In Search of Connections: Community and Self in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

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Introduction

The period of the 1930s and 1940s in the United States of America was characterized by turbulence, insecurity and hardship. High rates of unemployment left a mark on the population and forced vast numbers of citizens to live on the margin of subsistence. Physical and psychological hardship affected the masses. On top of that, the US-society was severely divided; the presence of discrimination based on an individual’s ethnicity and segregation by law could be considered as evidence for a strong disagreement among the population. The great divide of society resulted in conflicts and issues of various kinds, and most members of African American communities faced numerous challenges in various areas of life. Many were confronted with the difficulty of being unemployed, and among those who were employed, poor working conditions and low wages impeded them from being able to provide sufficient financial support for their families. Apart from the troublesome labor situation and the segregation by law in most public facilities, African Americans were prone to be confronted with physical violence; from disputes to homicidal riots, civil disturbance was omnipresent. (Frazier 134-136; 154-156)

Due to the constant presence of hardship and discrimination, a considerable number of writers decided to articulate their concerns about the division of society through their literary works. Assumed conventional beliefs and norms were addressed in a critical way and a shift in ideology was suggested and requested. Toni Morrison (born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931) is one of the authors who devoted herself to writing about black experience and occupies a unique position in the field of African American literature. For her accomplishments, the novelist was, among others, awarded a Nobel Prize and a Pulitzer Prize, and gained international attention. Literature has always constituted one of her main interests; her studies of English literature, teaching jobs at various universities in the same field, and the job as an editor at Random House are indicators of her enthusiasm. As previously mentioned, Toni Morrison writes about African American experience and uses her voice to address societal issues. (Jimoh 1-7)

This thesis focuses on Toni Morrison’s debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Set in 1941 in Lorain, Ohio, it recounts the stories of different members of an African American community. A girl named Pecola Breedlove is the center of attention, and the reader learns about her difficulty in finding her place in community and, consequently, about her frustration with
herself. Seemingly, assumed standards of beauty, as well as “racial” and social hierarchies impede Pecola’s happiness. I chose this particular novel for my thesis on account of the fact that it offers interesting ways of interpretation, and encourages reflection on complex issues. Morrison approaches highly important topics, most of which are relevant to the present day, from a rather uncommon and exceptional perspective. The high relevance of the subject matters the author broaches in her novel invites the reader to reflect on the current situation of the US-American society, and encourages him or her to scrutinize the roots of the difficulties numerous members of the African American community are confronted with. A further reason for my choice to focus on The Bluest Eye is that the novel offers countless ways of interpretation, which makes it an interesting book to work with. Morrison applies exceptional literary techniques which create ambiguity; a certain vagueness and irony encourage the reader to analyze the novel in a creative and unconventional way.

An in-depth analysis of The Bluest Eye, will constitute the center of this thesis. Previous investigations of the novel have mostly been concerned with standards of beauty and with the characters’ quests for identity. For this thesis, I choose to examine the novel from a different angle. As the title of this work (“In Search of Connections: Community and Self in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970)”) suggests, the focus of this investigation will lie on the dynamics of community and on the establishment of connections, as depicted in the novel. Relatively few researchers have addressed the issue of community and its connection to language, which, however, seems to be an intriguing area in the field of African American literature. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that the characters portrayed in The Bluest Eye are, in one way or another, in search of connections. Therefore, it seems appropriate to explore different approaches and ways to establish interpersonal relationships and communities. Additionally, the significance of language with reference to the organization and the creation of community will be inspected.

Before entering the analysis of the novel, certain relevant theoretical issues will be presented to the reader. The first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the African American literary tradition, and to the position of Morrison’s work within this movement. To begin with, the reader will be provided a brief overview of African American literary history, and of characteristic features of literary works which are considered part of this field. Subsequently, a brief synopsis of Morrison’s work will be provided. The next chapter serves to contextualize The Bluest Eye in
terms of historical events and cultural aspects. Some relevant milestones in African American history will be presented, and the socio-economic situation of members of African American communities during the investigated periods will be analyzed. The reader of this thesis, however, should bear in mind that the text in question is a work of fiction. Although the historical and the cultural context seem to be depicted accurately in Morrison’s novel, historical facts should not be taken as a basis for an interpretation of the text. The novel is a product of Morrison’s imagination, and as a reader, one can only make assumptions about the author’s inspirations and influences during the writing process.

The analysis of *The Bluest Eye* is subdivided into five chapters. The first one serves to give the reader an overview of the structure of the novel, and of the postmodern techniques Toni Morrison makes use of. It is fundamental to mention, however, that this chapter is approached in a practical way; every literary aspect discussed in this section will be supported with examples taken from the novel. The second chapter will discuss Morrison’s portrayal of society and social structures, in connection with the topic of community and with language. After an elaborate account of structures of society, the focus in the third chapter will be shifted to communities within the context of family. Again, different functions of language in relation with the concept of community will be analyzed. The fourth chapter is dedicated to notions which are assumed to be related to materialism, namely beauty and property. These concepts will be examined in consideration of underlying, unapparent functions. This investigation serves to demonstrate that certain ideas and notions, although they seem to have merely materialistic backgrounds, can also have more profound and elaborate objectives. The last chapter of the analysis portrays the act of “gossiping” from an unconventional perspective. It will be investigated whether gossip can have positive effects on a community, or whether the consequences of this form of conversation are necessarily negative. To complete the thesis, a conclusion will recapitulate the main findings of this analysis.

It is essential to mention that throughout this paper, terms such “race”, “black”, and “white” will be used, as Morrison herself employs them on a rather frequent basis. Furthermore, these expressions are omnipresent in the body of secondary literature on the novel in question. Nevertheless, the reader needs to be aware of the fact that these terms should be used and interpreted with caution. Guterl clarifies that “race” is a concept created by human beings. He describes it as “bizarre” and as “a public fiction masquerading as physical fact”. Race,
according to his description, serves to classify human beings according to certain optic features which lack precision; as an example, he names the visual factor “skin color”. (3) Hence, a certain sensibility with respect to these concepts is required; the reader of this thesis should bear in mind that the idea of “race”, and the binary opposition of “black” and “white” are artificial and should not be understood as ultimate truths.
1. Toni Morrison and the Field of African American Literature

As *The Bluest Eye* constitutes the focus of this thesis, it seems relevant to investigate Toni Morrison’s position within the African American literary tradition. Being the first African American woman to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in the year 1993, it can be argued that her influence in this literary genre is considerable and without doubt, Morrison’s oeuvre deserves special attention. (Tally 9) However, first and foremost, a brief synopsis of African American literature will be provided, in order to familiarize the reader of this thesis with the literary field in which Toni Morrison moves.

First, it should be noted that African American literature does not only incorporate written texts, but also oral works, which are published independently, or integrated in a written context. Orality can in fact be considered a highly important characteristic of African American literature and hence, sound productions of different kinds and in different contexts should not be regarded as inferior to printed works. (Graham; Ward 2) The high presence and the utmost importance of the aspect of orality can be considered to originate from a variety of sources. Mainly, however, it might result from the fact that Africans who were traded to the Americas were prohibited from receiving an education; hence, they were limited in reading and writing (activities they were not allowed to execute anyway) and in order to communicate, they had to rely on their special creations of sounds and on their ability to hear. It can be argued that the element of sound used to be essential for ensuring African Americans’ “psychic and social survival”. (Graham; Ward 8)

Early works which form part of the African American literary corpus can be considered to date back to the time of slavery. As the editors of *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, Maryemma Graham and Jerry Ward, convincingly argue, African American literature reflects different processes of identity (trans)formation of individuals descending from Africa, who were shipped to the Americas and sold as slaves, and over the centuries had to fight to obtain their place in society. It is essential to consider the fact that African culture and cultural products are not to be universalized, as different African ethnic groups were, during the era of transatlantic slavery, brought to the Americas and were obligated to merge “into an identity named African American”. (Graham; Ward 1-3)
Graham and Ward explain that most works of African American literature, despite the considerable diversity of this literary category, share a variety of central themes. They explain that literature has helped African Americans over the years to establish and to strengthen “a complex racial and cultural identity” through literature. (9) Furthermore, Graham and Ward claim that individuals of African descent who devote themselves to producing works of literature tend to broach the issue of African Americans’ low social status in the United States of America and discuss the importance of fighting for the freedom to “speak for themselves”. (9) Black communities have been faced with different forms of oppression and discrimination (of various intensities) throughout history. These types of social inequalities hence also triggered a strong literary response. (9) Napier likewise argues that African Americans “tempered their desire to reconfigure conventional American notions of race and inequality with a general concern for social acceptance and participation”. (1) He explains that this branch of American literature, among others, serves to support and reinforce social reforms, to protest against inequalities, and to fight assumed western perceptions of African Americans, according to which individuals of this community are regarded as subhuman. (1)

Furthermore, it needs to be taken into account that African American literature has kept up with the times; the form of literary productions has been adapted to social and historical circumstances. From slave songs during and after the period of slavery to autobiographies and anthologies of achievement during a time in which African American citizens started to gain a certain degree of recognition after the end of segregation: the forms of African American literary works are not homogenous. However, even though the direct focus of different works might vary, it can be argued that the underlying values defended by the authors tend to be universal. (Graham; Ward 10)

At this point it should be added that African American authors do not only concentrate on issues which could be considered exclusively African American, such as discrimination based on an individual’s African origin. Numerous creators turn towards subject matters which concern descendants from Africa, as well as human beings with other origins. To cite an example, a variety of women contributed significantly to the corpus of African American literature by publishing work with a focus on feminist concerns. It can be observed that African American women incorporate gender issues in storylines which are inspired by historical circumstances, such as slavery, the Great Depression, or the Civil Rights Movement. (Mitchell; Taylor 2)
variety of literary genres, themes, and topics proves that the African American literary tradition is characterized by great diversity.

Toni Morrison’s oeuvre in numerous ways reflects certain characteristic features of African American literature. One of the author’s underlying aims is to “express a cultural legacy” and to revisit and interpret history. (Furman 3) It can be observed that Toni Morrison wrote her works in a chronological order with respect to African American historical milestones. (Tally 3) The author uses her voice to raise awareness for African American cultural aspects, such as the importance of community, and through her literary works, she represents various aspects of African American existence in an artistic way. It can be argued that Morrison’s literary productions are highly authentic and serve to represent the folk. (Furman 3-4)

Besides speaking up for the African American community, Morrison also addresses the marginalization of women in society; like numerous other African American women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, Morrison considers it necessary to broach the issue of gender inequalities. It needs to be considered, that Morrison and other contemporary black female writers generally do not portray black women characters as outsiders despite their oppression, but as significant members of a social union. (Bjork 25-27) This approach might be considered rather modern, but African American literature typically combines general, perpetual values with modern approaches and techniques. (Graham; Ward 12)

Another literary feature which Morrison’s texts share with other works in the field of African American literature is a certain form of orality (which is highly representative of African American literature). Morrison’s literary productions are characterized by the oral effect in different variations. First of all, a high presence of different narration modes can be observed; Harris even claims that Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* is a “storytelling event” and ascribes a high degree of power and influence to the narrative instances. Secondly, Morrison’s work frequently contains musical elements. (15-16) Moses explains that *The Bluest Eye* includes various passages which are directly and explicitly connected to the African American music category of blues, and clarifies that the structure of the novel resembles the form of composition of a blues song (“a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion”). (623) The musicality and the oral aspects of Morrison’s works is one of the methods the author applies in order to transmit cultural values and ideas.
Although Morrison’s literary techniques and her obviously determined will to speak up as an African American woman reveal a certain resemblance with other authors who belong to this literary field, she undoubtedly sticks out due to her very particular opinion on various matters and her rather uncommon approach to writing. Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah from the New York Times reveals that Morrison, unlike most authors of African descent, does not assume the roles of “the explorer and the explainer”. She refuses to write in an obviously political way; Morrison focuses on aesthetics and on detail, instead of “generalizing sentiments blunted with anger”. Morrison’s most important interest is, according to her account, to write from the perspective of a black woman for black people, instead of writing for the white community. She claims that it is not her intention to convince other people of the validity of her world. Ghansah explains that Morrison, during her entire life, pursued the goal of bringing more diversity to literary culture in order to keep it alive. (online) Morrison’s approach without doubt is not a conventional and common one among African American writers, and this fact awards her a special position within the African American literary tradition.
2. Contextualizing *The Bluest Eye*

*The Bluest Eye* is a work of fiction and a product of Toni Morrison’s mind; consequently, an interpretation of the novel solely based on historical facts might not be appropriate. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the author was influenced and inspired by certain historical circumstances and occurrences during the writing process of the novel. As previously mentioned, Morrison is known for raising her voice for African Americans, and for spotlighting aspects of their traditions. However, in an interview with Emma Brockes from The Guardian, Morrison reveals that it is not her intention to “explain black life to a white audience”; she finds more sense in writing from the perspective of an “insider”, a person who witnessed certain circumstances him- or herself. Morrison portrays her own experiences and perceptions of society without the intention to instruct white readers, which makes the reading experience a different one. In the interview, Morrison explains that she sees the necessity of “confront[ing] the oppressor”, but she refuses to try to see the world from the perspective of the oppressor. (The Guardian online) Valerie Smith explains that “*The Bluest Eye* is certainly born out of the racial self-consciousness of the 1960s”. (19) However, the period of an increased “racial” awareness of African American citizens was deferred due to a variety of circumstances which are going to be presented in the section below. In order to approximate an understanding of the social, the economic, the cultural, as well as the collective psychologic situation of the community in the year 1941, in which *The Bluest Eye* is set, it is recommendable to not only scrutinize the time period in question, but also to consider events and circumstances from the past, which led to the situation portrayed in the novel.

2.1. Revisiting the Past: A Survey of the Socio-Economic and Legal Situation of African Americans from Slavery to the Great Depression

In order to attempt to understand African Americans’ identity creation processes in the 1930s and 1940s, the periods actively relevant for Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, it is essential to revisit certain periods of African American history which were characterized by oppression and discrimination based on the ethnicity of a person. First of all, it is relevant to investigate the time in which the transatlantic slave trade was flourishing. Ira Lee Berlet clarifies that slavery based on the conceptualized idea called “race” (which was developed between the
eleventh and the eighteenth century) is as old as mankind, as far as we know today; the concept of selling fellow men or women to let them work without any type of compensation or wage was not new. (84-85) Transatlantic slave trade existed from the discovery of the Americas onwards, but did not really prosper until the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. Berlet further names certain rules and restrictions which were introduced during that period of time:

Slaves were forbidden from holding property and could not leave their master’s property without permission. Nor could slaves be out after dark, and the law forbade them from congregating with other slaves except for church. Additionally, slave codes prohibited slaves from defending themselves against white aggressions. (85)

The aforementioned prohibitions are only few examples for rules African captives had to adhere to. Fundamentally, it could be argued that slaves had to waive the most basic rights (which nowadays are considered human rights). The period of slavery hence left its marks on uncountable victims and their descendants. (Berlet 85) Despite the official abolition of slavery at the end of the Civil War with the introduction of the Thirteenth Amendment in the year of 1865, the situation of African Americans remained difficult, as they still were not considered as equal human beings by a high percentage of white citizens. (Horton; Horton 30) Numerous Americans did not want to accept the fact that members of a community, who formerly were used as slaves, now were free people. Additionally, the poor (or non-existing) education of African Americans resulted in the fact that they had difficulties in finding jobs, which consequently induced a severe extent of poverty among the community. (Franklin 238)

The period after the Reconstruction Era was marked by the “Jim Crow Laws”, which were regulations introduced to maintain the white community’s superiority over the black community in societal, political and legal affairs. Segregation existed on numerous levels, for instance in schools and in the public transportation system. African Americans had to address people with a light complexion by saying Mr. or Mrs., whereas they themselves were called by their first names by white citizens. In public institutions and at events, dark-skinned attendees were told to respect the pre-eminence of whites (for instance, with regards to the seating arrangement). Furthermore, African Americans were refused the right to vote in most parts of the USA, and were prohibited to enter certain states, such as Illinois and Oregon. Discrimination still existed and deprived African Americans from fully forming part of the US-American society. (Wormser n.p.) The era of the Jim Crow Laws did not come to an end until the civil rights movements in the 1950s. (Encyclopedia Britannica online) During the entire period,
African Americans were forced to relinquish rights which were considered to be inherent privileges of white Americans. Although this situation, as previously mentioned, did not change until the civil rights acts, the beginning of the twentieth century implied significant change for numerous members of the African American community. (Frazier 134)

The massive change of various life aspects of the black community was triggered by different factors. First, it is important to mention that around the 1920s, the US-economy in the southern states stagnated due to various circumstances. Especially members of the African American community were affected by the decrease in job opportunities: a high percentage of them used to work in the field of agriculture, and lost their jobs among others due to a plague of insects which was held responsible for the destruction of vast amounts of cotton crops. At the same time, however, industries in the northern US-American countries were thriving and attracted the African American population of the south. The combination of the poor economic situation during the first half of the twentieth century in the US-American south and the thriving industrial situation in the north triggered an enormous migration movement towards the northern US-American states, which is referred to as “The Great Migration”. (Frazier 134)

During the first World War, members of African American communities took over the jobs of white citizens in the northern industries, who joined the military service and, consequently, left the country. Towards the end of the war, numerous soldiers and veterans returned to the United States and were confronted with an unfamiliar situation; African Americans, who, before the period of the Great Migration, mostly worked in the rural areas of the American south, were starting to be accepted as workers in urban industries. As a consequence, they partly filled the empty positions of former white workers who left the country during the war. The people who returned tended to disapprove of this situation, and social frictions between blacks and whites grew. The high tensions resulted in riots of different dimensions: lynchings, bombings and arson are some examples of the violent acts which were mostly targeted at African Americans, and committed by white citizens. However, authorities did not intervene in most of the incidents, which prevented the difficult situation from being controlled. After enduring several attacks, the victimized community found courage to fight back, which virtually resulted in war-like situations. (Frazier 135)

During the period of high tensions, the African American community is said to have developed a new, communal identity. Several campaigns such as the “New Negro Movement”, which was
closely linked to the literary and artistic movement called “Harlem Renaissance”, were on the rise and encouraged its members to fight social injustice and misconceptions of the African American community. The New Negro Movement, which was inspired by Alain Locke, implicated African American’s freedom of expression in literature and art, and brought about a re-evaluation of the African heritage. (Holmes 60-62) Another significant movement was led by Marcus Garvey, a Native American, who tried to convince his supporters (who were of different descents) of the necessity of creating an own independent nation. He was convinced of the impossibility to ever be treated with justice in a “white man’s country”. (Frazier 135-136)

