how while "Morrison creates extraordinary tales of human experience (...) enlightening her readers about themselves", the author has no interest in "sociology, polemics, explanations". However, looking more closely at Morrison's writing, and looking at her writing in a deductive way, one can see how it represents an intertwinement of all of the previously mentioned themes: cross-cultural, historico-political and emotional, where one theme often overlaps with the others, or is in causal relation with them. In other words, Morrison's works seem to represent a literary exploration of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, where the five systems mentioned earlier either enable or disable the healthy development of a person's identity.

Therefore, the aforementioned statement of Furman's (1996) seems to be far from the truth, since writing about one's state of mind – whether that mind belongs to a child or an adult, the emotional state of the family as a microsystem, the state of the neighborhood (as a mesosystem), or the state of the community – both black and white (representing Bronfenbrenner's exosystem), and even the state of the state (the country itself as a macrosystem), not only makes Morrison a "politician", but it consequently makes her a historian, a sociologist, a psychologist and a teacher - an interpreter of meaning for all of those whose map of the soul was lost throughout the centuries of oppression.

### *1. Nature vs. Nurture: The "Millenia-Long Dialogue"*

What makes us human, humane? What are the variables that are crucial for the development of all those notions human beings come to embody? How does one acquire values, beliefs, behaviors? And how are these collective notions being transformed, transferred and integrated into an individual? Is an (id)entity the product of our genetics - the malleability of one's genes, or are humans, as John Locke would say, merely a "tabula rasa" – nothing but a blank slate?

These are some of the major questions that have been imposed upon psychology from its earliest beginnings back in the Ancient Greece and which seem to continue to puzzle even modern psychologists. And so, ever since its breakage from the scientific field of philosophy in the 1870s, establishing itself as an independent field of study, psychology found itself in the middle of, as Keating (2010: 4) calls it, the "nature vs. nurture" debate. After a so-called "millenia-long dialogue", as Keating (2010: 7) calls it, all major schools of psychology – such as behaviorism, psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology and Gestalt, were deemed as lacking and inadequate when it came to explaining the development of humans and consequently their identities. Due to the latter, it seemed that this nature versus nurture discussion has been resolved for the time being, since "neither nature nor nurture alone provides the answer" (Keating 2010: 1). In other words, as both Guibernau (2013) and Keating (2010) concluded, the direction of an individual's psychological development – and consequently the development of their identity along with the behavior they are going to display, does not depend solely on their "genetic" pool, nor does it entirely depend upon the surrounding environment. Namely, as Keating wrote, it is "both nature and nurture in concert that shape developmental pathways and outcomes, from health to behavior to competence" (2010: 1). However, it can be said how this very realization of the equal importance of one's genes and the environment surrounding them led to another, more recent debate in psychology and that is this "fascinating terrain of how they interact over the course of development" (Keating 2010: 1). The ever growing progress in science and technology, accompanied by the new research tools – supported by the ever-growing accumulation of information collected from longitudinal studies, have allowed new psychological approaches when it comes to studying this "nature-nurture" interaction responsible for the formation of one's identity. Perhaps one of the most prominent "nature-nurture" models was the one proposed by the Russian-born American developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005). Before one becomes acquainted with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and what role it has in explaining how identity is shaped, a definition of what identity is must be provided.

## 2. Defining (Id)Entity

When it comes to the question of what identity is, it can be said that answering the question is anything but simple. Namely, the concept of identity can be considered from several viewpoints. Starting with the “mother of all sciences” – philosophy, the focus there would be on whether identity is the same as the self, or whether it is something entirely different. On the other hand, the more recent scientific study of genes would concentrate more on the inborn, biological aspects of one’s identity, a “genetic identity”, such as the genetic genotype and phenotype in family history (Lange, 2003). However, for the purpose of this paper, only specific psychological explanations of identity will be provided, since they are most suitable for the theme of this paper – i.e. analyzing and (re)constructing the identities of the characters found in Toni Morrison’s novels.

Turning back to interdisciplinary definitions of identity, one also detects that psychology provides numerous explanations. From the simple one given by Clayton and Opatow, who define identity as “a way of organizing information about the self”, to more complex ones which place emphasis on the collective, instead of individual identity, saying how “national identity is a collective sentiment based upon belief of belonging to the same nation” (Clayton and Opatow, 2003: 45; Guibernau 2003: 13). Although these two definitions may seem contradictory at first, looking at them more closely one can see how they both highlight, implicitly or explicitly, the sense of belonging or becoming a part of either oneself, or of the collective in which that individual is plunged. Or as, Grozdanovska puts it, “national identity relates to psychological well-being and adjusting”, stressing that “a strong sense of national identity” positively correlates with “enhanced levels of well-being” (2016: 93). In other words, society as a complex web of social relationships and social structures and processes that interact with each other provides a stable framework within which individuals make decisions and actions. The latter, then, determine not only as Shah (2008) says the direction of their own life, but also the direction of the life of an entire collective since society is formed by and consequently cannot exist without individuals. This paradigm which highlights the fact that society depends upon the individual and vice versa, plays a crucial part in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory. It provides a holistic approach to both matters in question – the development of one’s personal and, at the same time, national identity. And this also seems to be the case in Morrison’s works. Namely, the author’s works can be read as her attempt to illustrate how individual identity can be, and mostly is, molded from the broader, national identity. However, it must also be noted that Morrison perceives this “identity molding” as a two-way process, thus not failing to demonstrate how individuals with their identities can shape, or in some cases even change, the aforementioned national identity as well.