After the heyday of the cultural and social movements, however, Americans, and especially African Americans, were confronted with yet another critical situation. The 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s were characterized by a financial crisis in the USA, which is known as “the Great Depression”. Stock prices dropped, and, as a consequence, the industrial manufacture fell by half; this process was responsible for a massive wave of dismissal. (Horton; Horton 103) African American individuals were the ones who were most affected by the omnipresent unemployment in the United States. Frazier supports this statement with figures: “In Detroit, for example, 60 per cent of the black workers were unemployed in 1931, as compared with 32 per cent of the whites. In 1937, the figures for unemployed workers throughout the North were 38.9 per cent for blacks and 18.1 per cent for whites.” (154) These statistics imply that African Americans were highly affected by the Great Depression, which again demonstrates the existence of inequalities (in this case, in the field of economics and the labor market) based on the ethnicity of Americans. James and Lois Horton agree with this supposition; they claim that the threat of rising unemployment again revealed the fact that discrimination was still present. Black citizens lost their jobs with a higher probability and usually stayed unemployed for a longer period of time than white people. The situation unemployed African Americans found themselves in was desperate: numerous of them were evicted due to their inability to pay the rent, vast numbers of people suffered from hunger were forced to beg more fortunate people for food, and most African Americans were willing to accept any type of job in order to keep their families from starving. (Horton; Horton 103-104)

African Americans who were not dismissed during the Great Depression also faced enormous difficulties, working for low wages and often undesirable hours. At times, they did not even
have a day off; to sum up, the working conditions were poor. (Horton; Horton: 104) Although the drastic state of poverty most American citizens found themselves in is undeniable, it should be mentioned that their situations were, to a certain degree, facilitated with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s introduction of the “New Deal” in the mid-1930s. The New Deal was a measure to support the citizens who were most affected by the Great Depression, including African Americans, by providing opportunities to work and by establishing social services. However, it could be observed that the executors of the welfare-program tended to be “racially- biased” and favored the white population on various levels, which resulted in the fact that numerous African American citizens remained without a job. (Horton; Horton 111-113)

However, the period after the Great Depression was a time of great transition in the United States of America. With the country’s entrance into the second World War in the year 1939, life changed for every individual involved actively or passively in the military conflict; on a psychological, as well as on a physical level. One in every nine US-American citizens formed part of the armed forces and left the States; in case they returned, they did so after a considerable amount of time. The fact that numerous Americans left their old jobs and joined the military service, again, resulted in a lack of workers in the thriving US-industries; however, the empty positions were filled immediately, as the Great Migration, which continued until the 1970s, again brought numerous members of the African American communities, who were in search for jobs, to the country’s industrial north. Consequently, it can be argued that at the time, the economic situation during the second World War was rather fortunate for numerous non-white citizens. This situation can be considered similar to the one during the first World War. (Davis 7-8)

Davis clarifies that “the relative scarcity of labor boosted wages and beckoned workers to improve their positions”, which implies that the economic leaders admitted the importance and the necessity of African American workers in their industries. (8) However, Davis further explains that the encounter of white and black citizens in the northern countries of the United States implicated difficulties. Numerous whites were not used to the high presence of African Americans in their communities and were not content with the fact that people of color were now “upgraded” to the positions which used to be reserved for white citizens. The high disaffection toward African American workers, again, similarly to the post World War I situation, resulted in a high number of race related strikes and riots. (8-9)
To sum up, the entire history of African Americans, from the period of slavery onwards, was characterized by hardships of different kinds. The refusal of basic human rights during the period of slave-trade, laws of segregation after the official abolition of human captivity in the USA, and social, as well as economic disadvantage are only few examples of the difficulties African Americans had to deal with over the centuries. The reception and experience of cultural products, such as visual arts, music, and literature can be altered by a profound knowledge and awareness of the communal historical backgrounds of its producers.

2.2. Media and Mass Culture during the Great Depression

Not only the socio-economic and the legal context is relevant for an understanding of Toni Morrison’s inspirations for novel The Bluest Eye, but also cultural phenomena which characterized the period of time the novel is set in, and the media which supported the transmission of cultural values and ideas, should be considered and kept in mind. It can be argued that society and different assumed concepts which are defended by a community are generally influenced by the culture the involved individuals are surrounded by, and by certain cultural phenomena that are transmitted. Media play a crucial role in the distribution of ideas and ideals, and hence can have a strong effect on society’s structures. (Croteau; Hoynes xiii-xiv) This assumption is supported by Rita Barnard, who elaborately researched the field of (mass) culture in the 1930s in the USA, and investigated the influences it had on the country’s society. She specifies that social structures in the 1930s were majorly shaped by the emergence of a mass culture phenomenon; despite the critical financial situation the population of the USA had to face during that period, a general consumerist attitude started to spread among US-citizens. Billboards and other forms of advertisement were used to promote a certain standard of living—a standard numerous US-citizens could not afford. (3-4) Barnard claims that the period of the Great Depression was a time characterized by extreme contradictions, as most citizens were living on the margin of subsistence, while media suggested a rather luxurious way of life. (21-23) She explains:

The decade produced innumerable contrasts of this sort: while many were deprived of their living by the Dust Bowl, Rudy Vallee crooned, “Life is just a bowl of cherries”; while thousands lined their worn-out shoes with cardboard, Fred Astaire danced elegantly in his patent leathers [...]. (23)
The majority of the US population in the 1930s was constantly confronted with a lifestyle which was unaffordable for most citizens of the United States at that time. Public figures tended to present luxury goods and conveyed values which were closely tied to consumerism. Different forms of media used to play a crucial role in the process of establishing a culture of abundance. Although certain lifestyles were reserved for the rather wealthy minority of the USA, they apparently intrigued the masses. It can be argued that this type of fascination was responsible for the popularity of public figures or “stars” who used to embody a certain way of life. (McLean 1-2; 4)

During that period, Hollywood productions became exceedingly popular in the USA; the number of movie theaters in the country increased rapidly, which could be considered a sign of cinematic success. (McLean 1;4) Responsible for the enormous profit of Hollywood movies were, among other factors, the actors. As Rosten states, “Hollywood means movies, and movies mean stars”. (328) According to him, the leading actors and actresses hold immense power; their influence on the audience is enormous, and the attention they receive is of considerable dimension. (328) Indeed, numerous actors and actresses were virtually worshipped by the audience; a prominent example would be the child-actress Shirley Temple. Larsen explains that photos and posters of the girl decorated uncountable private households; cups, clothes and other articles which had Shirley Temple’s face imprinted were sold, and dolls who resembled the girl were best-sellers. (The Orange County Register online) Kasson provides an explanation for this phenomenon: “At a time when movie attendance knit Americans into a truly national popular culture, they did not want a mirror of deep deprivation and despair held up to them but a ray of sunshine cast on their faces.” He argues that during the period of the Great Depression the population of the United States was constantly confronted with highly critical situations; as a consequence, Americans longed for moments of ease and happiness, which they found among others in Hollywood movies. Kasson explains that despite the problematic financial situation American citizens found themselves in, most were willing to spend money on amusements, which resulted in a thriving of the entertainment industry. (1-2)

At this point it is important to mention that in the 1930s, virtually every leading movie-role was given to a white actor. On certain occasions, African Americans were elected to play featured parts; an outstanding example is Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, a popular tap dancer and actor. (McLean 8) Apart from him and few other actors or actresses who were accepted to play
featured roles in different Hollywood productions, it could be observed that the main performers were white. (8) Franklin’s observations lead to the same conclusion: “[...] Hollywood showed little inclination to undertake the integration of Negroes into productions on the basis of equality.” (389) The producers of the world-famous and popular motion pictures attached high importance to the esthetic appeal of their movies, and based the election of the actors on a certain, assumed “ideal”, which was apparently defended during this period. The few black actors who made appearances in Hollywood movies mostly played the roles of criminals or servants. It was not until the era after World War II that African Americans were integrated in the film-business and took on more meaningful roles. (389)

In the 1940s other forms of media, besides movies, gained in popularity; Davis clarifies that newspapers, magazines, and especially radio broadcasting were consumed by the American masses, and consequently had an enormous influence. He argues that these forms of media were mostly targeted at the white population, and hence also “operated on the white standard”. (51) Popular and widespread broadcast and print media used to defend values which were closely tied to consumerism instead of focusing on values which would have supported the “race-relations” of Americans, as Davis explains. Whereas in the 1930s black orchestras or singers on occasion made appearances on popular radio stations, they were hardly present in the 1940s, as they had to make way for other types of radio programs, which mostly featured superficial “white dramas”. (52) The content different types of media used to convey back in the 1940s was, more or less, out of touch with reality; popular programs steered clear of controversial issues, and avoided facing the problems of the American society with regard to the country’s diverse communities. (51-52) As previously mentioned, most radio stations featured programs which were directly targeted at the white community. The appearance of non-whites in certain shows was rather limited, but if a character of color was featured, he or she was usually stereotyped and presented as a troublemaker, or as a ridiculous individual. The caricatured presentation of members of the black community was highly popular among large parts of the audience. On rare occasions, however, a positive light was cast on some of the featured characters of African origin; in these cases, they were portrayed as intelligent human beings who had appreciated professions. (Davis 52-53) However, in general members of black communities were barely present in different types of mass-media.
In conclusion, it can be argued that media used to play a crucial role in the process of establishing certain ideals and concepts in the US-society of the 1930s and 1940s. Different notions were presented in ways which tended to convince large parts of the audience to believe in their validity; the concepts of race, beauty, and a prestigious lifestyle are only few examples which were promoted through different forms of media. The fact that performances of non-whites in certain types of media were virtually non-existent generally indicated discriminating attitudes towards African American communities. These unfavorable perceptions were spread among the US-population among others via media. The fact that certain forms of advertisement, newspapers, magazines, or broadcast devices were available for the majority of US-citizens implicated that the message different forms of media intended to convey reached large parts of the population. Hence, it could be argued that different forms of publications and broadcasts had a considerable influence, as they were able to participate in forming the consumers’ opinions and worldviews. Through media, society’s standards were, to a certain degree, shaped and controlled, and social structures were established. (McLean 1-8; Davis 51-52)
3. The Bluest Eye as a Dynamic Community

Toni Morrison’s debut novel *The Bluest Eye*, set in the year of 1941, is a work of fiction, in which the author depicts the life situations of different African American families living in Lorain, Ohio. She explicitly portrays the struggles and hardships the characters endure during a period of instability, and gives the reader direct insight into the main characters’ minds. Among others, the author broaches the sensitive issue of identity crises; dislocation, alienation and otherness are solely few examples for personal issues the characters of the novel deal with. They struggle with appreciating or defining their own identities, and hence let others modify or construe who they are. Morrison, however, also introduces individuals who are rather self-aware and appreciate their identities.

The reader of the novel learns about the characters’ relationships with themselves and with others, and observes that everyone seems to be in search of human connections. Morrison demonstrates that language and communication are essential tools for establishing a community and for creating a network. The reader of the novel witnesses that narratives and stories exist on diverse levels, and have numerous, frequently non-apparent functions. Certain forms of communicative behavior might seem trivial and insignificant at first, but upon closer inspection, different, underlying functions of language can be observed. The characters of the novel are portrayed to unconsciously express their hidden desires, wishes and intentions through language, and use their speech, seemingly unintentionally, as a tool to reach a certain goal. The underlying objective of most utterances seems to be the formation or the stabilization of interpersonal relationships and bonds, and the creation of a community.

The author introduces another function of language; the reader learns about the close connection between communication structures and the distribution of power in the context of family. Hierarchies on this level can be established and modified through a specific use of language. On the one hand, Morrison describes in what ways a “healthy” communication pattern, a stable family structure, and balanced power-relations contribute to the mental well-being of the involved characters. On the other hand, Morrison portrays deficient communication habits and unstable family-relations, and exemplifies the effects these circumstances tend to have on actively and passively involved individuals.
Another exceedingly relevant issue portrayed in *The Bluest Eye* is the importance numerous individuals attach to their reputations. To belong to “high society” and to be regarded as a member of “superior” social classes seems to be the aspiration of numerous individuals. This seemingly materialistic desire can be ascribed to the characters’ constant quest for happiness. Morrison reveals that in this context, the physical appearance, as well as the possession of luxurious material goods and property in general play a crucial role. The author implies that behavior that is driven by apparently materialistic values can potentially have beneficial effects on a community, as bonds and connections can be created by conversing about beauty, lifestyles, and images.

Moreover, the author informs the reader about the constant presence of gossip; numerous (mostly unnamed and minor) characters portrayed in the novel are eager to participate in seemingly harassing conversations. Gossip at first might seem to serve as a compensation for their own rather troubled personal situations. However, upon closer inspection it can be observed that it is used as a medium to create connections. Even though certain types of conversation seem to have negative impacts on an alleged victim, it needs to be stated that the communicating party shows interest in the targeted person, and by showing interest, they include him or her, in a certain way, in their community.

The topics Morrison addresses are dealt with in a subliminal way in numerous cases; a superficial reading of the story might not reveal certain profound issues which are indirectly discussed in the novel. In the analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, a variety of straightforward references, but also a high number of their corresponding implications are going to be explained. However, it is important to mention that the content of the novel will not be examined in isolation, but in relation to the form of the narration. In short, the apparent and superficial form (lexicon, punctuation etc.) is connected to the content and the rather profound levels of the narration. A close examination of the connection between form and content helps the reader of this thesis to understand in what ways Toni Morrison produces a certain image in the minds of her audience, and how she influences the readers’ perceptions of the different topics.
3.1. Structures, Literary Techniques, and Postmodern Features in *The Bluest Eye*

In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison makes use of outstanding literary techniques which open up interesting ways of interpreting the novel; the author experiments with multiple perspectives, with fragmentation, and with an exceptional arrangement of chapters. Additionally, Morrison’s (partly) ironical and paradoxical way of representing different concepts and ideas stimulates critical thought on certain topics. These features and techniques can be considered typical for postmodern writing. (Hutcheon 16) Her approach of depicting and representing the main topics and themes of the story is unique and intriguing, and the reading experience of *The Bluest Eye* is most certainly not a trivial one. The narrative techniques and the language Morrison makes use of are special, as numerous parts of the story are directly told from the perspectives of certain characters, who let the reader see the world through their eyes. The effortless mode of the expression of the narrators grant the novel great authenticity and credibility; the language the characters mostly use can be denominated *African American Vernacular English* (“Folks can’t like folks just ‘cause they has the same mama.” (117)), which tends to be used by members of the African American community (especially by the working-class) in the USA. (Edwards 181)

Most parts of the novel are narrated by Claudia MacTeer, a significant character of young age. Interestingly, she tells various parts of the narrative in the present tense, and the reader follows the events of the story directly through the eyes of the nine-year old girl. Other parts are narrated in the past tense, which gives the reader the impression that Claudia’s age at the time of narration is probably more advanced and that she, from the perspective of an adult, looks back on certain occurrences during her childhood and early youth. It needs to be noted that not only the tense changes, but also her diction, which sounds more mature. Matus argues that in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison attaches great importance to the value of memory; the past, to a certain degree, still is present. (17-18) History is not a terminated entity, it is always, somehow, connected to the current moment. Claudia’s thorough recollection of the past might symbolize its high relevance in the present. Her mode of narration hence invites the reader to contemplate the repercussions past events might have. Harris explains that Claudia can also be considered a storyteller: she is in charge of shaping and retelling events and occurrences which are linked to the history of her community. By transmitting her community’s stories, Claudia also conveys
her perception of cultural values. Harris argues that she interacts with the reader of the novel; the informality and directness of her language, as well as the fact that she narrates in the first person, allow her to establish a direct connection with the audience. (15-17) In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison explains:

The language has to be quiet; it has to engage your participation. I never describe characters very much. My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It’s not just about telling the story; it’s about involving the reader. [...] My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. (125)

The reader is invited to actively experience the story; he or she is supposed to take part in the narrative by filling certain “gaps” in the story. Claudia provides the framework, and the audience interactively contributes to the narrative by providing emotions and sensuous experiences. Other parts of the novel are presented in a rather neutral way: an omniscient narrator, who is situated outside the story, shares the feelings, thoughts and opinions of the characters, as well as information which is usually not accessible from an outside perspective, with the reader. The last chapter of the novel features a striking device of narration, namely, a stream of consciousness. Pecola, in a condition of madness, has a (maybe imaginary) discussion with an (obviously imaginary) friend; the reader gets direct insight into Pecola’s thought processes, which reflects her conviction of having received blue eyes. The different modes of narration Morrison makes use of in *The Bluest Eye* allow the reader to observe certain underlying concepts and ideals, which are portrayed in the novel, from different perspectives.

Moreover, it should be noted that the story is told in a non-chronological way. Already at the beginning of the novel, the reader is informed of the outcome of the narrative, as the pregnancy of Pecola Breedlove is announced during the introduction of the story. Furthermore, the storyline is interrupted by various retrospections. Morrison dedicates an entire chapter to each parent of Pecola, one to Pauline and one to Cholly Breedlove; in both sections the reader is informed about the parents’ personal histories. Their traumata, certain significant incidents of their adolescent years, and the development of their mindsets are portrayed in the respective chapters. The reader hence learns in what ways and in which directions Pecola’s parents develop. Pauline and Cholly are portrayed to neglect their roles as considerate and caring parents throughout the entire novel; however, in the two chapters dedicated to the parents, both are portrayed to have human traits. This, somehow, gives the reader the possibility to empathize with them, and, somehow, to understand the motives of their (mostly despicable) actions.
However, it can be argued that this empathy is ethically challenging; especially Cholly is presented as an abusive character who mistreats his family verbally and physically. Nevertheless, Morrison manages to humanize the man’s character, as she gives deep insight into the reasons behind his troubled psyche. The same scheme is implemented in the case of Pauline’s character; generally, she is depicted as a loveless wife and a careless mother. However, as the reader learns more about her personal history and about the struggles and hardships she had to face in the past, he or she regards Pauline as a pitiable human being who only acts in an unethical way because of her highly troubled mind. Morrison hereby puts the reader in a difficult situation, as she challenges him or her to empathize with people committing crimes and living their lives in unscrupulous ways.

Mueller claims that “Morrison situates her characters in social worlds in which the lines between victims and aggressors are not clearly drawn, and she thereby poses a challenge to our understanding of power and resistance.” (11) This statement implies that the characters tend to show different, and in certain cases even highly contradicting forms of behavior. Morrison indicates that each individual, as despicable he or she might seem, is not inherently and entirely “evil”. The author is said to “[show] what extraordinary and unspeakable acts ordinary people are capable of committing”, as she gives criminals and wrongdoers human traits and feelings. (Furman 5) The novel suggests that the power of society’s influence must not be underestimated; both, Cholly and Pauline suffer from certain forms of pressure triggered by seemingly accepted concepts and opinions. The reader can observe that in Cholly’s and in Pauline’s cases, certain “general” views and attitudes, which could be regarded as “standards” accepted by society, play a role in the characters’ slow descent into madness. Different concepts which seem to be commonly accepted by a community are on the one hand portrayed to be potentially harmful, as especially vulnerable individuals with a rather modifiable character are depicted to be prone to suffer under the pressure of conforming to certain ideals and standards. However, on the other hand, certain notions and ideas are portrayed to have different underlying, profound functions, which serve the purpose of creating connections and of establishing community.

Returning to the structure of the novel, it needs to be added that Morrison basically subdivides the story into four parts and assigns each part to one of the four seasons. I argue that the seasons of the year are suitable for representing the natural course of life, or different stages of life
which are marked by certain characteristics. Spring can be regarded to be a phase of development (and might therefore potentially refer to the earliest phase of life, or the childhood of a person). An individual grows and develops, and can somehow be compared to the image of a blossoming flower in spring. Summer can be seen to represent a stage of life which is usually filled with joie de vivre, energy, and effortlessness (it could, for example, refer to adolescence and the young adulthood of a person), as it is usually the season characterized by warmth, sun and comfort. Autumn also has certain characteristics which are suitable to portray a certain phase of human life. As it is usually the period of harvest, it can be seen as a suitable representation for the period of time in an individual’s life, in which he or she reaps the rewards of lifelong, hard work. The season of autumn hence could maybe be compared to later adulthood, or simply to a phase of achievement and success. Winter, which is usually associated with decay, coldness, and calm, can be seen as a representation for a phase of life in which vitality and high spirits slowly fade away and leave an individual with the wish to abandon the earthly world in order to rise to other spheres. A person who is of old age might be considered to be in the winter of his or her life. To sum up, the four seasons of the year are highly suited to represent different stages in the life of a human being.

As previously mentioned, *The Bluest Eye* consists of four major parts which are named after the four seasons of the year. Ledbetter however explains that the characters’ situations and life circumstances do not reflect the moods and atmospheres the seasons usually imply. (27) I agree with his perception, as Morrison obviously plays with a certain form of irony. The novel starts with autumn, the season of harvest; however, in this section the reader is informed about one of the main characters, Claudia, suffering from sickness; sickness, undoubtedly, does not conform to the usual image of autumn on the level of imagery. A state of physical ill-being might rather be associated with the season of winter. Moreover, Morrison decides to incorporate a significant incident in this section of the novel; the narrator informs the reader of the novel of Pecola’s first menstruation. The very first start of a girl’s menstrual cycle can be considered to be of a rather high symbolic value. It implies that the girl or the young woman from this incident onwards is physically able to conceive a child—this could generally be regarded as a positive and progressive event, as new life can be brought to the world.

However, Pecola’s menstruation and the birth of her child do not evoke feelings of bliss and of gratitude in the other characters or the reader of the story. The justification of this statement is
of simple nature: Pecola’s father impregnates his daughter by raping her. This act of violence impedes a positive outlook on the pregnancy. Additionally, the baby the young woman is supposed to deliver does not survive its birth. Hence, it can be argued that the season of harvest, which is autumn, on the level of imagery does not correspond with Pecola’s life situation as described in the first part of the novel. Including this strong form of contradiction might be one of Morrison’s methods to challenge the reader’s way of thinking. This technique is highly used by postmodern writers. (Hutcheon 4-5) I argue that the author consciously tries to restrain the readers of her novel from thinking in stereotypical ways and from having banal and cliché outlooks on life. The fact that autumn is stereotypically associated with harvest and with the positive consequences of the previous seasons does not imply that this annual period proceeds in the same exact way every year and in every place of the earth. Albeit the image of autumn might be a fixed one in an individual’s mind, awareness of the fact that this “typical” image might not be veritable in every imaginable situation, nor for every individual on planet earth, needs to be raised.

This idea might be considered a relevant and important one with respect to the main themes and topics of the novel The Bluest Eye. Morrison obviously attaches high importance to the “exposure” of stereotypes (in a rather ironic and implicit way); somehow it seems that she tries to ridicule the blind reliance on certain patterns suggested by the majority, or on certain conventions which are regarded to be universally valid. Morrison implies that nothing is ultimate, and that certain notions and ideas have different functions when being regarded from different perspectives. The novel suggests that forming an own opinion is highly beneficial for the mental health of an individual. Organizing one’s life and adjusting one’s goals according to stereotypes and ideas suggested by media and other entities can have traumatizing effects. Humann agrees that society and its racist views and concepts can be held responsible for the girl’s psychological hardships. (41) I argue that the use of the four seasons of the year in the novel of question might therefore have the power to stimulate profound thought on the validity of seemingly universally accepted concepts and ideals. Morrison deconstructs the “typical” imagery of autumn (which can generally be associated with a successful and a fertile phase of life), in order to raise awareness for the importance of forming an own opinion and of avoiding blind belief in stereotypes.
Before the very first chapter starts, the reader of the novel is confronted with a brief introductory section. At first sight, these lines do not correspond with the story Morrison continues to tell. However, upon closer inspection, the preamble does play a significant role in the narrative on a thematic level. Although the characters of the introductory part might not be directly linked to the ones on the main story-level, the images which are conveyed in this section of the novel in some way recur in the story that follows. The connection between the two parts of the novel is not an obvious one, but it definitely seems to be existent. Morrison extracts a section from a Dick and Jane story (a didactic book series in the twentieth century) in which an everyday life situation of a family consisting of mother, father, daughter, son, cat, and dog is depicted. (Conn 514) The text extract does not inform the reader explicitly about the financial means, the ethnic roots, the reputation and the image of the family. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the readers perhaps tend to picture a white, middle class US-American family, as they might think of US-American history, a history marked by different forms of “racial” hierarchies during a long period of time. It is widely known that the first half of the twentieth century, an era in which the novel is set, was characterized by a white superiority on numerous levels. Ethnic minorities used to be oppressed to a certain degree and different regulations, such as the Jim Crow Laws, kept people of color from having the same rights as Caucasians. (Encyclopedia Britannica online) As the oppression of numerous African Americans and other members of ethnic minorities still is present in the minds of most people when thinking about the USA in the first half of the twentieth century, it could be argued that the reader of The Bluest Eye might picture the family depicted in the opening section of the novel as white members of the middle-class. Moreover, it should be mentioned that this mental image might also derive from certain concepts media and different other entities and platforms promote (frequently even to this day). The white, middle-class family in the 1940s, owning a neat, spacious house, a dog and a cat might be considered a “typical” constellation. However, as previously mentioned, Morrison’s novel is a work of fiction and therefore does not necessarily have a link to reality. Hence, the reader should not start from the premise that his or her assumptions based on historical facts are true.

By including the extract from the Dick and Jane stories in her novel, Morrison seems to deliberately draw attention to the stereotype of the “perfect” family living a harmonious life. Smith justifies this assumption: the Dick and Jane stories “established as normative an idealized vision of a suburban, nuclear, middle-class white family.” (19)
The harmony and the perfection portrayed in the anecdote, however, do not last; Morrison decides to derange this “ideal” concept by slightly modifying the representation of the story, as she decides to leave out the punctuation marks (“Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty [...]”). (2) This method undoubtedly gives the reader the impression of confusion and disorientation, as punctuation marks are devices of organization; they are applied to connect and to separate elements which do (or do not) belong together. They serve to put a text in order with the intention to avoid misunderstandings and confusion. This organizational system and other universally accepted rules are neglected by Morrison; she boycotts the system and leaves out the conventional signs of regulation and organization.

After this slightly deformed version of the Dick and Jane anecdote, she goes even further and adds the same piece of text, but leaves out punctuation marks and the spaces between the words (“Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisverypretty [...]”). (2) She challenges the reader of the novel to read a story which obviously shifted from perfect order to total chaos. Spaces between different words usually have an important function—they serve to separate what needs to be separated, in order to avoid confusion. Again, it is conventional to use spaces between the different words of a sentence; it is a commonly accepted method used to create order. Somehow, these conventions and regulations could be seen as representors of society’s norms and standards. Certain norms are introduced to create “order”; however, this form of order might only be valid and profitable for certain members of a community.

Morrison, by leaving out the universally accepted “regulators” of a text, conveys the importance of rethinking universally accepted conventions. She demonstrates that the text is still readable, even though the universally accepted organizational devices are not applied. The author does not follow the conventionalized rules; this might be considered controversial, as these conventions tend to be blindly accepted by the majority of people. Nevertheless, Morrison dares to operate according to her own rules and convictions. It could be argued that the introductory part of the novel serves to raise awareness for the importance of ignoring the norm in favor of the ability to act according to one’s own persuasion. The author seems to deliberately destroy the harmonious, universally accepted image of the “perfect” family. By leaving out regulators such as punctuation marks and spaces between the words, she alienates the obvious content of the story and creates a bizarre version of the original text piece. Morrison applies this strategy to confuse the reader and to encourage him or her to reconsider the blind following of social
norms and conventions. Morrison apparently intends to take away the harmony of the stereotypical image of the allegedly “perfect” family; the passages in the book suggest that she criticizes and wants to destroy the conventional and universally accepted image of the “ideal” family and the “ideal” type of people. She indicates that appearances are deceiving and that even though a certain concept or situation might seem to be harmonious and ideal at first glance, this image can be turned around instantly by looking at it from another perspective.

The way Morrison modifies the fragment of the Dick and Jane story implies that universally accepted concepts, concepts created by society, could easily be boycotted. According to my interpretation, Morrison suggests that organizing life according to one’s own opinions and persuasions instead of blindly following assumed norms would be personally beneficial for each individual, and consequently, for the whole community. At this point, it is important to mention that Morrison seems to defend this opinion throughout the whole novel. One of the main themes of The Bluest Eye is the obvious impact certain conventions and universally accepted views can potentially have on an individual. The different characters are portrayed to deal with this situation in distinct ways. Some are prone to be affected negatively; rather vulnerable and manipulable individuals tend to suffer from a feeling of unworthiness, while others manage to stand up for their own opinions and fight certain universally accepted ideas and concepts in order to protect their own selves and to prevent a loss of pride and of dignity. Upon closer inspection, the reader can observe that these assumed notions and ideals have underlying functions which, in an implicit way and on a different level, serve most individuals. Different ideas encourage communication, and communication facilitates the establishment of community.

Morrison’s paradoxical approach to writing also manifests itself in the headings of the chapters of The Bluest Eye. The title of each section is a fragment, extracted from the modified version of the Dick and Jane story, and is even further altered by the capitalization of the letters. Fragmentation is a technique which can be regarded as typical for postmodern writing. (Hutcheon 51) The chapter dedicated to Pauline Breedlove, for example, is denominated “SEEMOTHERISVERYNICEMOTHERWILLYOPLAYWITHJANEMOTHER LAUGHSLAUGHMOTHERLAUGHLA”. The capital letters immediately attract the attention of the reader and grant the title a high degree of peculiarity. The reader might think of the preamble and of the content it is most likely supposed to transmit: a situation in which all
individuals involved live harmonious and happy lives. However, the main characters (including Pauline Breedlove) in *The Bluest Eye* are portrayed to endure the opposite situation: their lives are filled with various kinds of struggles, such as financial hardships, and personal issues. At no point their lives seem to be as effortless as the ones portrayed in the Dick and Jane anecdote. I argue that Morrison uses the paradox headlines in order to create a bizarre and grotesque effect; this method leads the reader to reflect on the possibly discriminating situations the main characters of the novel seemingly have to face. The narrators clarify that members of the African American community hardly get the chance to approximate the apparently pleasant lifestyle of Dick, Jane and the other characters of the preamble.

This observation leads to the conclusion that the novel *The Bluest Eye* raises awareness for numerous societal issues. Morrison presents the different effects certain (seemingly) widely accepted opinions, concepts and convictions can have on individuals; in the analysis of the novel, an exemplification of the distinct forms of the characters’ self-perceptions is going to be provided. A critical and thorough investigation of the novel is going to deliver insight into different ideas of what is considered to be right and wrong by society, according to Morrison’s portrayal of the situation. In order to clearly understand the author’s ideas and perceptions, it might be beneficial to inform oneself about different definitions of the concept of society. According to the Monolingual Oxford Dictionary, *society* is “The aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community”. (online) The Merriam Webster Thesaurus provides two suitable definitions: “a group of persons formally joined together for some common interest” and “the way people live at a particular time and place”. (online) The different approaches suggest that the term *society* describes a concept directly linked to *community*. Factors such as the “common interest” of a community and a certain “way of living” seem to constitute the essence of the term.

However, it must be noted that different ideals and concepts which are considered to be defended by society are difficult to interpret on an entirely objective level. Obviously, the possibility of analyzing different personal views and perceptions of different societal norms exists, but the outcome would presumably not be fully verifiable due to its subjectivity. However, for the purpose of this thesis it is highly relevant to discuss and analyze the different perceptions of society Toni Morrison portrays in her novel. In order to verify the arguments which are going to constitute this analysis, direct references to the literary work will be
provided; assumptions will be justified and every step which is taken to lead to the conclusion will be explained. As previously mentioned, a discussion of numerous themes and topics of relevance based on facts and figures is rather impossible. As this analysis is based on the novel *The Bluest Eye* itself, however, it is adequate to analyze Morrison’s portrayal of the world. Although the perspective she portrays can be considered subjective, the readers might regard it to be representative of African American women’s viewpoints during the 1930s, 1940s and onwards. The following statement supports this claim: “Indeed, Morrison’s work is ‘genuinely’ representative of the folk.” (Furman 4) The author herself claims: “When I view the world, perceive it and write about it, it’s the world of black people.” (Tate 118) Through her literary works she manages to transmit “cultural knowledge” and enables the readers of her works to reflect on African Americans’ modes of life. (Furman 4) However, the readers should not start from the premise that a relation between Morrison’s portrayal of the world and reality exists. Even though it might be assumed that Morrison was inspired by reality when writing the novel, *The Bluest Eye* is a work of fiction and thus does not have to be based on real life.

3.2. The Creation of Society, or the Perpetual Quest for Connections

In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison conveys that humans in general are social beings who feel the urge to be part of a community. Connecting with fellow human beings on numerous levels and strengthening interpersonal relationships seems to be highly important to the main characters of the novel. The quest for connections is apparently a driving force on the story level of *The Bluest Eye*; most actions and behavioral patterns seem to be influenced by the characters’ subconscious desires to be an accepted member of a community. The following paragraphs are dedicated to the description and the analysis of social structures, as depicted in *The Bluest Eye*. The inquiry is mainly based on the main characters’ utterances and thoughts, and on the omniscient narrator’s depictions of the characters’ life-situations. Not only the content level is going to be a matter of interest, but also the language of the narrative itself is going to constitute an issue of investigation. Language in various ways (including communication and narration) serves as a medium of communication and can be considered a powerful tool, as it gives members of a community the possibility to connect and to demonstrate mutual interest. It allows individuals to participate in a narrative and to create certain concepts and notions of the world. Language can be seen as a utensil individuals use to share evaluations and worldviews, and to create certain models of organization (with reference to social arrangements). Hence, it could
be concluded that language is a medium of power. Hierarchies and relations on the level of society are partly established through acts of conversation. In order to obtain an overview of the social structures of the fictional world represented in *The Bluest Eye*, it is essential to analyze various text extracts with regard to the relation between form and content. The language transmits the essence of the quotes and excerpts, and hence helps the reader to understand the structural patterns the characters of the novel are confronted with, as well as the ones they themselves create.

The circles of influence in which the characters move is portrayed to be characterized by hierarchies on different levels. A variety of text extracts are going to demonstrate that the social structures in Morrison’s novel are portrayed to be closely linked to ethnic background of an individual and to the artificial concept of race. The characters’ (self-) perceptions, their behavior, their thoughts, as well as their utterances are portrayed to help shape social structures and norms. The reader could assume that Toni Morrison was influenced by reality when writing the novel, as the social structures she portrays in the novel seem to reflect the structures during and after the Great Depression. However, it is essential to mention that *The Bluest Eye* is a work of fiction, which implies that the novel is a product of Morrison’s mind. Although the reader might assume that Morrison was influenced by historical facts when writing the book, it should not be taken for granted.

Nonetheless, the reader can observe that the characters’ utterances and thoughts, as well as the omniscient narrator’s descriptions of the social circumstances imply a hierarchy of race. Morrison gives numerous examples which verify the assumption that the society portrayed in the novel generally degrades and disesteems people of color. Quotes such as “Black people were not allowed in the park [...]” (103) or “except for an occasional and unaccountable insurgent who chose a restive black, they married “up”, lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features.” (166) imply that the general attitude towards the physical appearance of people with a dark complexion is a negative one throughout the whole story.

The text suggests that society’s rules and concepts are adapted to white people’s ideals and desires, which are apparently driven by a feeling of superiority over dark-skinned members of a community. The values and standards that are suggested by members of a specific social stratum can be observed to have undeniable effects on individuals who do not conform to society’s ideas of what is right and what is wrong. The internalization of constructed ideals and
concepts is portrayed to frequently take away the appreciation and the acknowledgement of a person’s own identity and cultural background:

The text reenacts the white constructions of beauty, order, and family to illustrate how the imposition of these standards on blacks prevents the development of a black identity based on African American cultural ritual. As a result, white constructions confine black consciousness. (Schreiber 83)

The quote refers to the characters’ intents to assimilate to the culture of the white majority; in this process, they can lose the values of the culture they inherited. Several characters are portrayed to try to (re)define their identities according to white ideals and standards, because they want to avoid being considered “the other”. Otherness is portrayed to bring along social marginalization, which, as depicted in the novel, can lead to severe identity crises. However, at this point it is important to clarify that not all characters react in the same way to discrimination based on society’s norms and standards. Another factor worth mentioning is that Morrison through language might, to a certain degree, have the power to influence the readers’ perceptions of certain situations and concepts during the reading process, and she can trigger or suggest certain feelings and emotions. However, the reader has to decide for him- or herself whether Morrison’s suggestions are valid for him or her, or not.