Furthermore, Morrison transforms a traditionally personal and privatized genre into a national one, i.e. an African-American one, and provides a specific interpretation of the axiom “the personal is political.” In that respect Morrison equates personal identity with a national identity because she wants to give voice to African-Americans and to revise American history by telling the stories of numerous African-Americans who have been silenced for a long time.

### 3. *A New Paradigm: Ecological Systems Theory*

As it was mentioned earlier, most of the approaches that have dominated the field of psychology ever since its establishment as an independent scientific field have been thoroughly criticized as too simplistic. Developed by Skinner in the 1930s, behaviorism was critiqued for being too one-dimensional, ignoring “consciousness, feelings and states of mind”, it was charged for “not attempting to account for cognitive processes”, as well as for not being able to capture “the richness of human experience” (Thyer 2013: 211). In other words, behaviorism provided nothing but a glimpse when it comes to the richness of human experience, reducing the way humans operate to the simple “stimuli-reaction” model in which one’s consciousness, feelings and states of mind, were of little or no importance. Later, a similar critique was given to Freud’s psychoanalysis, often called out by the fast-growing number of “Anti-Freudians” who mocked his theory by saying how “God made man from dust, but psychoanalysis reduces him to it” – asking Freud to “absolve us all from analysis” (Szasz and Kraus 1990: 105). With Gestalt and cognitive psychology also being dubbed as too simplistic in explaining how the development of identity occurs, it was time for a new model to emerge. As the answer and as the solution to the drawbacks of the mentioned schools of psychology, Urie Bronfenbrenner proposed his “nature-nurture” model called Ecological Systems Theory. Also known as Human Ecology Theory, this approach was developed during the 1960s and 1970s by the American professor, educationalist and psychologist, was, unlike all previous psychological approaches, placing a focus on an active individual engaging in an active exchange with their active environment. In other words, as Bronfenbrenner himself states, his approach can be seen as a “contemporary scientific study of human development” which is “characterized by a commitment to the understanding of the dynamic relationship between the developing individual and the integrated, multilevel ecology of human development” (Bronfenbrenner 2005: 3). When it comes to these aforementioned factors, what is also peculiar is the fact that every single one of them is malleable and subjectable to various changes during one’s lifetime. Or to be more specific, Grozdanovska (2016) explained how the core of Bronfenbrenner’s model is based on the belief that the model itself is marked by “the theoretical focus on temporally (historically) embedded person-context relation process (...)” which is led by the notion that “individuals influence the people and institutions of their ecology as much as they are influenced by them” (Bronfenbrenner 2005: 3). Also, unlike other major psychologists such as Skinner or Pavlov 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: 4).

#### 3.1. *The “Russian Doll Model”: Bronfenbrenner’s Five Systems*

Taught by major drawbacks that marked previous psychological approaches to human development, Bronfenbrenner (2005) decided upon leaving behind artificial contexts that laboratory-conducted experiments provided, and instead opted to focus on natural, everyday environments that surrounded individuals. According to him, the environment, also called the natural ecology, is defined as “a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” – with “the developing individual being

at the center and embedded in several environmental settings”, each of the settings or levels being dynamic, interrelated or interconnected (Kail and Cavanaugh 2012: 17; cf. Shaffer and Kipp 2010: 64). And due to the very fact that these environmental settings include both studying and the knowledge of both individual as well as the society– its values, beliefs, political and social organizations which change with the passage of time, Bronfenbrenner saw his Ecological Systems Theory as representing an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach. This led him to invite not only educators and psychologists, but also sociologists, anthropologists, historians and political scientists whom he ushered to simultaneously consider, as Shaffer and Kipp (2010) pointed out, the variety of different levels and environmental effects that could and do influence the shaping of one’s identity. In order to make his theory more systematic, Bronfenbrenner spent almost a decade on describing each of the five levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, as presented in the Chart 1 – a graphical explanation of his bioecological model. And these five layers, with their own peculiarities, constitute this “natural ecology” – being influenced by, while simultaneously having influence on, a developing persona.