The following paragraphs are dedicated to the self-perceptions of the main characters of the novel, who are of African American descent. Through language, Morrison manages to give the reader a clear picture of how and on what levels certain concepts and ideals, which might be considered to be approved by society, influence different individuals. Each character deals with societal pressure (pressure, which derives from artificial notions, such as “beauty”) in a different way – some seem to have the strength to keep their pride and self-worth, whereas others seemingly surrender and end up losing every form of self-respect and dignity. The narrators of the novel convey the different attitudes of the characters towards their own persona, and towards the people they are surrounded by. The following paragraphs are going to display quotes extracted from the novel, which serve to interpret the main characters’ positions and opinions.

The major part of the story, as previously mentioned, is told from the perspective of Claudia MacTeer, a nine-year-old African American girl, whose mode of expression is rather particular. Her language (in most parts of the novel) is relatively simple due to the fact that she is still a
child. However, it is noticeable that the girl makes frequent use of strong terms, which have violent meanings and connotations: “We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth.” (6) This quote demonstrates Claudia’s harsh and rather aggressive way of speaking. She is portrayed to dauntlessly verbalize her deepest desires; harsh terms and swearwords form part of her active vocabulary.

Claudia’s way of narrating suggests that she is tough and strong-minded, and her language and utterances show that she has straightforward opinions on numerous relevant matters. However, the reader should avoid jumping to conclusions; he or she should not start from the premise that Claudia, because of her harsh way of speaking, automatically has a strong character. The reader soon learns that Claudia is offended by the way people treat white girls, as she seemingly considers herself to be disadvantaged due to society’s assumed negative opinion on her dark complexion. It is important to mention that she is not only portrayed to feel negatively towards people who seemingly embody the “prototype” of beauty, such as blonde, fair-skinned girls, but also towards items and depictions she associates with them, for instance white baby-dolls. Claudia expresses her apparent anger through language: “If I pinched them, their eyes—unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll’s eyes—would fold in pain, and their cry would not be the sound of an icebox door, but a fascinating cry of pain.” (21) However, the girl also feels a strong curiosity about the source of the popularity of white dolls, and, consequently, white girls. She explains:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. 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 girl treasured. (18)

Claudia’s incomprehensibility towards people’s apparent affection and love for white dolls and girls influences her behavior considerably. Heinze’s statement supports this claim: “Claudia’s desire to dismember the doll is a deconstructive attempt to make sense of an incomprehensible aesthetic.” (17) She explains that the girl does not accept society’s views until she is given a proper explanation for the reasons behind the so-called “beauty standards”. However, nobody seems to be capable of clarifying the sources of society’s alleged perceptions; virtually everybody (with a few exceptions) seems to blindly accept the supposed truth about the link between whiteness and the embodiment of the concept of beauty. (Heinze 17)
Claudia hence can be seen as an individual who is in search of her place in society, but is refused to obtain the position she desires. She considers the system to be unjust and has a strong desire to combat it. Her aggressive language should serve as a medium to be noticed, and to attract attention to the issue of social injustice. Claudia’s commitment arises from her wish to reevaluate African American culture among (black and white) members of the society she grows up in. Pecola, for her part, shows an entirely different reaction to society’s outlook on African American culture. She is portrayed to be convinced of the standards and ideals that are imposed on her; she apparently accepts these notions without really questioning them. To a very slight extent, however, she seems to lament the fact that her ethnicity and everything it brings along (such as cultural patterns and physical features), do not conform to society’s assumed standards.

A striking excerpt taken from the novel supports this idea: “The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty. [...] Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong, and soon.” (45) This extract contains interesting imagery; the dandelions, which by a high number of people would be considered weed, are, as regarded from another perspective, flowers of appealing exterior. Pecola undoubtedly likes the flower, and laments the fact that it is considered unworthy by others. She does not understand why numerous people ignore its beauty and want to get rid of it in their gardens. The reader of The Bluest Eye might consider the dandelions (as depicted in the excerpt above) to be a metaphor for members of the black community. Not only the flowers are depicted to be misinterpreted by society, but also the African American community. Pecola’s thoughts reveal that no notion or concept is fully valid and ultimate; depending on the perspective, these ideas can be observed to have different functions and characteristics.

Pecola’s perspective, however, is portrayed to be strongly influenced by other people’s opinions, so she rather surrenders and accepts being considered ugly and worthless. Middleton explains that her acceptance of white values lead to her low self-esteem, and result in the destruction of her mental well-being. (13) I argue that the girl considers the alleged inferiority of the African American community as logical and unquestionable; she has obviously internalized the concepts and ideas society constantly tries to promote. The following thought process of Pecola (with respect to the dandelions) supports this assumption: “They are ugly.
They are weeds.” (48) The girl seems to believe in what the people she is surrounded by believe in and are convinced of.

Considering the characters’ descriptions and perceptions of the social structures they are told to accept, it could be argued that a general hierarchy built on the concept of race exists in the community portrayed in *The Bluest Eye*. White members of society are portrayed to fulfill assumed social “requirements”, such as a certain standard of beauty and a certain degree of wealth. African Americans are generally portrayed to be perceived as inferior human beings due to certain features which are typical for their ethnic heritage, which do not correspond to certain, artificial patterns and standards. Most African American characters seemingly do not intend to fight this image, as they themselves accept it in certain respects. However, as everyone seems to be in search of connections and apparently pursues relatively high social positions, members of the African American community tend to look for ways to approximate the lifestyle of the white population; in order to do so, they are portrayed to be willing to undergo personal changes.

The author also introduces characters of African American or Native American origin, whose skin color is lighter than the ones of other members of their communities. Those characters are portrayed to feel superior due to their comparatively light complexion, and seemingly try to distance themselves from their African American or Native American roots. It can be argued that “light-skinned blacks absorb white values and translate them into hatred of dark-skinned blacks.” (Heinze 21-22) Geraldine, one of the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, seemingly embodies this idea; she is portrayed to be of African American descent, but has a lighter complexion. She is a member of the middle-class who apparently attaches great importance to her image and her reputation. The woman seems to adapt her values to the ones society assumingly defends, and also has the intentions to pass on her apparent convictions to her son:

White kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. (85)

Geraldine makes a clear distinction between “colored people” (a group she considers herself part of), and “niggers”, who are described to have uncivilized features and live barbarous lives. This assumption is supported by the fact that the adjectives the narrator uses in order to describe “niggers” tend to have negative connotations; “dirty” can be defined as “morally unclean or
corrupt” or as “likely to cause disgrace or scandal”. (Merriam Webster online) The term “nigger” itself can, among others, be defined as “a member of a class or group of people who are systematically subjected to discrimination and unfair treatment”. (Merriam Webster online) The language the narrator makes use of in order to describe Geraldine’s thought processes with reference to racial differences can have a strong effect on the reader of the novel. It can be argued that the use of pejorative lexemes is responsible for the creation of a low social position of darker-skinned African Americans in the novel. The rather positive connotations of the adjectives the narrator voices to describe “colored people” hints at a higher social position. The text extract hence indicates that the social structures, in the fictional world of the novel, are closely linked to skin-tone and complexion.

Another relevant character with reference to the topic of social structures and hierarchies is a man who is mostly referred to as Soaphead Church. He is described to be “a cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browed skin.” (165) The narrator depicts the importance most generations of his family have attached to the lightness of their complexion:

He had been reared in a family proud of its academic accomplishments and its mixed blood—in fact, they believed the former was based on the latter. A sir Whitcomb, some decaying British nobleman, who chose to disintegrate under a sun more easeful than England’s, had introduced the white strain into the family in the early 1800’s. Being a gentleman by order of the King, he had done the civilized thing for his mulatto bastard—provided with three hundred pounds sterling, to the great satisfaction of the bastard’s mother, who felt that fortune had smiled on her. The bastard too was grateful, and regarded as his life’s goal the hoarding of this white strain. (156)

Soaphead Church’s family members apparently have, for a rather long period of time, tried to distance themselves from their Native American heritage. Their culture of origin has been considered as inferior by the family, therefore “lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features” has counted to their most significant intentions. (166) Soaphead Church’s family and Geraldine are portrayed to be convinced of the concept of the superiority of “lightness”. At this point it is essential to mention that Morrison, by portraying the characters’ opinions in a radical and extreme way, might intend to trigger a will of reflection in the reader of the novel. The audience is encouraged to critically reflect on certain portrayed concepts and ideas, in order to form an own, independent opinion.

Apart from the racial hierarchies the fictional structures of society are portrayed to be based on, also a ranking of gender can be observed. As portrayed in the novel, female characters are
generally in a lower social position than their male counterparts. Schreiber states that African American women in *The Bluest Eye* are generally portrayed to be submissive, and have to take orders from Caucasian women, children and men, as well as from African American men. (88-90) The text offers various passages which support Schreiber’s assumption. However, I argue that certain female characters in *The Bluest Eye* refuse to surrender to men and try to combat the classical, patriarchal system. Pauline Breedlove can be taken as an example for a defender of an anti-patriarchal system, as she is portrayed to strike back at her husband when being attacked, physically or verbally.

To sum up, the text clearly suggests that society is a construct fundamentally based on the human need for community. However, the social structures the characters move in are generally created after and shaped by ideas of a racial hierarchy and a hierarchy of gender, on one side with Caucasians at the top, and dark-skinned African Americans at the bottom, and on the other side, with men at the top and women at the bottom. The reader can observe that most individuals who make an appearance in the novel in one way or another try to fit in in this social system; the characters are portrayed to seek connections with other human beings, and language plays a significant role in this process. However, it has to be noted that certain characters intend to combat this rather rigid system, and try to break the rules suggested by society in order to establish and defend their own system of rules and values. Nevertheless, it can be observed that numerous characters seemingly intend to approximate certain man-made ideals without questioning them, in order to gain popularity among other members of the community. This seemingly has to do with the fact that the creation and strengthening of human connections and relationships is portrayed to be the underlying goal of each action and behavioral pattern of the characters in *The Bluest Eye*.

### 3.3. Hierarchies on the Level of Family

Hierarchies and social structures do not only exist on the level of society, but also in the context of family; in *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison depicts different types of communities and interpersonal relationships on different levels. Within the diverse constellations, power is distributed in variable ways. In the following paragraphs, the focus will lie on the analysis of relationships on the family level, and the distribution of power among the members of interpersonal unions will be investigated. At this point it should be noted that language plays a
crucial role in the manifestation of might and power; it can be observed that the participation in a narrative does not only serve to create connections in a positive atmosphere, but also to establish certain forms of hierarchies in which oppression and mental, as well as physical abuse are prone to be present.

The fact that the concept of family constitutes the center of the present investigation can be justified as follows: both the MacTeer and the Breedlove family show unique and particular power structures, which are crucial factors with respect to the personal development of the involved characters. Furthermore, the family background of an individual can be considered to contribute significantly to the involved characters’ attitude towards community and society. The text suggests that family shapes the members’ internal worlds with reference to their own selves and to the people they are surrounded by. Morrison opens up numerous ways of comparing the two families and of interpreting the inter-familiar hierarchies. One focus of this analysis is on the different forms of upbringing; the distribution of power between the elders and the children of the two main families is going to be discussed. Another focal point will be the power-relation between the parents, especially the one between Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, as their relationship is of high relevance in the story; the relationship of the MacTeer parents is hardly presented to the reader. On a general note, I argue that in both families, highly different forms of power distributions can be observed and need to be taken into consideration for a better understanding of the characters’ personal developments.

The reader gets the impression that within African American families who are situated in a rather low social class, the way of communicating is rather tough. Mothers, who are portrayed to be in charge of child-rearing, are depicted to be strict and authoritarian with their children; physical and verbal violence are daily occurrences in the portrayed families. Mrs. MacTeer is a prime example for this presumption: her tough nature leads her to raise her daughters in a rather dictatorial fashion. She frequently demonstrates physical and verbal power in order to encourage her daughters’ obedience, and to a certain degree her method works. The following dialogue between Mrs. MacTeer and her children supports this statement:

“What you all doing? Oh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Playing nasty, huh?” She reached into the bushes and pulled off a switch. “I’d rather raise pigs than some nasty girly. Least I can slaughter them!” We began to shriek. “No, Mama. No, ma’am. We wasn’t!” (28)
Through language the woman indicates that she has power over her daughters. Some of the lexemes she uses are, in the context of the enunciation, rather harsh and serve to intimidate the girls. The act of intimidation results in respectful behavior on the part of the children towards the mother. Apart from ensuring her daughters’ obedience, the Mrs. MacTeer seemingly wants the girls to develop a strong character; the reader gets the impression that she wants her children to grow up to be as tough as she is herself. This is clearly noticeable when Claudia sickens, as the treatment by her mother lacks gentleness and affection. Instead, the woman feels a certain level of anger towards the sickness of her daughter, and seems to project her negative feelings on the girl. Claudia describes the apparently loveless and rather harsh treatment she gets from her mother:

Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers’ full of it at a time, and massages my chest until I am faint. Just when I think I will tip over into a scream, she scoops out a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it in my mouth, telling me to swallow. (...) Later I throw up, and my mother says, “What did you puke on the bed clothes for? Don’t you have sense enough to hold your head out the bed? Now, look what you did. You think I got time for nothing but washing up your puke?”

The reader gets the impression that Mrs. MacTeer seems to despise the girl’s sickness, because it weakens the body, and weakness is a feared characteristic. The following text extract suggests the mother’s highly negative attitude towards her children’s sickness: “Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black Draught, and castor oil that blunts our minds.” (8) This statement also implies that illness is not only perceived to be a damaging force to the body, but also to the mind of a human being. Claudia compares the condition to foul Black Draught; possible definitions of the lexeme “foul” according to the Oxford Dictionary are the following: “offensive to the senses, especially through having a disgusting smell or taste or being dirty”, “very disagreeable or unpleasant”, and “wicked or immoral”. (online) These definitions undoubtedly imply that the lexeme “foul” has repugnant characteristics.

Interestingly, it is mentioned by Claudia in connection with Black Draught, which is a type of medicine. (Oxford Dictionary online) The idea to mention both terms in relation to each other seems paradox—medicine is usually a means to heal sicknesses; foulness, however, suggests a mental image of decay and illness. I argue that Morrison might have combined the two controversial ideas consciously, in order to create a certain atmosphere of confusion, and thereby establishing a disturbing image of Claudia’s sickness in the minds of the readers. Foul
medicine and castor oil, which is known to have an unpleasant taste, are hence considered to be the treatments of Claudia’s and her sister’s illnesses. As Claudia states, it “blunts our minds” (8), which apparently signifies that the treatment the girls receive by their mother (which is supposed to heal their physical handicaps) has an impact on their mental health. Claudia and her sister Frieda seem to suffer from the harsh treatment by Mrs. MacTeer, especially in the case of illness. They are portrayed to be avid for affection and care.

As mentioned above, however, Mrs. MacTeer seems to associate illness with weakness, and to her, weakness is an alarming and dangerous characteristic. Members of the lower social classes are portrayed to be obliged to work hard and to stay strong at all times, in order to avoid sinking further into poverty. This might result in physically and psychologically challenging situations: “Within the novel Morrison demonstrates that even with the best intentions, people hurt each other when they are chained to circumstances of poverty and low social status.” (McKay; Morrison 414) Mrs. MacTeer is portrayed to be a person of authority who raises her daughters in a rough way; however, she does not do so, because she wants to deliberately hurt them, but rather to show them that toughness is a life-saving characteristic. Weakness seems to be associated with poverty, and poverty might lead to unpleasant and difficult life circumstances; it can, potentially, prevent an individual from actively forming part in society, as society’s “laws” and assumed standards (which seem to be based on rather materialistic values) are portrayed to be unpardonable.

Mrs. MacTeer’s tough treatment of Claudia and her sister hence does not seem to be an act of hatred towards her children, but is rather supposed to help them grow up to be strong, in order to cope with the typical everyday-struggles of a member of a working-class ethnic minority and in order to enable the children to actively take part in society, without letting society influence them in a negative way. Taking this assumption into consideration, it could be concluded that Mrs. MacTeer raises her children in a dictatorial way out of love and hope. The reader is presented an interesting thought process of Claudia, which implies that the girl receives a rare form of motherly love:

And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested for a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die. (10)
This statement clearly suggests that a bond between mother and daughter exists. Furthermore, Mrs. MacTeer is portrayed to be highly protective of her children; one occasion reveals that her love for the girls is strong indeed. Frieda is sexually harassed by the roomer of the family, named Henry Washington. The girl manages to run away before being raped and tells her parents about the incident; both react in a shocked and enraged way. Frieda explains:

“I told Mama, and she told Daddy, and we all come home, and he was gone, so we waited for him, and when Daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch.”
“Did he die?”
“Naw. He got up and started singing ‘Nearer My God to Thee.’ Then Mama hit him with a broom and told him to keep the Lord’s name out of his mouth [...].”
[...]
“Miss Dunion came in after everybody was quiet, and Mama and Daddy was fussing about who let Mr. Henry in anyway, and she said that Mama should take me to the doctor, because I might be ruined, and Mama started screaming all over again.” (98-99)

The conversation between the sisters reveals that both parents show concern for their harassed daughter’s well-being and do everything in their power to defend her. Mrs. MacTeer not only intends to scare away the offender, but also raises objection to the assumption that her daughter “might be ruined”. (99) By actively defending the honor of Frieda, the woman shows how important her children are to her. Mrs. MacTeer uses language among others as a tool to demonstrate the connection between her and her daughter, and to establish a community on the level of family. Their bonding at times is not entirely visible; nevertheless, I argue that Mrs. MacTeer is a loving mother who protects her daughters in every possible way. Heinze supports the supposition; she explains why Mrs. MacTeer, as opposed to other characters in the novel, is able to build a rather sane relationship with her children. Her motherly love (although it might not be clearly visible at times) can be justified with the family’s rather rational approach to beauty and wealth. “Unlike Pauline and Geraldine, Mrs. MacTeer rises above the conditions of her life and the self-pity that could have consumed her, in order to fulfill her duty as a loving mother.” (75) Heinze’s explanation seems to be plausible: neither the mother, nor her daughters strictly follow their community’s perception of what is right and what is wrong. (75) This results in a rather functional relationship with their own selves, as compared to the Breedlove family; even though Claudia and Frieda tend to show rebellious behavior and are obviously discontent with society’s views, they seem to retain their sanity. Mrs. MacTeer’s apparent indifference towards societal issues, such as physical appearance and “beauty ideals”, gives her the power to concentrate on more important aspects of life, such as an effective upbringing of
her children. As mentioned in the paragraph above, Mrs. MacTeer does not indulge and spoil her daughters; her disciplinary measures might not be considered gentle, but are presumably chosen out of valid reasons.

Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s and Sammy’s mother, shares some similarities with Mrs. MacTeer, although there are notable differences concerning the upbringing of her children. A characteristic she has in common with Mrs. MacTeer is her toughness with regards to the treatment of her daughter and her son. The noticeable difference between the two women is that the mother of Claudia and Frieda has built a relationship with her daughters; Mrs. Breedlove, on the other hand, apparently has not. She is rather unapproachable and the reader senses that she barely bonds with her children. It can be observed that Mrs. Breedlove does not use language as a tool to establish community and connections, but to distance herself from her family. Wall explains that the lack of love towards Pecola and Sammy can be seen as a result of her self-hatred. The fact that she regards her white employers and their children as worthy and superior apparently leads the woman to disrespect herself and her ethnic heritage; connected to that, Pauline Breedlove is unable to show affection to her children. (797) The narrator of the novel explains that “Pecola, like Sammy and Cholly, always called her mother Mrs. Breedlove.” (41) It could be argued that by using a formal form of address, the children seem to distance themselves from their mother. Language hence does not only serve to create connections and bonds, but, in a way, also to dissociate oneself from another individual. The fact that the children use a formal address when speaking to their mother might indicate that the affection level on the part of Mrs. Breedlove towards her children, but maybe also the other way around, is rather low. The mother’s thoughts on Pecola briefly after delivery indicate a certain level of depreciation towards the daughter: “Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.” (124) At this point, the reader might ask him- or herself how it is possible that assumed ideals or standards can have the power to determine a mother’s degree of affection for her children; I argue that Morrison depicts the situation in a highly extreme way, in order to criticize the manipulability of numerous citizens, and in order to question the validity of society’s assumed standards.

Mrs. Breedlove’s apparent disapproval of her daughter might, among others, derive from her former passion and admiration for actors and actresses starring popular Hollywood movies;
going to the cinema and imitating her idols (such as Jean Harlow) used to be Pauline Breedlove’s favorite pastime during her youth and young adulthood. As Bjork explains, Pauline is intrigued by the seemingly perfect world which is portrayed in aforesaid movies, as she gets to observe situations and feelings she herself would never get to experience. “Pauline has begun the process of attempting to internalize images and their implied values.” (44) Her apparent fascination with the picture shows and her admiration for the dominantly fair-skinned actresses seemingly result in a depreciation for herself and her own cultural heritage.

Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard [...]. I don’t know. I remember one day I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well, almost just like.” (121)

As a consequence, neither her daughter nor her son, who both show common African American features, are considered physically appealing by Mrs. Breedlove. The reader of the novel gets the impression that the woman’s perception of herself and of other members of her community has been influenced drastically by the movies she watches on a regular basis. Problematically, her negative attitude towards her family’s physical appearance results in a depreciation of them as people; the mother’s affection for her husband and her children is perceived as low, or rather, as non-existent. This fact is what distinguishes her from Mrs. MacTeer, whose toughness can be considered to be linked to care and motherly love. Pauline Breedlove’s toughness, however, involves distance and, apparently, lovelessness. At no point in the text it is implied that Mrs. Breedlove has a healthy mother-child relationship; from the birth of Pecola onwards, she is portrayed to feel indifferent towards her daughter (and also towards her son, whose relationship with his mother is, as opposed to his sisters’, is not described in more detail). Harris clarifies that Mrs. Breedlove does not only refuse to bond with her daughter, but also feels the need to stress and to “[highlight] what Pecola lacks” with reference to the woman’s concept of beauty. (45)

Pecola and her brother hence are to cope with this presumably rather uncommon situation. At first glance, it seems that the girl does not have the power to withstand the lack of motherly love and suffers quietly; her passivity and her insecurities are apparently consequences of the non-existent relationship with her mother and the non-existent community on the level of family. Her brother Sammy seems to have different coping mechanisms: he is rebellious and runs away from home on a frequent basis. The reader of the novel might consider the children
to be victims of neglecting parents. A profound reading of the novel however suggests that Pecola’s apparent “victimhood” at the end of the novel leads to the salvation of her soul. Even though she could be considered to be a victim of society and of her family at first, the reader needs to keep in mind that her journey of life filled with hardships helps Pecola, in her own personal way, to find herself. The psychological state of madness she finds herself in after everything she experiences in the course of the novel, can be interpreted as her personal way of relief and emancipation. Although madness is usually considered to be a burden and a negative state of mind, it can be argued that in the case of Pecola, madness is a condition of comfort and relief. I argue that the girl’s insanity activates her agency and helps her to gain the confidence she has never had before. Additionally, Pecola’s madness allows her to have an imaginary friend who seemingly supports her unconditionally; the girl finally finds someone who she can connect with. The imaginary friend and the girl interact in the form of dialogue; the reader of the novel can once again observe that language serves as a means to connect and to take part in a community. Pecola’s friend seems to have a supportive and reassuring function. The dialogue below demonstrates the approval and the recognition the girl receives from her invented companion. The two converse about Pecola’s “blue” eyes:

Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about a lady I saw yesterday. Her eyes sure were blue. But no. Not bluer than yours.
Are you sure?
Yes. I remember them now. Yours are bluer.
I’m glad.
Me too. I’d hate to think there was anybody around with bluer eyes than yours. I’m sure there isn’t. Not around here, anyway. (200)

This section of the dialogue demonstrates that Pecola’s madness is closely linked to her personal growth. As previously mentioned, however, the girl endures times of hardship before her mental phase of transition. The authorial and affectionless upbringing can be considered one contributing factor to the insanity the girl ends up with. Bouson claims that the lack of parental protection and affection causes severe trauma in the victims; different measures of child-raising, such as different forms of punishment, are prone to have negative repercussions on involved children. Bouson further explains that the traumata victims of parental abuse are burdened with frequently impede the sane development of the character of the affected individual; this results in the fact that the victim’s personality is clearly marked by trauma. The deep-rootedness of psychological damage is responsible for the difficulty or impossibility of recovery. (8) Considering Pecola’s psychological distress, the impact of a harsh upbringing on
the character of the affected person seems to be obvious. The reader of *The Bluest Eye* can observe in what ways different types of traumatic experiences shape the personality of the girl. Pecola’s passiveness, her insecurities, her inferiority complex and the lack of self-respect can, among others, be attributed to the lack of affection from her mother. The combination of an extreme form of authority and the absence of love and care is portrayed to have an enormous impact on the girl on numerous levels. However, as previously mentioned, Pecola is indirectly strengthened by her hardships, as they contribute to her insanity, which, in her case, is portrayed to be a form of liberation and emancipation.

Returning to the main argument posed at the beginning of this section, it is now possible to argue that numerous factors indicate Pauline Breedlove’s superiority over her children. Although a real and relatable relationship between her and her children does not exist, certain features of a power-hierarchy do exist. Pauline Breedlove, as mentioned above, is never called “mother” by her children, but “Mrs. Breedlove”, which implies that language can be used to demonstrate the distribution of power between different parties. The reader might interpret this form of address in two different ways: either, Pecola and Sammy are to address their mother in a formal way in order to show respect towards her, or the children decide to do so in order to distance themselves from their mother and from the woman’s disrespect towards them. However, it could be argued that the first case is more probable, as (especially) Pecola is portrayed to show passive behavior throughout the entire story and most certainly would not dare to be rebellious and to disrespect her parents. Therefore, according to my interpretation, Pauline Breedlove is responsible for the way her children (have to) interact with her and address her.

At this point it is essential to mention that Pauline is portrayed to behave differently among other people. From a young age onwards, she has been employed by different white families; it has been her responsibility to take care of their households. Housekeeping has always been a passion of Pauline, and being surrounded by rather wealthy, white people has seemingly made her content. The young woman has appreciated to be considered responsible enough to take care of their property. “She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs.” (125) Pauline’s strong admiration and respect for her different employers and their property are, among others, responsible for the deterioration of her
relationship with her own family. Mrs. Breedlove laments that her own life does not resemble the lives of her wealthy employers:

Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. (125)

The fragment of the text suggests that the negligence of her own family and the disrespect towards her own children originates from her apparent admiration for her white, middle-class employers. Compared to them, her family, according to Pauline, is poor, ugly and discreditable. This leads her to ignore some of the most basic needs of her children; to receive motherly love and affection. In fact, she even requests being addressed with “Mrs. Breedlove”, instead of common terms, such as “mother” or “mom”. By doing so, she seems to put herself in a higher position. Apparently, Mrs. Breedlove does not want to create a bond with people who remind herself of her poverty and her (obviously despised) cultural heritage. She, as well as the other characters in the novel, seems to be in search of community and in search of connections, but refuses to engage with individuals who have the same cultural background as she does. The impact of her decisions on her children is a powerful one; Pecola and Sammy are portrayed to feel low-spirited, as they do not see themselves capable of changing their mother’s attitude towards them. Furman explains that Mrs. Breedlove’s lack of love for her daughter is the main reason for the girl’s pain and mental breakdown. (18)

Pecola’s (temporary) powerlessness is intensified by numerous incidents. One of them is thoroughly presented to the reader: the girl and her friends Claudia and Frieda are present at Pauline Breedlove’s work-place one day and find themselves in a bizarre situation. The young daughter of Mrs. Breedlove’s employers shows up and seems to be rather frightened when she encounters the girls. The situation, as depicted from Claudia’s perspective, is the following: “‘Where’s Polly?’ she asked. The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her.” (106) Claudia obviously is aware of what is responsible for Pecola’s hurt feelings. She realizes that Mrs. Breedlove neglects her own children, because she found a substitute family, a family of “higher prestige”; Claudia now seems to understand the reasons behind Pecola’s low self-esteem. Mrs. Breedlove shows her depreciation towards Pecola openly after a minor,
rather unfortunate incident; the girl accidentally spills juice and thereby soils the floor of Mrs. Breedlove’s employer’s house. The mother’s reaction is serious and shows the power she has over her daughter:

Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. “Crazy fool...my floor, mess...look what you...work...get on out...now that...crazy...my floor, my floor...my floor.” Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread. The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. “Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it.” (107)

The affection Pauline Breedlove shows for the daughter of her employers is what Pecola and her brother Sammy crave for and seem to need in order to establish a sane form of self-esteem. The fact that Pecola witnesses Pauline Breedlove mothering the young white girl and considering her part of her family (instead of Pecola, who is her biological daughter) seemingly breaks her, and (for a certain amount of time) gives her the feeling of powerlessness.

The reader can observe that the language Pauline uses as she speaks to Pecola has a condescending function; the woman conveys that she does not accept “misbehavior” and implies that she is not interested in the creation of a bond with her daughter. The lack of motherly recognition undoubtedly triggers a loss of self-worth and a feeling of being unwanted. Pecola, being a young and rather unstable girl who is to face numerous obstacles on a daily basis, is in urgent need of human recognition—recognition she hardly ever receives, not even from her biological mother. Hence, I argue that Pauline Breedlove’s attitude towards her daughter can be seen as one of the catalysts for her Pecola’s madness, which, in her case, is a state of liberation.

In The Bluest Eye, power relations are not only portrayed between mothers and their children, but also in romantic relationships or marriages. The most prominent example would be the liaison between Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, and the reader soon learns that their relationship is marked by intense highs and lows. Their first encounter is described in the chapter “SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICEMOTHERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANEMOTHERLAUGHSLAUGHMOTHERLAUGHLA”; Morrison depicts young Cholly as a loving and caring person who manages to brighten up Pauline’s life and take away her sorrows for some time. The young woman is described to suffer from a lack of self-respect, which can among others be attributed to her physical appearance: “Her general feeling of separateness and
unworthiness she blamed on her foot.” (109) Her foot, as the narrator makes clear, is deformed and is responsible for Pauline’s low self-esteem. When she encounters Cholly, however, her critical situation seems to be eased, and the two immediately connect. He openly cherishes her flaws and gives her the feeling of being loved and respected for who she is. She explains:

When I first seed Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that time down home when all us chil’ren went berry picking after a funeral and I put some in the pocket of my Sunday dress, and they mashed up and stained my hips. My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. [...] All of them colors was in me. Just sitting here. So when Cholly come up and tickled my foot, it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together. Cholly was thin then, with real light eyes. He used to whistle, and when I heerd him, shivers come on my skin. (113)

Pauline voices her thoughts in a rather playful manner; the woman’s mention of colors indicates that her memory of the beginning stage of her relationship is bright and vivid. Her descriptions allow the reader to picture the union of Cholly and Pauline in a positive light: the terms the woman uses imply ease and happiness. Pauline’s specific, picturesque way of expression enables the reader to understand the union the woman finds herself in; yet again language can be observed to talk about connections. Morrison makes clear that the relationship, at this stage, is loving and respectful. The young couple gives each other strength and a feeling of security. The woman forgets her anxiety and her concerns, as Cholly supports her in every way. The relationship, as described by Pauline, is not characterized by a hierarchy of power; the text suggests that, at the beginning of the union, the two individuals treat each other as equals, neither of the two seems to take on leadership and power is distributed evenly.

However, as life becomes more difficult due to certain circumstances, this situation changes. The couple moves from Kentucky to Ohio due to promising job opportunities for Cholly. Pauline, however, who grew up in Alabama, does not get used to her new life in the northern USA. She feels incomplete, dislocated, and has the feeling that she cannot be her real self in the new area; she knows that she must adapt to the new surroundings in order to fit in and to be able to socialize, but she has severe difficulties. Undoubtedly, the woman is in search of connections, but she does not seem to find her position in society.

I don’t know what all happened. Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people. I weren’t used to so much white folks. [...] Up north they was everywhere–next door, downstairs, all over the streets–and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. no better than whites for meanness. [...]

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That was the lonesomest time of my life. I ‘member looking out them front windows just waiting for Cholly to come home at three o’clock. (115)

As Pauline’s thoughts reveal, her integration process in Ohio is slowed down by various unpleasant circumstances. She has the feeling of being different than the people who live in Lorain, her new hometown, and she does not fit in. This fact causes loneliness and to a certain degree, desperation. Cholly, however, seems to adapt easily to the new situation: “He had no problem finding other people and other things to occupy him—men were always climbing the stairs asking for him, and he was happy to accompany them, leaving her alone.” (116) Cholly, as opposed to Pauline, is successful in finding his place in society. This situation worsens the relationship of the couple tremendously; the woman’s loneliness and the man’s active social life do not harmonize.

The different ways of spending their free time result in the fact that mutual respect and understanding decreases: “Cholly commenced to getting meaner and meaner and wanted to fight me all of the time. I give him as good as I got. Had to.” (117) Their way of speaking with each other becomes rougher and more unfriendly. Additionally, Cholly’s frequent (and excessive) consumption of alcohol plays a significant role in the deterioration of the couple’s relationship. The fights Pauline mentions in the quote above are not only verbal, but also physical. It should be mentioned, however, that their affection level varies; at times, the couple seems to rediscover their fondness for each other:

One winter Pauline discovered she was pregnant. When she told Cholly, he surprised her by being pleased. He began to drink less and come home more often. They eased back into a relationship more like the early days of their marriage, when he asked if she were tired or wanted him to bring her something from the store. (119)

The beginning of Pauline’s pregnancy with Pecola seems to be an adequate occasion to make up, and end their habit of arguing. Although at times the couple seems to be able to restore their marriage to a certain degree, the relationship is generally portrayed to lack stability. Pauline and Cholly fall back into the same patterns as before; they lose control easily and disrespect each other and each other’s interests. During that time, Pauline discovers her passion for Hollywood movies and starts to dream about the luxurious lifestyles and the romantic love-affairs and relationships which are depicted in the films. Wall argues that for the woman, the movies serve as a distraction from Pauline’s difficulties of integration and from the struggles of everyday-life. Problematically, the posed scenes convey idealized concepts which are hardly
ever manifested in real life. (797) They tend to deceive the spectators and lead them to believe in an ideal world: “Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard.” (121) Cholly, an average man who abandons himself to vice and starts drinking again, clearly does not correspond with Pauline’s conception of a good and adequate husband. The lack of mutual respect, once again, results in highly frequent verbal and physical fights, and disconnects the couple on an emotional level.

As this chapter is dedicated to the power-relations between the different characters and to community on the level of family, the hierarchy within the couple and their way of bonding with each other is going to be examined in more detail (in case a hierarchy exists). Certain situations will be presented in order to clarify who of the two is more dominant than the other, if that is the case. Dominance, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, allows a person to have “power and influence over others”, characteristics which tend to shape a relationship tremendously. (online) In the following paragraphs, different factors which have an impact on the marriage and on the power relations between Cholly and Pauline will be analyzed.