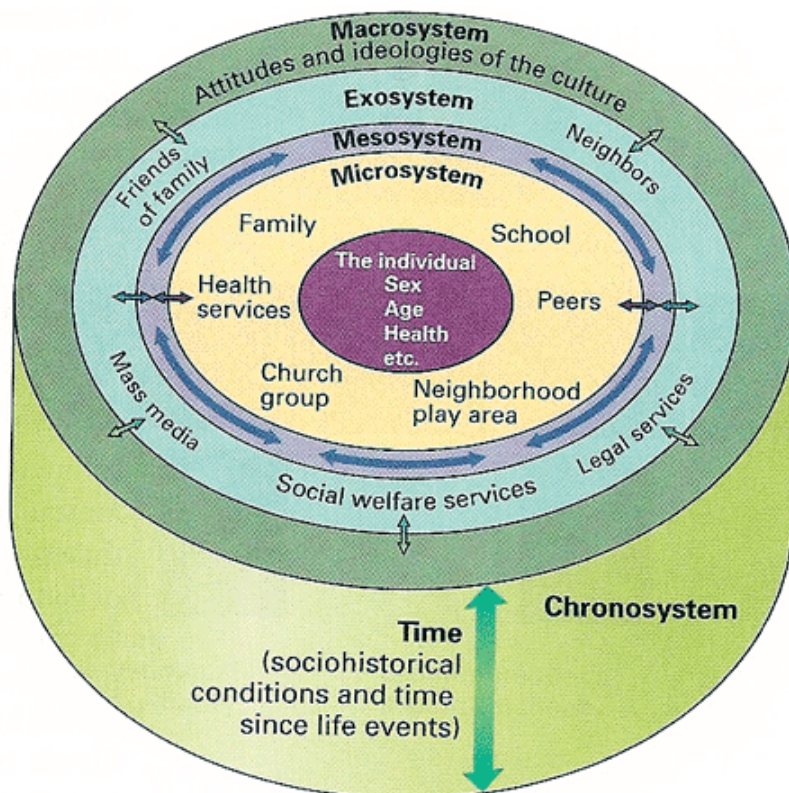


Chart 1 – The bioecological model of development<sup>1</sup>

1 Hayes, Noirin, O'Toole, Leah, Halpenny Ann Marie. 2017. *Introducing Bronfenbrenner: A Guide for Practitioners and Students in Early Years Education*. New York, London: Routledge. (rights to reproduction obtained).



### 3.1.1. *Microsystem*

As it is shown in Chart 1 above, at the very core of Bronfenbrenner's "Russian doll" Ecological Systems Theory is the individual itself – the microsystem. As it was previously stated, Bronfenbrenner included multiple fields when creating his model– including biology and genetics. Thus, at the very center of an individual there lies a so-called "gene pool" – frequently perceived as the set of all genes, or a sum of a population's genetic material at the given time. In other words, this "gene pool" refers to what that individual inherited from his ancestors, one's genetic structure. Consequently, the combination of genes will later result in the biological characteristics (such as sex), but will also come to shape one's physical characteristics – (cap)abilities, health and gender but also one's temperament and habits (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Shaffer and Kipp, 2010).

Adding the social variable into the equation, Bronfenbrenner also included one's immediate surroundings, with family being the most prominent one during one's early childhood. However, as the individual matures, the "social" aspect of this level becomes wider and more complex. To be more specific, during the process of maturation, one's microsystem will now consist not only of their immediate family (i.e. parents, grandparents, siblings) but also of their "peers, neighborhood, school, religious or church contexts" in which a person acts as an "active agent" (Bronfenbrenner 2005 qtd. in Erwin 2010: 112).

### 3.1.2. *Mesosystem*

As the name itself proposes, the second environmental layer, the mesosystem, stands in the middle of two or more settings in which an individual actively participates; "the connections and interrelationships between among (...) microsystems such as homes, schools and peer groups" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 qtd. in Erwin, 2010; Shaffer and Kipp, 2010: 64). What is peculiar for this layer is, as Erwin (2010) pointed out, the fact that it is not only constituted out of "formal and informal" modes of communication, from formal letters exchanged between parents and a child's school to friendly "chit-chat" amongst friends. However, it is important to mention that the mesosystem also includes, or consists of, both explicit and implicit values.

The latter includes not only opinions one's parents have when it comes to that individual's friends and peers, but also values being taught in school or church, or later in life, at one's workplace (Bronfenbrenner 1979: 214). Or as author Erwin (2010: 64) while analyzing Bronfenbrenner's theory concluded, these multiple interrelated webs constituting one's mesosystem influence not only their perception of "their world", their personal and collective (id)entity but also affect the rest of their "developmental journey".

### 3.1.3. *Exosystem*

Unlike the previous two systems, the third, outer layer, is the one in which a developing individual does not have a "regular" active role. What is meant by that, as Couchenour and Chrisman stated, is that the exosystem "is a system removed from direct access of an individual and has an indirect, rather than a direct effect"

(2013: 10). Or as Bronfenbrenner (1979: 229) himself explained, the exosystem is the level of a developing person's ecology that encompasses processes and linkages between at least one setting that contains that individual- microsystem and at least one setting that does not include that very individual. When it comes to these kinds of settings, examples are numerous.

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, the third developmental layer includes the mass media to which an individual is exposed on a daily basis, social welfare and legal services, and it stretches all the way up to the parents' workplace, which may influence the quality of emotional relationships back home, to "a factory closing in the community that results in a decline in the school's revenue" (Shaffer and Kipp 2010: 64). However, it is important to mention that even though the effects of the exosystem upon an individual are implicit, it affects an individual's development as much as the micro and mesosystem do. In practice, that would mean if a child's parents are unable to provide them with the basic needs – such as food or a "roof over their head", that will have a negative effect upon the child's overall experience in life. According to studies, the aforementioned circumstances will result in a child's lower self-esteem, lower grades and deviant behavior (Ljubetić 2007: 49). Also according to Ljubetić (2007: 49), if a child's parents have a stable working environment, which enables both their self-actualization but also allows them to provide their children food on the table and a home, this will positively correlate with that child's well-being – their own desire to self-actualize, a higher self-esteem, the establishment of positive social relations and high academic achievements.

#### *3.1.4. Macrosystem*

Having studied cultural anthropology, Bronfenbrenner developed the fourth layer of his model. It can be perceived as the combination of values both explicit and implicit, cultural and subcultural beliefs, behaviors and the social class context in which all three systems– micro, exo and meso are built (Couchenour and Chrisman 2013: 8-10; Shaffer and Kipp 2010: 37-39). In other words, the macrosystem can be seen as representing the cultural context, or cultural environment, in which child resides and develops. What is also important to mention is that Bronfenbrenner (1979) perceived this layer as a blueprint containing both settings governed by laws, rules and regulations, but also thought of the macrosystem as sometimes being more informal, with customs developing as a part of everyday life.

As for the aforementioned cultural context, what is interesting is that these socio-cultural notions mentioned above vary or differ from culture to culture. Namely, members of a certain social group are often seen as sharing not only common values, but also a common, national identity. For example, western societies can be considered to be more individualistic, while non-Western ones can be seen as placing emphasis upon the collective. This again, has and will have a major impact, direct or indirect, on the experience that the developing individual has in their home, neighborhood, school and workplace (Bronfenbrenner 1979: 111; Couchenour and Chrisman 2013: 29, 31; Erwin 2010: 54). To be more specific, just like the previous layers, all the components that constitute the macrosystem can be seen as (not) supporting a child's optimal development.

One interesting example is provided by the authors Hook, Watts and Cockroft (2002: 13), who tackle the issue of children with special needs and the society's perception

of them. The authors talk about the laws encouraging the inclusion of handicapped children in mainstream school classes, which is likely to have a profound effect upon the social development of both children with special needs as well as those without special needs (Hook et al. 2002: 317). The same authors also mention how the failure or success of this attempt is likely to encourage or discourage later governmental efforts when it comes to integration of these two groups (Hook et al. 2002: 317-318).

### 3.1.5. Chronosystem

This fifth and final layer of Ecological Systems Theory was added by Bronfenbrenner almost a decade after creating its original version. Nevertheless, this temporal dimension is vital for the proper functioning of the model, since it represents the social and historical context or the era in which an individual lives and which affects their perception of self, as well as their development and behavior (Couchenour and Chrisman 2013: 12-13; Shaffer and Kipp 2010: 63). Furthermore, the chronosystem represents the time dimension which simultaneously stands for both change and constancy when it comes to the developing individual. Bronfenbrenner (1979) sees this final layer as having a fundamental effect upon the way this psychological development will occur. What is meant by that is that, as time goes by, social and historical contexts and subcontexts change, and alongside them individuals also change – their perceptions, values and behavior.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) also distinguishes between two types of time: personal time (microsystem) and the time that belongs to a broader socio-cultural contextualization. Speaking of personal time, authors Watts, Cockcroft and Duncan (2009) give an example of how a parents' divorce influences a child's development – effects are extremely severe during the first year following that event, but later decrease over time. The same authors also provide an example of the second type of time – social time, in which time “constitutes a very broad level of ecological influence” (Watts et. al. 2009: 507). There, they speak of an instance which had a major influence upon the development of women and which was optimized after the increase in culture of women's rights– resulting in the fact that today, women are more likely to be encouraged to pursue their careers than they would have been three decades before (Watts et. al. 2009: 507).

Having studied Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, it can be said that in his trans- and interdisciplinary approach to the development of human (id)entity, where experiments are conducted in the “natural environment”, Bronfenbrenner generalized and continued the path the Chicago School of Sociology paved throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Namely, while Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was primarily developed in order to explain how humans and their identities are being developed, and therefore it can be dubbed as universal, it did not particularly focus on the problem of black identities in the United States. However, due to the fact that Toni Morrison, who insisted on calling herself an African-American author, and whose works particularly focus on the aforementioned problem – that of a black identity – it is necessary to discuss the main postulates proposed by the Chicago School of Sociology in which sociologists dealt with the aforementioned “issue of blackness”. However, the reason for doing this is not to disprove Bronfenbrenner's model, but to confirm it and widen it, or as Waters says, “add some color to it” (2009: 142).