First, it must be noted that Cholly’s behavior is frequently marked by his drunkenness; he is portrayed to neglect his duty as a husband and as a father and treats his family rather poorly. Pauline does not suffer quietly—she has no fear of confronting her husband directly. This, however, mostly ends up in an intense verbal and physical fight. The reader could interpret Pauline’s behavior as a rather dominant and powerful one, as she dares to stand up to her husband, despite the man’s physical power and aggressive behavior. Pauline does not seem to fear physical pain; she frequently decides to fight back instead of putting up with the disrespectfulness of her husband. By daring to do so, she actively combats society’s obviously rigid, misogynic rules and attitudes. Pauline opposes a patriarchal system of rules within the community of her family. A prominent scene which demonstrates Pauline’s courageous behavior is portrayed in the following extract:

“I said I need some coal. It’s as cold as a witch’s tit in this house. Your whiskey ass wouldn’t feel hellfire, but I’m cold. I got to do a lot of things, but I ain’t got to freeze.”
“Leave me ‘lone.’”
“Not until you get me some coal. [...]” Her voice was like an earache in the brain. “...If you think I’m going to wade out in the cold and get it myself, you’d better think again.”
“I don’t give a shit how you get it.” A bubble of violence burst in his throat. [...]”
“Don’t try me this morning, man. You say one more word, and I’ll split you open.” (38-39)
The language of Pauline and Cholly is rough and implies mutual disrespect. There is a tendency of violence on both sides; Cholly obviously shows power by ignoring his wife’s requests, or rather commands. He does not seem to have a guilty conscience, because his alcohol level is on numerous occasions rather high, and hence impedes clear thinking. Moreover, the reader can observe that the relationship is, at this point in the novel, rather loveless; neither Cholly nor Pauline seem to feel affection for their partner anymore. A series of circumstances and incidents can be held responsible for this fact. Morrison implies that Cholly, due to the lack of feelings for his family, shows ruthless behavior; he openly expresses his potency and power in order to establish his own rules and guidelines. Cholly’s feeling of superiority allows him to shirk responsibility without the slightest sense of guilt. The man’s apparent lack of respect and his feeling of superiority infuriate his wife, who can generally be considered a hardworking woman. She has a rather strong character and a well-established, stable opinion (which she voices on a regular basis), dares combat her husband, and shows resistance; in order for her counter-action to be effective, she uses harsh and violent expressions. The fact that Pauline threatens Cholly to “split [him] open” shows that she is, like her husband, rather ruthless. Pauline’s behavior can be seen as a form of female resistance to masculine power and superiority; as previously mentioned, the society portrayed in *The Bluest Eye* can be observed to generally defend patriarchal values, but Pauline dares to combat this apparently rigid system. This results in intense fights and discussions, but the woman considers her form of victory to be worth the trouble.

Pauline and Cholly’s marriage is obviously no union of love anymore, and this fact might be responsible for the couple’s unsuccessful and unhappy coexistence. The rough mutual treatment and the poor and combative interaction brings along negative energy which manifests itself in countless fights and disagreements. These arguments frequently seem to have the only purpose to (re)define the power-relations between the two partners. Language hence can be observed to function as a tool to create a certain form of hierarchy within a community. Pauline and Cholly seem to ask themselves the same type of questions: “Who gives in first?” – “Who is too weak to stand up for him- or herself?” The reader can observe that neither of the two in fact has power over the other. At times, Cholly seems to see himself as the winner of their arguments, and hence seems to believe to be the dominant member of the relationship; in other situations, however, Pauline seems to hold power over her husband.
In the case of the argument depicted above, for instance, Pauline gives in to a certain degree. Her final reaction to Cholly’s ignorance and disrespectfulness is the following: “All right. All right. But if I sneeze once, just once, God help your butt!” She seems to surrender with the purpose to avoid further meaningless and nerve-wracking discussions. However, it needs to be noted that Pauline is not portrayed to give in because she lacks strength; in the course of the story the reader is repeatedly informed of her high endurance and her toughness. These characteristics are portrayed to be tightly connected to her apparent loyalty to God. Pauline claims to see herself as a martyr who willingly faces the hardships of life in order to find salvation. Cholly’s attitude and behavior is portrayed to be her toughest challenge:

If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly’s sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus. (40)

Cholly’s verbal and physical maltreatment of his wife, as well as his ignorance and lack of respect towards his family, obviously produce a feeling of indirect power in Pauline. As the narrator claims, the woman needs her husband’s sins in order to be free in the afterlife and in order to experience the salvation of God. This prospect gives her power over Cholly. Pauline seemingly attaches higher importance to spiritual force, whereas her husband relies on a physical and verbal form of power. Even though Pauline might seem to surrender to Cholly during some of their frequent fights, she finds new strength and energy in this situation. Cholly, as mentioned before, likewise finds strength in the fights with his wife, but on a different level; they seem to give him a feeling of power and masculinity. “She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact.” (40) As this statement implies, Cholly defends the patriarchy, and is convinced of his superiority over his wife. Additionally, the quote reveals that the man has a rather abnormal relationship with himself. He feels the urge to project his negativity on his wife in order to experience a healing process. Childhood trauma and certain incidents during his adolescent years can be held responsible for his severe psychological issues.

To sum up, the power-relations (which are, somehow, a form of “connections”) in the case of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove’s marriage are not easy to define. I argue that both, husband and wife, have different ideas of power; each of them defends a distinct concept their counterpart does not seem to understand. Hence, it is rather difficult (or even impossible) to compare
Pauline’s and Cholly’s degree of power. As both feel dominant in their own ways, the reader could conclude that although Cholly might seem like the stronger and more influential one on the surface, both of them can be observed to share approximately the same “dimension” of power and might. Pauline’s way of defining power might not stand out at first glance, but Morrison implies that might, dominance or power do not always have to have physical or verbal dimensions; they might also exist in another sphere, for example on the spiritual level. On this note, it can be argued that Pauline’s idea of power is a subliminal one and cannot be observed on the surface (such as Cholly’s idea of power), but nonetheless it seems to be equal in significance.

Only few lines are going to be dedicated to the relationship of Mrs. MacTeer and Mr. MacTeer, as not much is known about it; the husband hardly appears in the story. Generally, the reader could assume that this marriage is rather unspectacular, as it is virtually not described. Although this union is not portrayed explicitly, Morrison indicates that is stable enough to keep Claudia and Frieda grounded and to ensure a relatively healthy development of the children. Seemingly, the power-relations and connections between Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer are rather balanced (as Morrison implicitly implies), and hence allows a secure and solid family-environment.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the power-relations on the level of family portrayed in the novel are unique and highly relevant for the storyline. Not only the different ways of child-rearing, but also the diverse forms of power-distributions within marriages provide various forms of interpretation. Morrison exemplifies different forms of community on the level of family, and demonstrates that language does not only serve to create a community, but also functions as a tool to distribute power and to establish hierarchies within a community. The author implies that the power-relations within the different families significantly influence the personal development of involved characters, as well as their attitudes towards community and society. Hence, family structures and relations can be regarded as decisive factors for the advancement of the story. A close examination of the different family-hierarchies helps to understand the roots of the characters’ personality traits and behavior, and can therefore be considered a decisive factor for the development of the novel’s plot.
3.4. Materiality and its Apparent and Subliminal Functions

In this section of the thesis, different concepts with respect to the topic of materialism are going to be analyzed. The reader of The Bluest Eye can observe a high presence of attitudes and opinions with regard to community and societal structures that have been shaped by apparently materialistic ideas and ideals. Before examining a variety of scenes in which the characters of the novel are seemingly fond of the idea of having a prestigious image (which is closely linked to the concept of materialism), it needs to be clarified that the reader can only make assumptions on the values the characters might defend, instead of taking a fixed idea as a basis. Although Morrison’s portrayal of the different characters’ attitudes adumbrates a strong desire to embody a certain “ideal”, it cannot be known whether the longing has its roots in real personal convictions, or whether they are a product of society’s assumed standards which are imposed on the characters. In the section below, the characters’ attitudes towards a variety of assumed materialistic concepts are going to be analyzed, and different language and communication patterns are going to be examined closely in order to identify their underlying functions.

3.4.1. Beauty as a Way to Establish Communication

Morrison broaches the issue of the concept of beauty and of the embodiment of this abstract idea; the author herself claims that the notions of beauty and ugliness are a mystery to her. Nevertheless, she tries to comprehend the essence of these concepts in order to understand the negative effects they tend to have on people. (Tate 121) Numerous examples which imply the idea of society’s concept of beauty and of “white superiority” can be found in the text. A high number of members of the African American community are portrayed to accept this concept, as they seemingly lack the strength to fight it. Only few individuals are depicted to be tough and strong enough to embrace their own ethnicity and to neglect certain suggested “standards”. In this section of the thesis, different ways of dealing with society’s norms are going to be exemplified and the self-perceptions of the characters are going to be presented. The analysis of the main characters’ utterances and thoughts with reference to their physical appearance, and the interpretation of their opinions on the concepts of “black” and “white” is going to constitute the main component of this chapter. Morrison includes numerous scenes in which the concept of a “white” ideal of beauty is manifested and embodied by various female, Caucasian characters.
Before analyzing the different attitudes towards the concept of beauty, a brief analysis of certain potential functions of the notion will be provided. It can be argued that the artificial creation of ideals and standards serves a specific purpose; it encourages communication among members of a community and facilitates the creation of a social union. Creating a concept of beauty and speaking and thinking of its’ embodiment allows individuals to create connections and bonds on several levels. It could be argued that the notion of beauty is not about beauty per se, but rather serves as a tool to enable individuals to create connections and talk about relationships. According to this interpretation, engaging in a conversation about the embodiment of certain artificially created standards can be seen as a possibility to share opinions and evaluations, which, consequently, can be seen as a contribution to the creation of community. Communication is a fundamental device to build interpersonal relationships. Controversial topics, such as the embodiment of beauty-standards, facilitate this process, as they tend to allow diverse forms of interpretation and evaluation. In order to detect the underlying functions of the concept of beauty, an overview of the apparent and obvious interpretations of different quotes and situations depicted in the novel will be provided, and then, subsequently, a closer look on the relationship between the characters’ attitudes towards the concept of beauty and the creation of community through communication will be presented.

The first character whose opinions on social structures and attitudes towards the idea of beauty will constitute the center of the investigation is Claudia. It can be observed that the girl does not seem to tolerate the imposition of society’s assumed ideas of beauty. She does not fear being criticized for questioning the so-called “standards” and the obviously common and universal perceptions. Destroying baby-dolls or maltreating people she despises, for example a white girl from the neighborhood called Rosemary, apparently are only mechanisms to fight society’s blind acceptance of their alleged attractiveness. After getting mocked by the girl, Claudia asks her sister: “Should we beat up Rosemary?”; she wants to defend her pride and show that the obvious “prototype” of what can be called “beauty” is irrelevant to her. (29) Adults and other people Claudia is surrounded by frequently react with a lack of understanding to her sometimes rather violent behavior and her revulsion against white dolls: “Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-up-what’s-the-matter-with-you?” (19) Toni Morrison gives the reader of *The Bluest Eye* the impression that apart from Claudia (and at times her sister Frieda), virtually every person the girl encounters and knows shows a certain degree of affection, admiration and respect for fair-skinned people. This fact triggers a feeling of jealousy
in Claudia; the utterances and the thoughts she voices as the narrator of the story suggest that she considers the situation to be rather unjustifiable and not legitimate.

Claudia’s attitude towards a white ideal of beauty manifests itself through violent behavior and language: her utterances and acts are provocative and might be considered as disturbing. This form of behavior might, in the first moment, trigger a negative perception of the girl’s character in the reader of the novel. However, upon closer inspection, Claudia’s provocation can be observed to be a cry for attention. The girl is portrayed to use her rather aggressive language and behavior as a means to obtain other people’s interest, and via interest, Claudia hopes to get a chance to be part of a community. She uses the common standard of beauty in order to find ways to communicate with fellow human beings, and consequently, to create connections and inter-personal relationships. The novel offers various examples which support this assumption. Claudia’s way of treating white baby-dolls and her way of speaking with white girls are, among others, methods to find possibilities of establishing connections with other members of her community. The anger of the girl is not only expressed directly through language and behavior, but is also present in her thoughts, which are visible to the reader of the novel. Her apparent resentment provoked by envy and jealousy is represented in the following situation:

Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was. I couldn’t join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. (17)

The reader of the novel gets the impression that Claudia is in desperate need of more affection—affection. Shirley Temple and other white girls are, according to Claudia’s depictions, deluged with. Toni Morrison clearly implies Claudia’s feeling of grudge through her choice of words and through certain literary devices; the fact that the possessive pronoun “my” is written in italics throughout the whole utterance by Claudia demonstrates that the word should be emphasized, as it is attributed a high degree of significance. Possession in general is nothing Claudia aspires; however, affection is of high value to her:

Had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. (19)
As mentioned before, Morrison gives the reader the feeling that the girl feels disadvantaged on numerous levels. Not only does Claudia seem to have the impression that on a superficial level, her physical appearance is not as admired as the one of Shirley Temple (who can be seen as the embodiment of the idea of beauty), but she also feels neglected on an emotional level due to her dark complexion. Furman explains that members of the black society, as portrayed in the novel, are constantly confronted with images, movies, and people who remind them of their “failure”, and of the impossibility of conforming to the “white” beauty ideal. (19) Morrison gives the reader the impression that Claudia dislikes this situation, and feels treated in an unfair way; she believes that she deserves the same attention as fair-skinned girls, and dares to openly, and sometimes radically, express this opinion. As previously mentioned, Claudia’s provocative utterances and acts serve as a medium to obtain attention and consequently, to create connections with other human beings.

Not only Claudia, but also Pecola seems to see the difficulty of being accepted by society. However, as opposed to Claudia, she seemingly agrees with society’s views and makes no resistance. Patrick B. Bjork explains that “Pecola is victimized by the community’s hierarchy of color and caste.”, and argues that the concept of beauty is based on western views and opinions. The closer a person approximates this “ideal”, the more acceptance is awarded to him or her. Bjork further states that “within the socio-historical context of black oppression, appearances have always been tantamount to gaining approval from the dominant group, however illusionary those appearances or approvals may be.” He puts forward that not only Pecola’s physical appearance (which, according to the narrators of the novel, is considered to be “ugly”) detains her from being accepted by the community, but also her low economic status. (38-39) As opposed to Claudia, Pecola does not express her desire to be accepted through an aggressive way of speaking. The girl reacts to society’s apparent disapproval of her in a rather quiet and seemingly passive way.

Pecola and her family are portrayed to be outsiders, disesteemed by their community. Especially the girl suffers from the destructive power of other people’s views and perceptions; without doubt, she longs for acceptance and is in urgent need of recognition. Furman agrees that the community “is seduced by a white standard of beauty and […] makes Pecola its scapegoat”. (21) The girl’s fragile character is apparently prone to undergo modifications provoked by society. Morrison depicts Pecola in a vulnerable, passive and unstable way; these characteristics
seem to complicate the girl’s life. She is manipulable, and the critical attitude of society towards her community seem to ruin her. In the foreword of the novel the author claims that she consciously chose to focus on the most vulnerable member of society: a girl. (IX) Morrison further explains that Pecola is particularly sensitive due to the lack of a support system, deprecative adults and the fact that her surroundings in diverse ways intensify her despair. (VIII) The girl seems to be forced to cope with her problems on her own; her insecurities and fears overwhelm her. She is portrayed as failing to find the strength to stand up for herself and seemingly decides to surrender to society. At this point it is important to mention that Pecola, despite her apparent suffering, should not be considered a victim, although Toni Morrison tempts the reader to think that way. The author portrays the girl as a suffering individual, who expresses her grief among others through language. The reader should keep in mind that Morrison, by doing so, might aim to challenge the reader’s critical thinking and question or criticize a possible tendency to jump to conclusions.

Albeit the girl experiences numerous forms of discrimination throughout her childhood and young adulthood and at first sight seems to lose herself in the constant struggle, it can be observed that the incidents which bring her down in the beginning, later strengthen and empower her. In the last chapter of the novel, the reader learns about Pecola’s mental metamorphosis; her initial passive, reluctant and suffering state of mind transforms into a state of freedom, a state of independence. At first, the reader of the novel might judge the girl’s condition, as she is portrayed to go mad, and madness tends to be considered to have negative effects on an individual. However, in Pecola’s case, her insanity liberates and empowers her.

Nevertheless, the way towards liberation is portrayed to be far and difficult. The reader of The Bluest Eye gets the impression that virtually every member of society (apart from few exceptions) finds beauty in “whiteness” and in different characteristics which are linked to Caucasians. Humann argues that Pecola accepts society’s constructed ideals of beauty and knows that she cannot keep up with people who embody this notion; the girl’s conviction of white superiority hence pushes her further to the margins of society. (42) An example extracted from the novel which supports this claim will be presented: Pecola intends to buy candy at a local shop and has a bizarre encounter with the shopkeeper, who refuses to look at her. She wonders: “How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant store-keeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blinded
by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl?” (46) Pecola’s thoughts reflect her apparent perception of society; Morrison portrays her to be convinced of society’s negative attitude towards the black community. The author implicitly suggests that the white storekeeper can be seen as a prototype for members of the dominantly white community. Bouson argues that Morrison repeatedly portrays shameful situations caused by contemptuous treatment of certain individuals. (4) This form of mistreatment then frequently results in an intense disturbance of emotions. In the case of Pecola’s encounter with the storekeeper, a feeling of shame (on the part of the girl) seems to be present. The man looks down on Pecola and treats her with contempt; it is clearly visible that he considers the black girl to be inferior to him. Surányi claims that the shopkeeper’s treatment of the girl implies her insignificance and her “invisibility” in society. Pecola immediately senses his negative attitude towards her, and her feeling of unworthiness increases. (12) I agree with Surányi to a certain extent; Pecola can be observed to be pushed to the margins of society. Nevertheless, I argue that she is not entirely invisible. On numerous occasions, the reader can observe that the girl is included in other people’s conversations, and consequently forms part of a community.

During the reading process, certain historical circumstances and events might cross the reader’s mind. He or she might reflect on the superiority among Caucasians over African Americans during the time-period at which the novel is set, and might think about the fact that virtually the entire history of this community has been characterized by hardships. (Encyclopedia Britannica online) During the period of slavery, black people were regarded as barbarous and unhuman: “Both male and female slaves were beasts of burden, seen as sub-human by their white masters, relegated to drudges in an accursed economic system.” (Bjork 17) Although slavery had been abolished before the period in which the novel is set, the reader of The Bluest Eye might see a connection between the former enslavement of African Americans and the concept of white superiority during the period in which the novel is set. (Encyclopedia Britannica online) As Matus explains, numerous disgraceful conditions in the past and different historical events tend to have a long-term impact on the formerly affected community. (30) However, as previously explained, The Bluest Eye is a work of fiction, and hence the interpretation of the content should not be based on historical facts. The reader does not know in what ways or to what extent Morrison’s writing process was influenced by external factors. Nevertheless, it can be observed that an extreme form of white superiority and black inferiority is present in The Bluest Eye. Pecola does not consciously seem to think of the roots of white people’s disrespect towards her,
but still she is convinced to be inferior. I argue that the girl has internalized the socially constructed racial differences and the divergence of power and social status. She seemingly does question the concept of white superiority; to Pecola, it seems to be the result of a logical conclusion:

The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. (...) Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness.” (47)

This extract suggests that Pecola, the fragile and unstable protagonist, questions her own self; different encounters with disrespectful people who in some way do not consider her a “proper” human being, lead her to loathe the body she was born with. Tate argues that Pecola firmly believes in a connection between her blackness and her ugliness. “Consequently, Pecola sublimates her desire to be loved into a desire to have blue eyes and blond hair; in short, to look like Shirley Temple, who is adored by all.” (117) Pecola’s seemingly negative self-perception is the catalyst for her desire to modify her physical appearance; as numerous instances in the novel imply, it is the girl’s greatest aspiration to receive blue eyes, as she regards them as the ultimate symbol of beauty. In her opinion, they would change her entire situation; she is convinced that the modification of her real eye-color would grant her an attractive appeal and hence facilitate the creation of connections with other human beings. Pecola’s self-judgement takes on enormous dimensions; she seems to be willing to do anything to change her eye color. De Weever argues that Pecola’s intense craving for blue eyes and her willingness to change her identity is responsible for her vulnerability and weakness. Also her madness, according to De Weever, can be attributed to her wish to modify her features. (402-403) Her desire to change her physical appearance might be considered to be a typical feature of adolescence; the reader might argue that Pecola’s age might contribute to her intense vulnerability. She is eleven years old and finds herself in a rather unstable stage of life; the blue eyes are only one of the numerous symbols that can, in the novel, be associated with a higher social status and, hence, a higher degree of acceptance. It can be argued that especially adolescents tend to attach high importance to their image and to the way they are perceived by fellow human beings. (Clay et al. n.p.)