#### 4. *Getting Closer to Morrison: Enriching the Ecological Macro-Micro Approach*

Founded by a group of sociologists in Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s, the Chicago School of Sociology – also known as Chicago School of Thought, used the ecological approach in order to study the relationships different individuals have in a certain environment. Bronfenbrenner's work seemed to be a continuation of what the Chicago School of Sociology started back in the 1920s, due to which his approach shares certain similarities with their "modus operandi". First, both approaches dubbed the laboratory setting as an inappropriate context for studying the development of one's identity and opted for "social settings (...) in which scientific studies intended to address human needs" (Andersen and Taylor 2007: 17). Another major connecting link between the two said approaches was the fact that the Chicago School and its sociologists were "interested in how society shaped the mind and identity of a person," which was also the focus of Bronfenbrenner's studies (Andersen and Taylor 2007: 17; cf. Waters: 2009). Even though the Chicago School consisted primarily of sociologists, while Bronfenbrenner's model is mostly analyzed from the psychological point of view, Bronfenbrenner has also integrated sociological aspects in it (the "natural environment"). However, Bronfenbrenner decided to focus on the biological aspect of an individual (i.e. the "genetic pool"), while the Chicago School and its sociologists decided to "bypass" the genetic component, while placing more emphasis on "urban environments", including those surrounding and shaping people of color in America. Another similarity that needs to be pointed out is that this approach also advocated the fact the identity is being built in that very interconnectedness between an individual and society, with both the individual and the environment being mutually sustainable, (inter)changeable and created. Addressing the works of Toni Morrison, this approach would then assume how her characters are not merely passive objects of the ecological systems, but that they are active agents who with their thinking and their doings actively affect the aforementioned processes, thus contributing to change in society.

Continuing the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, who in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) gave the first systematic study of an African-American community, some of the most prominent sociologists of the Chicago School, such as Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, gave this "issue of space and race" a fundamental role in their research (Andersson and Massey 2001: 3; cf. Merriman 2015). Focusing on what in Bronfenbrenner's theory would be the exosystem, the Chicago School designed the "concentric zone model" in order to explain the three concepts of locality influencing the development of an individual; ecological, institutional and perceptual (Merriman 2015: 5). If one looks at the definition of ecological space, they will see how the latter resembles Bronfenbrenner's microsystem. However, the sociologists of the Chicago School decided to include and to place more emphasis on the racial factor as well.

When it comes to the concept of institutional space, its definition seems to comprise Bronfenbrenner's microsystem and mesosystem, since the Chicago School sociologists included "political organizations, gathering places such as cafes and studios, commercial institutions (...) and churches", but also emphasized race-related aspects, such as "division into community areas" and "organization and control in the black community" (Merriman, 2015: 5). Finally, perceptual or subjective space is equivalent to the first four layers in

Ecological Systems Theory. What is meant by that is that it consists of a “set of shared beliefs (...) that have practical consequences for action”, which results in individuals “wishing to be around people with similar styles of life (...) and avoiding those with certain different styles” – creating separate communities such as “ghettos” (Merriman 2015: 5). And it was this confirmation of how “the sociology of race was thoroughly grounded in human ecology”, in which “social relations were spatial relations” that made American sociologists turn to “understanding how ecological factors shaped and constrained interpersonal behavior and social structure” (Andersson and Massey 2001: 3).

Having analyzed racial stratifications, while including a detailed description of “the ecological configurations of class, race, and ethnicity” Chicago School sociologists presented how the intersection of these variables influenced the life chances and social worlds experienced by individuals (Andersson and Massey 2001: 3). By stressing racial factors and the ways they influence the construction of an individual, the Chicago School of Sociology, thus not only enriched the model proposed by Bronfenbrenner, but their conclusions seem to parallel those of Toni Morrison in her own writings.

##### *5. Toni Morrison – Writer, Historian, “Social Scientist”*

When asked in an interview whether she think of herself “as something of a social scientist” in the way in which she does her own writing, Upon answering the question regarding her “social scientist” role, Toni Morrison replied how she is “totally the latter”. Breaking the dichotomy, she also added she does not “believe that good art can separate itself from the world in which it lives. And I don’t even think the idea of the separation of art from politics is really worth discussing any more” (Frias, Pond, Harris and Morrison 1994: 266-267). This indeed seems to be true, because once a reader starts plunging into her novels, they discover the multiplicity of meanings, of layers, all interconnected and embedded into a single piece of work, just like the “Russian doll”. Moreover, believing that narrow mindsets led to the horrors of racism and slavery, Morrison became famous for leaving “space for readers” – encouraging them to open-up their minds and read between the lines in order to interpret and decipher her message from various perspectives (Gillespie 2008: 17).

It seems that Morrison herself adhered to her own advice in her writing, since the works of this Nobel Prize- and Pulitzer Prize- winning novelist are, also a combination of various perspectives, including historical. “I was terribly indebted to historians” – Morrison said, while spending quite some time collecting “slave narratives, and the letters that were collected by other historians of the things that slaves had actually wrote and said” (Frias et al. 1994: 279). Hand in hand with this historical aspect is the social awareness and social activism found in her novels, since according to the words of this Ohio native: “if you think about the world in which you live, and you try to transform some aspect of it into an art form, then it (...) can exist in its own context– its political and historical context, and have a kind of faithfulness to that” (Frias et. al. 1994: 227). Apart from focusing on what in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory would fall into the chrono, macro and exosystem in development of a particular character, Morrison also focused on the individuals, their homes, their families and their communities – domestic spaces, or the “colored” microsystems in

Bronfenbrenner's terms. Despite her writings tackling different issues, and including a plethora of miscellaneous characters, all of Morrison's works seem to be historical, social, psychological and literary "odes" and attempts to, as Gillespie said, "enter the consciousness of individuals who were enslaved and to animate the feelings that must have been associated with so much uncertainty, loss, and violation" (2008: 17). And due to this "multifaceted" nature of Morrison's works, this paper will attempt to analyze the ways in which the writer (re)constructs the identity of her characters from the socio-psychological aspect – Ecological Systems Theory.

## 6. "To Be" in Morrison's *Beloved*

"What does it mean to be human?" is the question Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory posed, while Morrison's works challenged the mind of her readers even more by asking the same question – but with adding "when one's primary humanity is denied?" (Gillespie 2008: 17). While reading Morrison's novels, including her 1987 Pulitzer prize winner *Beloved*, the reader comes to see how the novel is not merely focusing on the (in)ability to let go of the traumas or the spirits of the past and slavery. On the contrary, every single one of the novel's characters – male or female, black or white, is confronted with the same question: that of how to "come to their own conclusions regarding the purpose of their own life" (Gillespie 2008: 29). When it comes to the problem of how to make sense of your own life, and whether making sense of it is possible at all, a reader can see that these are the questions that also concern *Beloved's* central character– Sethe. This is the reason why in the following sections of the paper, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model will be used to analyze the microsystem that Sethe forms alongside her lover Paul D and her daughter Denver, while also analyzing her path to self-discovery. Namely, as Gillespie said, the story of this former slave, mother and "murderer" in the novel can also be read as her own "coming of age- learning how *to be* and learning how *to love*", after having been denied of her own humanity (2008: 29). However, in order to discover how Sethe, Denver and Paul D came to be, the larger socio-historical context must be dissected first.

### 6.1. Chronosystem

As it was mentioned earlier in the paper, Toni Morrison was not exclusively a writer. In other words, her works do not belong to the "literature-only shelf", but they also represent an embodiment of history and social critique. Similarly, her novel *Beloved* is not solely a work of fiction, since the author got the idea from the "historical narrative of Margaret Garner, a woman who in 1856 ran away from the farm where she was enslaved in Kentucky" (Gillespie 2008: 19). Placing her novel in the 19th century – in 1873 in Ohio, Morrison nudges her readers to go back to the time when slavery in the United States was still very much present, despite the fact that the Civil War ended almost a decade previous. However, speaking of history and the chronosystem – the dimension of time that *Beloved* covers – both directly and indirectly – is the period from the 15th to the 19th century. Namely, by dedicating her novel to the "sixty million and more" who died during the Middle Passage from

Africa to North, but mostly South America, Morrison puts the actual timeline of the novel – that of the 19th century, into a larger chronological perspective when the issue of slavery is being discussed. Therefore, the story of Sethe in *Beloved* becomes the story of the sixty million and more “affected by the institution of slavery” (Marks 2002: 99). However, what is both interesting and frightening at the same time is the fact that – according to Bronfenbrenner’s model, as the chronosystem changes, the macrosystem changes as well, but during these four centuries not much has changed when it comes to the perception of African-Americans in the States. In the novel this temporal dimension is represented in the form of a female ghost named Beloved.

Bringing together the dimension of time and the shaping of one’s identity, it seems that *Beloved* primarily focuses on tracing a connection between the personal-feminine and collective identity (Ayadi 2011: 263). It represents the trauma of history itself, through its female figures – Nan, Sethe, Denver and the ghost Beloved, who comes to serve as a “symbol for an interconnection between the past and the present”, the “arche-phenomenon of memory” (Ayadi 2011: 265). Therefore, Beloved becomes a “mnemonic muse for Sethe, Paul D and Denver, (...) the representation of a larger pasts that persist in a forgotten archive” buried deep in their memory (Marks 2002: 80). Apart from representing the temporal dimension, Beloved within herself also comprises both individual and social identities, speaking on “two levels (...) the common individual experience of life in the womb–“ – which she describes as full of water and darkness, “and to the larger historical communal experience of black people in the Middle Passage” (Gibson and Gibson 1995: 97).

The above described theoretical approaches, both individually and combined, open new possibilities of dealing with identity structures and at the same time reveal new readings of Morrison’s novel that have not been systematically examined in this context.

## 6.2. Macrosystem

Bronfenbrenner’s macrosystem consists of the cultural context and values incorporated in society. Throughout American history “hating on negroes” was part of the culture ever since the white conquerors brought them onto American soil. Similarly, as Matthewman pointed out, the schoolteacher in *Beloved* measures the skulls of black people trying to prove their connection to animals (2010: 20). And the result of such practices was the fact that many African-Americans not only internalized racism, but sometimes also participated in the oppression of their own people. Throughout the novel it can be seen how this internalized self-hatred comes in two forms. The first form is evident in the fact that most of the black characters in the novel equalize themselves with the animal – a practice learned from the white schoolteacher who once attempted to “write and read Sethe as a subhuman thing by listing her (...) animal characteristics alongside her human ones” (Andrews and McKay 1999: 57). Mirroring the schoolteacher’s behavior are also the white boys residing at the same plantation who were involved in Sethe’s brutal rape. What is interesting is that even when describing the rape scene, Sethe is portrayed as being reduced to the level of an animal yet again – being beaten and humiliated as they sucked the milk from her breasts; “They used cowhide on you? –And they took my