Popularity among peers tends to be one of the priorities of adolescents; to be accepted, admired or, to a certain degree, even idolized seem to be some of Pecola’s most intense desires. She supposes that blue eyes would give her the chance to be popular, and, connected to that, to be loved. In the end, all of Pecola’s wishes lead to her ultimate goal: to experience human
recognition and respect on the part of her community. Although at first sight it might seem like the social status, and linked to that, physical appearance, are Pecola’s main priorities, the text implies that the girl as a matter of fact seeks the more profound qualities of life. Subconsciously, but undoubtedly, she is in search of love and respect, and wants to be an appreciated member of her community. Pecola, who longs for blue eyes (in order to achieve her ultimate goal: to be accepted, to establish connections and, as a consequence, to receive human recognition) would do anything to fulfill this wish.

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—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. Maybe they’d say, “Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.” (44)

Pecola’s firm conviction of the positive effects blue eyes would bring along on all levels of life increases her desire even more: “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time.” (44) Pecola’s extreme fascination with blue eyes at first can be considered responsible for her frustration with herself, as her own eyes are of different color, but then slowly drives her into madness, a condition which, in fact, empowers her. Pecola’s manipulability does not imply that she should be seen as an entirely powerless individual; although her agency is not visible during the major part of the novel, the reader can observe that it comes to light towards the end of the story (during the portrayal of her insanity). The girl has certain wishes and would do anything in order to fulfill them. Her dedication reveals that she holds power over herself, and she pursues her goals without fear. Pecola urgently wants to change her identity; she desires to resemble people who are considered to have a high social status, as she is convinced that this resemblance would make her life and her existence worthier. The girl believes that attractiveness and other factors which, according to her perception, account for a high position in the social hierarchy would make her more popular and would grant her human affection. The reader learns that Pecola sees a close connection between the superficial standards people seemingly strive for, such as blue eyes, and more profound necessities of life. The opinions and attitudes the girl adopts obviously complicate her life, but at the same time contribute to her salvation. Pecola is portrayed to accept what other people want her to believe in; this, in the girl’s case, results in a temporary feeling of inferiority and worthlessness. Only Pecola’s liberation through madness seems to
restore her feeling of self-worth. On her way to salvation, she experiences serious setbacks, which the girl decides to endure in order to be free eventually.

In connection with the girl’s desire for blue eyes, a closer examination of the book-title might be of interest. At first glance, it seems to refer directly to Pecola’s desire to have blue eyes; in fact, she seemingly wants to have the bluest eyes of all—the most beautiful and the bluest eyes. However, it must be noted that the title of the novel is The Bluest Eye, and not The Bluest Eyes. The fact that the lexeme “eye” in the title is singular and not plural might have a specific meaning. It could be assumed that Morrison thought of the connection between the lexeme “eye” and the lexeme “I”, which sound exceedingly similar, if not identical; hence, they can be considered homophones. In case Morrison thought of this connection when choosing the title of the novel in question, the caption The Bluest Eye might get a second meaning. Besides the obvious significance, which very likely refers to Pecola’s wish for blue eyes, the title might subliminally describe the girl’s depressed state of mind; the term blue is known to refer to the color blue on the one hand, and to the emotion of sadness and melancholy, on the other hand. (Oxford Dictionary online) In case Morrison made deliberate use of the homophones “eye” and “I” and gave the lexeme “blue” the “alternative” or rather informal significance of “sad”, it could be argued that the title implicitly refers to Pecola’s melancholic self. She is the “bluest”, the saddest character of the novel. When the reader mentally transforms the title The Bluest Eye into The Bluest I, he or she is bound to think of Pecola’s intense state of misery, a burden she bears during a major part of the novel. Hence, it can be argued that Morrison, with the title of her novel, intended (and managed) to create ambiguity. Surányi likewise argues that the title can be interpreted as a pun; apart from the ambiguous meaning of the term “eye”, she also sees a connection between the adjective “blue” in the title of the novel, and the blues Claudia’s mother frequently sings. (11) “Blues”, as defined in the Merriam Webster Dictionary, is “a song often of lamentation [...]”. (online) The fact that this type of music might be represented in the title of the novel implies that melancholy is an exceedingly relevant theme in Morrison’s text.

Not only the title of the novel implies the girl’s deep-rooted sadness; numerous other scenes in the book reveal that she is the most desperate, or, in other words, the “bluest” character of all, at least until her state of madness. The girl seems to have a weak character throughout most parts of the novel; however, I argue that deep inside she has the strength and the willpower to break free from everything that holds her back from reaching her goals. Her adapting, accepting,
and apparently submissive behavior hence can be considered a necessity for her eventual emancipation. Everything she endures along the way, and all the hardships and struggles add up and support her goal in an implicit way. Without her personal burdens Pecola would not have the possibility to develop her insanity, which, in her case, can be seen as a liberation.

For the most part of the novel, however, Pecola, but also the rest of her family, are presented to the reader in a submissive way. All members of the Breedlove family are, apparently, convinced of their “ugliness”: “Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master has given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question.” (37) The conviction the narrator emphasizes seems to root in other people’s perceptions of what is right and what is wrong, of what is beautiful and what is “ugly”. In an interview with The Guardian, Morrison states: “[Beauty] can destabilise you if that’s all you have and that’s all you care about and that’s where your success comes from.” (The Guardian online) This citation can serve as an explanation for the Breedloves’ lack of self-esteem. Their values are portrayed to be oriented towards certain “standards”, which are, according to Morrison, considered to be universally accepted by society. Especially Pecola remains of the conviction that her physical appearance is a crucial factor for being accepted by the community. The girl’s refuge into a state of madness can be ascribed to her obsession with the standards of beauty suggested by society, and her conviction of a link between these standards and human connections.

However, not only Pecola, but also Pauline Breedlove seems to consider herself inherently “ugly”. One chapter of the novel is dedicated to her; it retells her life-story and informs the reader of the origins of her dissatisfaction with herself. The chapter reveals that the woman to a certain degree struggles (or rather finds it impossible) to accept her African American heritage. The narrator presents a fundamental reason for this issue; one of Pauline’s favorite pastimes during her early years of adulthood used to be going to the movie-theater and watching (assumingly Hollywood-produced) motion pictures. Fick argues that movies constitute the root of all evil—“not only because of the values they present—perfect, white bodies and romantic love—but because of the way they represent them: as flawless Archetypes above and outside the shadowy world of everyday life.” (11) This statement implies that not only certain standards and values which tend to be commonly accepted, but also the representation of the very same can potentially be have a negative effect on individuals. The portrayal of ideas and ideals might
be exceedingly influential; not only does it promote a luxurious lifestyle numerous people cannot afford, but it also outshines and shames the rather simple way of life, which might be associated with the working-class. Apart from an extravagant and expensive way of living, Morrison implies that the movies also tend to represent what is usually considered to be beautiful, according to society. The reader of the novel is informed about the tremendous dimensions of influence this type of movie has (or can have) on an individual, with respect to the issue of physical beauty.

In general it could be argued that film-productions which portray a specific lifestyle and hence reinforce a certain standard of living and a specific ideal of beauty can be considered as contributions to a collective narrative of a community. Movies have the power to connect people, as they, in different ways, encourage communication. Not only the act of going to the movie-theater (in groups) can be seen as a social achievement, but the images, concepts and ideas a movie portrays, can also offer topics of conversation. Beauty, as previously mentioned, can be considered as a concept created to connect people; engaging in conversations about certain prototypes and discussing other people’s achievement of these ideals or their failures can be seen as methods to bond on a social level. Nevertheless, it can be observed that Pauline does not seem to find social benefits in the act of watching movies. In her case, this activity seems to be rather isolating, as the standards that are portrayed in the productions pressure the woman and somehow disconnect her from her own self and the people she is supposed to be close with (such as the members of her family).

The following quote helps to understand the impact the portrayal of certain ideals in movies has. “Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion.” (120) This text extract can be considered as exceedingly crucial; it sums up a number of reasons why “institutionalized” beauty might have the power harm an individual on different levels. The constant portrayal of different lifestyles (on different platforms, such as television, cinema and radio) which are usually reserved for the white middle- or upper-class can potentially be of destructive power. Members of minorities who are restricted to a different (frequently less luxurious) way of living might suffer from frustration and lose respect for their own background:
Like the Dick-and-Jane story, Pauline’s movies continuously present her with a life, again presumably ideal, which she does not now have and which she has little, if any, chance of ever enjoying in any capacity other than that of ideal servant. (Kuenz 425)

Pauline, Pecola, and many other characters seemingly do not appreciate their image and the way in which they are perceived by most members of society. As they are constantly exposed to direct or indirect criticism, most characters seem to suffer from a deep-rooted and continuous feeling of shame, which can have damaging effects on the psyche of affected individuals. Only few individuals seem to be able to consciously oppose the generalized views of society. Pecola, her mother and other characters, however, seemingly collapse internally and seem to be unable to live a satisfied life under these circumstances. Valerie Smith justifies this argument: she explains that numerous individuals portrayed in the novel unconsciously believe in the concept of white superiority with regards to social rights and physical beauty. They seemingly internalized the standards and ideals society has obviously imposed on them, and therefore reject their own cultural heritage and everything it brings along, such as their physical African features. (19) Pecola and her parents can be regarded as prime examples for this group of characters; undoubtedly, they are not aware of the fact that certain concepts were only created by the majority population of the country in order to oppress the African American community. The Breedloves are portrayed to accept their inferior status on all levels of society and (for the most part) do not question the origins of the concept of “white superiority”.

Claudia, for her part, is rather self-secure and tough; she seems to feel a strong urge to fight for the acceptance of people of color. In numerous passages of the novel, the reader is informed about her rebellious and at times even aggressive behavior in situations Claudia feels threatened by white individuals. Her sister Frieda, too, seems to be of strong nature and protective of her community; both of them care for people who are close to them and do not fear to stand up for them in case of (racial) harassment. A group of boys at school mocks Pecola (among others, for her blackness), and is confronted by the sisters: “I had never heard Frieda’s voice so loud and clear. (...) ‘Leave her ‘lone, or I’m gone tell everybody what you did!’“. (64) Claudia’s and Frieda’s strength and courage to stand up for their friend and for themselves can be explained by their tough, strict, but also loving upbringing.

Nevertheless, the sisters’ strength at times slightly gives way to deception; as mentioned before, Claudia and Frieda feel threatened by what is widely considered to be the “ideal” of beauty, because they fear that their “nonconformity” to the assumed standards results in a sense of
disconnection from other human beings. In a fight with Maureen Peal, a white and utterly popular girl at school, Pecola and the sisters are accused of being inferior and ugly: “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (71) Pecola, due to her apparent lack of self-acceptance, does not seem to question Maureen’s attitude towards the girls. Claudia and Frieda, who are usually depicted as strong and tough girls who at all times defend their African American heritage, have feelings of doubt after Maureen’s accusation:

We were sinking under the scratch, or examine old scars. We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen’s last words. If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she was—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? Guideless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. (73)

Claudia and Frieda, as opposed to Pecola, do not want to change, because they are content with themselves and do not feel the need of adapting to other people’s standards and ideals. However, Maureen’s statement somehow triggers profound thoughts on the girls’ position in society. Even though they themselves appreciate their identity, they notice that if society’s ideals are seemingly considered as the “ultimate truth”, according to which the sisters and other members belonging to the African American community are, unquestionably, unworthy. This thought process implies a slight degree of acceptance of society’s norms on the part of the girls. Although Claudia repeatedly assures the reader of her contentedness with her cultural heritage, in some way the quote above suggests a certain form of surrender to society’s values. The girls are aware of the fact that Maureen and other white girls are accepted in ways they would never be:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her, (...); black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. (60)

This observation of Claudia and Frieda, among others, is responsible for their frustration with society. On numerous occasions the author of the novel implies that the sisters are convinced that according to society’s ideals white girls are considered beautiful and respectable.
To sum up, it can be argued that virtually every character portrayed in *The Bluest Eye* is influenced by society to a certain degree. The forms and shapes of influence seem to differ from person to person; weaker individuals (on the mental level) are portrayed to follow certain ideals and adapt to concepts imposed on them. Seemingly stronger individuals are portrayed to keep their pride to a certain degree and protect themselves as well as possible from other people’s accusations. However, the case of Claudia and Frieda exemplifies that even the strongest individuals are not entirely immune to society’s judgement; in spite of the girls’ toughness, they seem to suffer from the apparent bigotry and narrow-mindedness (caused by certain “universally” accepted ideals and concepts) of the people they are surrounded by. However, apart from the obvious influences (which are frequently perceived as negative), certain subliminal functions of assumed concepts and ideas are presented to the reader in an implicit way. The idea of beauty can be observed to facilitate the creation of connections, and connections are the basis for every community. As a consequence, it can be argued that community is strengthened through the concept of beauty.

### 3.4.2. Indicating Connections and Expressing Power Through Possession

In the previous section, the notion of beauty and its significance in the lives of the characters and in society in general was illustrated and it can be argued that certain concepts, which apparently are of an exclusively materialistic character (such as beauty), can have subliminal, hidden functions; connecting people and establishing a community can be considered the most relevant benefits the concept of beauty implicates. However, not only the topic of a seemingly appealing physical appearance is present in the novel *The Bluest Eye*, but also the idea of having a luxurious lifestyle and a prestigious image. Albeit a superficial reading of the novel might not suggest the relevance of the topic of property, a thorough interpretation of the content suggests its importance. Property, and the prestige connected to it, appears to be inherently desired by most members of the depicted community in *The Bluest Eye*; the different attitudes of the characters towards the materialistic concept of property are going to be investigated in this section of the thesis.

Before portraying the different characters’ opinions, it should be noted that property, as well as the notion of beauty, implicates certain functions which might not be visible at first sight. Numerous characters are portrayed to desire property, and Morrison does not explicitly explain why. However, according to my interpretation, the portrayed individuals on the one hand
believe that property and luxurious lifestyle grant them a form of happiness, and on the other hand they expect to strengthen their position in society. The characters seem to be in search of more ways to create connections and to establish a functioning community. Not only the creation of different standards of beauty and the constant intent to approximate and embody the very same encourage communication, but also the wish to succeed in developing a prestigious image might unite individuals. Exchanging opinions on certain lifestyles and discussing the situations of individuals who reach, or individuals who fail to reach their goals, brings people together. Whether the mission to develop a reputable image is successful or not, the process tends to awaken other people’s interest, and showing interest is a way to include fellow human beings in a community. In the following paragraphs, the different characters’ attitudes towards property and a “good” reputation is going to be analyzed.

Claudia MacTeer, for example, generally does not view property and ownership of material goods as essential, because she seems to look for attention in a different way (through violent language and behavior, for example). However, most characters who appear in the novel seem to desire materialistic goods. In opposition to Claudia, they defend seemingly superficial values; values which are directly linked to possession and high positions in social hierarchy. Numerous quotes indicate that most characters consider property to be essential for having a good and prestigious life. Most individuals are convinced that the lack of possession might lead them directly to poverty, and poverty is portrayed to be a feared condition. Not only does it deteriorate a person’s lifestyle, but also his or her reputation and security. Even characters whose image is not considered prestigious receive a certain amount of attention, and hence, in a way, have the possibility to be included in a community. However, numerous individuals seemingly prefer to have a “good” reputation, in order to receive a different, more positive form of attention.

Reputation and prestige undoubtedly seem to be issues of high importance among numerous characters of the novel. Most people who have a light complexion are portrayed to be considered “prestigious”; according to the artificial standards of a “good life”, they dress nicely, own clean, spacious houses with tasteful furniture and have neat gardens. The idea of owning a proper residence seems to be appealing and apparently, it is the ultimate goal of a number of African American characters. One of the prime examples is Pauline Breedlove; she gives an exhaustive account of her employer’s house (a rather wealthy, white family named Fisher), and
indicates her respect for their property. “She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. The child’s pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slops edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers.” (125) Apparently, Mrs. Breedlove finds comfort in the belongings of their employers; to her, material goods symbolize wealth, and wealth seems to be interconnected with prestige and a high position in social hierarchy.