milk” (Morrison 1998: 17). Black men working on the farm received no different treatment than Sethe had. In fact, Morrison on numerous occasions in the novel portrays how males at Sweet Home were downgraded as well – highlighting their sexuality. Consequently, the majority of men working at Sweet Home - Paul D, Paul A and Paul F, are, as Bloom states, “sexually inadequate”, frequently presenting, “sadistic, sexual thoughts and practices that were born on a white man’s plantation” (2009: 97). Having no “real” name, Morrison (1998: 10-11) describes black males from Sweet Home as; “(...) all in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs (...) They were young and with the absence of women they had taken to calves”. Portraying them as frustrated animals who, having no other choice, reduced themselves to that same bestial behavior, black workers seemed not only to have confirmed the schoolteacher’s theory, but they also seem to have internalized it as a part of their own identity.

On the other hand, Morrison also describes another type of culture, that of the black community, which is more nourishing than the one created by the white supremacists. Through the character of Baby Suggs, a former slave, Morrison provides a glimpse of this separate culture and its values which helped both Sethe and Denver find the way back to themselves. Baby Suggs is Sethe’s mother-in-law, who through ceremonies held in the Clearing, helped Sethe, Denver and the rest of former slaves in reinstalling a sense of self-worth. Unlike the white schoolteacher, the teachings of Baby Suggs have the purpose of re-instilling a sense of self-worth and self-love in the former slaves. For the first time in their existence, both Sethe and Denver are educated how to accept themselves - not only physically but mentally as well; “Here (...) in this here place, we celebrate the flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard” (Morrison 1998: 88). It is through these connections, through playing with her children, through conversations with other women, through song and dance, through developing friendships and relationships, that both Sethe and later Denver, are not only “allowed to be” – but also allowed to be themselves: as mothers, as daughters, as companions – as human beings (Gillespie 2008: 30). It is through this very “black culture” that Morrison seems to show that African-American identity could be reconstructed through its own cultural heritage and social structure.

### 6.3. Exosystem

Looking at the exosystem in *Beloved*, one can look at one particular example that Urie Bronfenbrenner provided when describing this layer, and that is the parents’ workplace. Sethe’s mother was a slave, the “status” of which majorly influenced her role as a mother – and consequently Sethe’s own mother. Being a slave, Sethe’s mother sacrificed her own maternal role due to the fact she did not actually “belong” to herself. Or, as Gillespie (2008: 2) stated, her own body was not her own, and her time was not really hers. Due to the nature of her job, Sethe’s mother rarely attended to her daughter’s needs, resulting in the fact that Sethe never experienced that mother-daughter bond. And so, when asked about her mother Sethe said; “I didn’t see her but a few times out in the field and once she was working in indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line (...) She never fixed my hair



nor nothing” (Morrison 1998: 60). Later in life, upon arriving at Sweet Home, this sacrifice becomes prominent again. Spending most of her time attending the Garner family, the female protagonist sacrifices her role as a mother – mirroring, thus, her own mother’s behavior. This is perhaps most visible in the scene in which one of her sons – Howard, is injured, since Sethe appears to be lost and unable to attend to his needs – something a true mother would be able to do (Gillespie 2008: 2). Another similarity Sethe shares with her mother is related to “letting go” (to put it mildly) of their children – despite the reasons for these acts being different. To be more specific, the reason why Sethe’s mother got rid of the children she had before her was due to the fact she felt repulsed by them for being the product of rape – her own inability to protect herself from the whites (Morrison 1998: 60).

#### 6.4. Mesosystem

When reading *Beloved* through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s model, one can see how this mesosystem, or interactions between microsystems, plays a crucial role in formation of one’s identity. This layer is important since it seems to prove a belief of the Chicago School sociologists that claimed that people who share similar values and sets of beliefs form a community with people who have similar outlooks. In the novel this mesosystemic aspect consists of two distinct microsystems that are formed over time. The first one consists of the white men at Sweet Home - Mr. and Mrs. Garner and the schoolteacher with his three nephews, while the other one is formed by the black slaves working on the Sweet Home plantation.

When it comes to this “white” microsystem, the values, opinions and “culture” that was prevalent in it was already described in the “macrosystem” section. Speaking about the Sweet Home “whites”, Morrison describes them as having “pretty manners, all of them. Talked soft and spit in handkerchiefs” (1998: 37). And despite being “gentle in a lot of ways”, the schoolteacher and his nephews came to embody the dehumanizing effects of slavery, considering slaves no different, if not worse than animals (Morrison 1998: 37). What is interesting is the fact that Morrison at first leads readers to believe that the Garners, the owners of Sweet Home, deviate from the usual perception of white slave owners. Morrison portrays Mr. and Mrs. Garner as parental figures to their slaves. However, as the novel progresses, this illusion slowly begins to fade – leading one to conclude that the Garner family is not as kind as readers are led to believe at the very beginning of *Beloved*. Namely, regardless Mr. Garner’s “paternalistic” behavior, both him and his wife Lillian Garner consider “blacks” their property – with Halle having to buy his mother’s freedom and Sethe attending Mrs. Gardner’s needs more than her children’s (Gillespie 2008: 38; Marks 2002: 30).

#### 6.5. Microsystem

As it was mentioned before, in *Beloved*, the “narrowest” layer in Bronfenbrenner’s theory consists of the Sethe-Denver-Paul D triad. Speaking of the novel and its central characters, one can easily spot the triple burden Sethe has to carry – as a woman, as a slave and as a mother; having no control over her body, husband and children (Gillespie 2008; Zühlke 2003: 5). Connected with the latter, right at the beginning of Morrison’s novel the reader is introduced to Sethe and her role as a mother in her present

microsystem – or what is left of it. Namely, the author portrays Sethe and her daughter Denver as “victims” of the spirit of her dead child Beloved. Morrison then continues describing how the ghost of Beloved tore her family apart leaving “124 (...) full of a baby’s venom” making her two sons “Howard and Buglar (...) run away by the time they were thirteen years old” (Morrison 1998: 3). Apart from the concept of “victim” the reader also discovers how the concept of “sacrifice” plays an important role when portraying Sethe –as a woman, as a mother, as well as a lover. As it was mentioned earlier, just like her own mother, Sethe sacrificed her daughter to save her from her fate as a slave. Once her daughter is dead, Sethe sacrifices her own body to have the letters imprinted on her dead daughter’s tombstone. Thus, burying her Beloved also meant burying her dignity by “selling her body to another white exploiter” (McCarthy 1993: 226). As Gillespie has noticed, “after the misery (...) Sethe refuses to allow herself to be defined in anyway other than as a mother, (...) limiting her identity to motherhood”, Sethe is yet again unable to “fully explore the question of what it means to be Sethe” (2008: 30). Plunged into the past– into the spirit of her dead daughter, her love becomes all-consuming, excessive, or as Paul D says, “too thick” (Morrison 1998: 164). Sethe even sacrifices her role as a lover, not stopping Paul D when he decided to leave 124, since for her being a mother to Denver and Beloved is the ultimate and only priority; “The world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all their needs to be” (Morrison 1998: 183). However, this kind of excessive love or love without limits, as Morrison (1998) calls it, affects not only Sethe’s relationship with Paul D, but it also has a huge impact on her daughter, Denver.

Looking back at the question posed in the introductory part of the paper – whether a “damaged” child can “give birth” to a man, whether it can finish its 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 the author’s characters throughout the novel, one can draw a conclusion that Morrison perceives the microsystem and its mesosystemic relations with the exosystem as layers which play a crucial role for developing a healthy and stable identity.

When it comes to *Beloved*, one can see how the three main characters– Sethe, Denver and Paul D have indeed finished their developmental journey successfully, despite the hardships in the environment they had to endure on their path to self-discovery. Starting with the broader socio-political context, in 19th-century Ohio where the novel takes place, slavery and enslavement practices were far from being abolished, and this is reflected not only on the macrosystem, but it also had a negative effect upon the remaining systems. The black community was often portrayed as shattered, with many individuals still bearing the scars of the past. Similarly, Sethe, Denver and Paul D did not seem to be doing much better at the beginning of the novel, with every character functioning as an independent, closed-off microsystem. However, as the novel progresses, readers come to see how the main protagonists of the novel slowly begin to construct themselves anew. This reinvention occurs first through this communal exosystem that soon transforms into the microsystem in which they are able to find meaning within themselves in times when all meaning seemed to be lost. Finally, Denver found meaning in saving her mother and seeking help within the

community. Paul D found meaning not only by retelling his story and ridding himself of his past traumas, but also through helping Sethe in finding the path to herself by communicating those same traumas with her.

Having analyzed the complexity of Morrison's characters through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, which was enriched by the discoveries made by the Chicago School of Sociology, perhaps the best conclusion that reflects the ideas and thinking of the aforementioned models is summarized in one single statement from Bronfenbrenner (1979), emphasizing 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" (qtd. in Sell 1995: 152).

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## Appendix

### Chart 1 – Bioecological model of development

## TEORIJA EKOLOŠKIH SUSTAVA: (RE)KONSTRUKCIJA IDENTITETA U ROMANU *BELOVED* TONI MORRISON

### Sažetak

U ovom radu roman *Beloved* (1987.) autorice Toni Morrison razmatrat će se sa stajališta razvojne psihologije. Djela autorice Morrison često su isprepletanje društvenih, povijesno-političkih i emocionalnih tema koje imaju ključnu ulogu u konstrukciji identiteta autoričinih likova. Iz tog razloga, teorija ekoloških sustava Urija Bronfenbrennera koristit će se u svrhu detaljne analize načina na koje Morrison (re)konstruira identitet likova u romanu. Korištenje pet sustava na kojima se temelji Bronfenbrennerov bioekološki model – krono, makro, egzo, mezo i mikrosustav omogućit će često zanemareni holistički pristup koji je potreban zbog boljeg razumijevanja načina i razloga koji o(ne)mogućuju likovima Toni Morrison da uspješno završe svoje razvojno putovanje izgradnje identiteta.

Ključne riječi: Toni Morrison, Urie Bronfenbrenner; teorija ekoloških sustava, konstrukcija identiteta, holistički pristup