Most African Americans in The Bluest Eye seem to need a certain standard of living in order to feel complete and accepted by the people they are surrounded by. In numerous cases this might have to do with a certain social position they aspire to have. The reader is conveyed the feeling that a prestigious image is frequently viewed as a guarantor for a “good” life; being admired is frequently equated with being respected. Possession hence tends to give people a positive attitude towards life, because it is a factor which ensures comfort and prestige. Pauline Breedlove is one of the prime examples supporting this assumption. She seems to feel incomplete without her work at a wealthy family’s house; it gives her the chance to be surrounded by different types of luxuries which give her the feeling of a certain degree of power. The woman, whose own financial situation does not allow her to splurge on luxuries, enjoys the fact that she at least has the chance to work in an environment characterized by luxury and prestige. Pauline Breedlove hardly owns anything herself; relative poverty has left its mark on the woman’s life and has influenced her priorities, points of view, and perspectives. Her belongings are modest and her home is simple:

In the front room were two sofas, an upright piano, and a tiny artificial Christmas tree which had been there, decorated and dustladen, for two years. [...] Trunks, chairs, a small end table, and a cardboard “wardrobe” closet were placed around the walls. [...] There were no bath facilities. Only a toilet bowl, inaccessible to the eye, if not the ear, of the tenants. (33)

This extract from the text reveals that the Breedloves’ living situation is rather simple. They lack rooms and objects which assumedly would be considered to be “necessary” in order to have an “acceptable” lifestyle. Their deficit in luxurious, material goods impedes them from being respected by their community. Property and prestige are generally linked, as numerous quotes and extracts from the novel suggest; in case this assumption is true, the Breedlove family can be considered to lack prestige. The reader of The Bluest Eye gets the impression that Pauline Breedlove does not feel comfortable in this situation; she knows what life could be like under different circumstances, and believes in a link between social connections and possession. Her
employer’s family owns everything she considers to be necessary for a good life and for creating a network with other human beings. This fact makes her devalue her own existence and entity. She feels unworthy unless she is surrounded by the wealthy family and their belongings. One incident in the story apparently deteriorates the (already rather negative) image of the Breedlove family among other members of the community. The focus lies on Cholly Breedlove, who is responsible for the family’s forced moving out of their home; the idea of being obliged to live “outdoors” seems to be one of the most unfavorable and most despised concepts among the community. Claudia MacTeer explains her disrespect towards Cholly:

Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. (16)

The girl’s thought process reveals that there is nothing more despicable than a man who does not give his family the chance to have a proper home, or, in this case, a home at all. Albeit property in general is nothing Claudia regards as important, she seems to count a home, no matter how simple and small, to the absolute necessities in life. Cholly fails to maintain his and his family’s home due to his irresponsible behavior:

He was outdoors, and his own flesh had done it. To be put outdoors by a landlord was one thing—unfortunate, but an aspect of life over which you had no control, since you could not control your income. But to be slack enough to put oneself outdoors, or heartless enough to put one’s own kin outdoors—that was criminal. (15)

The girl seems to depreciate Cholly as a person; nevertheless, she includes the man in her thoughts instead of ignoring and disregarding him. Consequently, she sees him as a member of her community, and despite his “negative” reputation, he is a character of interest. I argue that a certain form of attention (even though it might seem to be negative) and an awareness of the person in question is a crucial factor for his (or her) possibility to be seen as a member of a community. Claudia on the one hand despises the man, but on the other hand allows him to be, in a rather implicit way, part of a community.

Morrison depicts Claudia’s intense fear of the outdoors as a result of her own rather poor background. Her parents have never had the possibility of providing their daughters with luxuries; the MacTeer family however has learned to live a simple and modest life, and even under these circumstances, to maintain (or to create) their state of happiness. Notwithstanding,
Claudia seems to be afflicted with a certain fear of owning even less than they do. “Outdoors, we know, was the real terror of life. The threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days.” (15) Although the girl explicitly states that material goods are nothing she aspires and never complains about the modest property of her family, the fear of losing their few belongings and especially their place to live, is present.

However, as previously mentioned, Claudia generally does not believe in the importance of property. Image and public recognition are no factors her happiness depends on. She emphasizes that possession is nothing she pursues; instead of getting a present for Christmas, for example, she prefers to make extraordinary memories. “I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.” (21) To her, direct attention from other human beings has a higher value than the indirect attention material goods would trigger. Her social status, which, as depicted in the novel, might be regarded to depend on property and other factors such as physical appearance, seemingly does not account for Claudia’s happiness. Most characters, however, adapt their opinions to what is generally viewed to be right and what is wrong; interpreting the novel, it could be argued that society shapes the way people think and the way people perceive themselves and others. For this reason, the image of a person is an aspect that requires to be worked on. Claudia and Frieda, who are portrayed to be strong enough to form their own opinions, on the surface level do not seem to attach high importance to their personal image.

Nonetheless, it is important to mention that the girls are not entirely resistant and immune to the judgement of fellow human beings. One situation reveals that Claudia and Frieda are irritated and confused by a rich girl’s possessions: “She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care. The quality of her clothes threatened to derange Frieda and me.” (60) This quote does not imply that Claudia and her sister aspire to resemble the rich, white girl in any way; however, it suggests that the MacTeer children do not feel comfortable in the girl’s presence. This might have to do with the fact that the sisters do not attach great importance to the ownership luxuries, and additionally, that they do not have the financial means to own valuable items, such as nice clothes. They depend on their parents whose income is solely sufficient to provide the family with the most essential goods; the girls are used to their modest lifestyles and never complain about it.
However, the reader of the novel could also interpret Claudia’s and Frieda’s negative attitude towards luxuries and towards people who can afford them as a defense mechanism; perhaps the sisters disavow their poverty and do not want to admit that they themselves would not be able to own anything expensive. In the case that the girls’ behavior is effectively a defense mechanism, they are, to a certain extent, protected from feeling inferior to wealthier people. The interpreter of the story might argue that they unconsciously try to preserve their mental well-being by acting in a tough and self-confident way. On the surface, Claudia and Frieda seem to be resistant to other people’s opinions and attitudes; however, Morrison indicates that the girls at times do not manage to stick to their toughness. It becomes clear to the reader that the two frequently envy rich, white children: “What made people look at them and say, “Awwww,” but not for me?” (20) This envy seems to be caused by the positive attention the girls who have a wealthy family background tend to get; nevertheless, the reader does not have the feeling that Claudia and Frieda strive for property and for a high social status. All they seem to want is more direct attention and recognition from other people; however, the girls seemingly do not see a link between property and the establishment of social connections.

Pecola has a rather different perspective on the importance of her social status, because she believes that a good reputation is the only way to build connections with other individuals. To her, nothing seems to be more essential than the recognition on the part of her family, friends and other people of the community. She wants to be accepted as a fully adequate and complete human being. The storyline suggests that Pecola is convinced of a fixed connection between recognition and the social status of a person, and her point of view seems to be highly influenced by the thoughts and convictions of the people she is surrounded by. Pecola, whose self-esteem is portrayed to be virtually non-existent, is in urgent need of admiration and recognition. Her lack of confidence and self-respect stop her from creating the same defense-mechanisms which seem to protect Claudia and her sister Frieda. Pecola does not seem to have a tough side; she is portrayed to be sensitive to the core. The reasons for Pecola’s apparent inferiority complexes seem to be diverse; among others, it can be observed that the girl lacks a stable family background. Pauline and Cholly Breedlove constantly fight and she does not experience parental care and love. In the text, Morrison implies that the lack of attention Pecola receives results in the girl’s delicate situation; she is portrayed to have difficulties in loving and accepting herself and her social position, because she is not loved or accepted by her own family.
Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, on the contrary, do experience parental love (albeit the type of love they receive is rather unconventional, as their upbringing can be considered harsh and tough) and hence easily learn to respect themselves. All they seem to worry about is the general opinion of their community on different issues; the sisters do not understand why they tend to be unaccepted as equal members of society, because they themselves are convinced of their dignity. The following quote supports this assumption:

Guideless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. (73)

Claudia and Frieda are undoubtedly content with their bodies, their social status, and their moderate possessions. They do not want their personal situation to change; what they desperately want to change, however, are other people’s opinions on their situation and their attitude towards the girls. They do not settle for the simple form of attention and interest they receive from other members of society, who might pity them for their appearance and modest possessions. Claudia and Frieda only seem to appreciate direct attention and want to be accepted for who they are, without having to adapt to other people’s artificially created standards.

The girls’ mother, Mrs. MacTeer, has a similar approach to the topic; she does not have a strong desire and does not feel the need to be excessively wealthy, because image and reputation seem to be of rather low importance to her. She prefers to create connections in a different way. However, she seems to intend to keep her living standard the way it is, which means that she wants to avoid plunging into greater poverty (as “real” poverty is associated with insecurity and discomfort). One specific occasion leads to this assumption: Pecola, who lives with the MacTeer family for a certain amount of time (because her father “put his family outdoors” (16)) drinks three quarts of milk. Considering the weak financial situation of the MacTeer family, this is a considerable amount. Mrs. MacTeer does not approve of this excessive consumption and Pecola’s seemingly greedy behavior: “Time for me to get out of the giving line and get in the getting line. I guess I ain’t supposed to have nothing. I’m supposed to end up in the poorhouse.” (22) Morrison gives hints that even though certain characters do not strive for luxury and a prestigious reputation, they do fear a deterioration of their current living standards. The MacTeer family undoubtedly is used to modesty, and hence also expects humility from guests or other residents. Pecola, being a girl whose background is even poorer, does not deliberately show greedy behavior; her consumption of three quarts of milk seemingly does not
originate from a possible craving for milk, but from the fact that she wants to look at Shirley Temple’s face which is imprinted on the cup.

Unlike Mrs. MacTeer and Claudia, Morrison portrays a group of women who are strongly driven by possession and consumption. Morrison dedicates a chapter (“SEETHECATITGOESMEOWCOMEANDPLAYCOMEPLAYWITHJANETHEKITTEN WILLNOTPLAYPLAYPLAY”) to a certain type of ladies of African American descent, who live their lives virtually like the white middle- or upper-class. They are portrayed to be “sugar-brown”, to have “slim ankles; long, narrow feet” and to “wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion.”. (80) Morrison gives the reader the impression that the women portrayed in this chapter intend to obtain (or maintain) a prestigious image in order to be viewed as members of the upper-class.

They take good care of themselves to look presentable at all times; apparently, they have sufficient time at their disposal in order to do so. These women are portrayed to strive for a physical appearance which, supposedly, would be associated with Caucasians; “They straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, and part it on the side.”; “They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair.” (80-81) Kuenz explains that the behavior of these women and their obsession with their appearance can be explained by the spreading of a mass culture phenomenon, which, in a way, suggests certain normative values one must adhere to. She further explains that these values are closely tied to racial- or gender-oriented concepts. (421)

However, not only the physical appearance of the ladies is taken care of; Morrison depicts them to act in a morally “decent” way, in a way, which presumably would be considered to be correct according to assumed Christian standards. The reader gets the impression that these women work hard in order to create a positive image of themselves, and, undoubtedly, to maintain it. They seemingly want to be perceived as “good housewives” who provide their husbands with everything they might need after a long day of work.
They never seem to have boyfriends, but they always marry. Certain men watch them, without seeming to, and know that if such a girl is in the house, he will sleep on sheets boiled white, hung out to dry on juniper bushes, and pressed flat with a heavy iron. (81)

These women are portrayed to satisfy their husbands’ physical needs (“They look at her hands and know what she will do with biscuit dough; they smell the coffee and the fried ham; see the white, smoky grits with a dollop of butter on top.” (81)) and on the surface, seem to care for their mental wellbeing (“There will be pretty paper flowers decorating the picture of his mother, a large Bible in the front room. They feel secure.” (82)). To take care of the property seems to be the main task of women. The house, the garden and all other belongings are put in order, neatened and kept tidy. Property and their task to keep it in order seems to give women a certain feeling of power.

What [the men] do not know is that this plain brown girl will build her nest stick by stick, make it her own inviolable world, and stand guard over its every plant, weed, and doily, even against him. In silence will she return the lamp to where she put it in the first place; remove the dishes from the table as soon as the last bite is taken; wipe the doorknob after a greasy hand has touched it. A sidelong look will be enough to tell him to smoke on the back porch. (82)

This extract visualizes in what ways this specific group of women build up their empires. The houses, the gardens and everything that belongs there are under their commands. Their belongings (which were presumably financed by their working husbands) apparently give them a certain feeling of superiority and of power. Property is, as it seems, linked closely to higher social classes; this association might be responsible for these women’s materialistic-oriented behavior. Their feeling of power is expressed in a subtle way, but undoubtedly it does not stay unnoticed. Materialistic concepts can be observed to help these women to establish social structures and hierarchies. Despite, or rather because of their feeling of superiority on certain levels, these women are insentient; all they focus on seems to be their prestigious image and a certain degree of power over their husbands. This attitude towards life apparently takes away these women’s sensibility and their ability to openly experience emotions. The narrator for example points out that these women resist to find pleasure in sexual encounters.

He must enter her surreptitiously, lifting the hem of her nightgown only to her navel. He must rest his weight on his elbows when they make love, ostensibly to avoid hurting her breasts but actually to keep her from having to touch or feel too much of him. (82)

The reader of the novel might conclude that material goods and a “high-profile” image do not guarantee happiness and content; even though these women have the intention to present their
relationships as flawless and perfect, the partners do not seem to be attached to each other emotionally. And, although these women seem to own everything a “good” housewife needs, they apparently do not find complete self-fulfillment. However, to a certain degree, property helps them to feel a certain form of power and control, and power can contribute to the self-awareness of a person. Their belongings and their social status apparently contribute to the formation of their identities, and, in a way, support them in the process of emancipation, and in the formation of hierarchies within the community of family. Having said this, it might be comprehensible why the women described above (and numerous other characters of the novel) attach high importance to possession.

Only few characters in the novel The Bluest Eye seem to believe that a perfect image, property and a high social status do not count to the real necessities of life, because they do not seem to associate these notions with power or happiness; they obviously try to reach their goals in a different way. Most African Americans who are depicted in the novel, however, are portrayed to aspire toward a higher social position and in some cases, are willing to change what defines them as a person. Not only their lifestyles and physical appearances, but also their cultural heritage and the original values of their community tend to be ignored or to get lost. Other characters, on the contrary, are portrayed to define themselves through property, which seemingly gives them a sense of power. The values the characters of the novel defend seem to be merely materialistic at first glance, but it can be observed that they, in an implicit way, can serve to strengthen the community and to establish social structures and hierarchies. Sharing opinions on lifestyles and on the own or other people’s property implies that a certain bond between the conversing individuals exists. The individuals who might be talked about (because they are pitied for not owning much) receive attention, which makes them part of the community. Even though their lifestyles might not conform to the “ideal”, people tend to show interest in them by conversing about them, and hereby include them in their community.

As previously mentioned, a prestigious image, a high social status and everything that is connected to these concepts (such as property) seem to be of high importance to most characters of the novel The Bluest Eye. However, as Bjork argues, “white beauty, white living, white freedom: these are what the characters in The Bluest Eye long for, strive for, and yet can never realize.” (52) The main characters seemingly do not have the chance to change their lifestyles radically due to their lack of financial means. Nevertheless, it can be observed that some
members of the African American community seem to be successful in reaching their goal to approximate a white person’s assumed standard of living. The characters’ consume-driven behavior implies that the values they defend are seemingly materialistic, and some of them apparently achieve to have a rather luxurious standard of living. On the one hand, it can be observed that there is no innate connection between wealth and happiness. Unless certain necessities, such as social justice, are fulfilled, no form of material luxury can grant peace of mind. However, on the other hand, Morrison implies that materialistic goods also facilitate discourse. Conversing about lifestyles (in a positive, as well as in a negative way) can strengthen connections and hence contributes to the establishment of a community. Furthermore, certain individuals seem to define their identities partly by their ownings; materialistic luxuries can help them to feel empowered and to be self-aware. To conclude, it can be argued that the concept of materialism can neither be regarded as entirely negative nor as entirely positive; depending on the perspective, it can have beneficial, as well as destructive characteristics.

3.5. Shifting Perspectives on Gossip: Of Language as a Tool to Establish Community

A prestigious image seemingly is, by the characters of the novel, perceived to play a crucial role for the mental well-being. They (often mistakenly) believe that a good reputation completes their lives and grants them happiness and satisfaction; this belief is held by most characters portrayed in Morrison’s novel. The perpetual quest for prestige tends to pressure an individual tremendously and frequently impedes his or her ease and serenity. Numerous characters, however, fail to achieve their ultimate goal and are, for various reasons, forced to live their lives in a way they do not appreciate. They seem to be on an eternal quest for the ideal image and the ideal life; however, perfection does not seem to exist. The novel’s characters pursue (obviously) unreachable goals and in numerous cases seem to suffer from the unattainability of their wishes. This frequently triggers negative feelings and a pessimistic attitude towards the affected person’s existence. Depreciation and frustration in numerous cases result in repugnant and improper behavior. Negative conduct, and, connected to that, a negative image, is prone to be the subject of gossip. It seems that numerous characters in The Bluest Eye tend to enjoy addressing other characters’ personal issues in their conversations. Apparently, they seek personal benefit from the act of addressing other people’s issues. It could be assumed that a
general sensationalist attitude among the population is responsible for the fact that gossip is a widely spread phenomenon. A certain curiosity about other people’s lifestyles, actions and struggles, at first sight, seems to be a deep-rooted character trait in numerous members of society.

However, it is important to mention that gossip, as depicted in Morrison’s novel, can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it could be argued that certain individuals seem to appreciate other people’s problems, because they enable them to feel better about their own personal lives. Conversing about scandalous situations fellow men might find themselves in, somehow seems to grant the gossiping individuals a sense of power and superiority. On the other hand, however, gossip can be seen to serve as a means to engage in conversation and to form part of a narrative. The act of conversing about other people’s problems and issues hence can be interpreted as a collaborative achievement. Individuals who actively participate in a conversation are part of a community, and community can be seen as an empowering construct, which allows individuals to interact and consequently, to form bonds with other individuals. Gossip can, among others, serve as a tool to help to define the identity of a person and to establish his or her position in society. Individuals who have the possibility to actively participate in social acts such as gossip can be observed to feel less lonely and receive support from other members of the community.

For numerous people, as Morrison suggests in *The Bluest Eye*, conversations about scandalous events seem to be part of the daily routine. The reader, taking the events of the novel as a basis, might assume that especially women who belong to the working class have a tendency to enjoy gossip; it could be speculated that they are not entirely content with their own lives, as their seemingly difficult economic situation might seem to impede them from having a “good” lifestyle. Financial problems tend to entail other forms of personal difficulties: they might trigger a tense family-situation because of general discontent, fatigue because of low-paid, exhaustive jobs and shame because of the feeling of inferiority (as compared to members of the middle- or upper-class). However, at this point it is important to mention that the reader of the novel should not automatically assume that poverty results in a psychological state of misery and unhappiness; albeit certain passages in the novel suggest that poverty brings along struggles of different kinds, the reader should be aware that the values the characters defend do not necessarily coincide with the values the majority of a society might seem to defend.
Nevertheless, it can be argued that the act of gossiping might be a form of self-help; regardless of the personal background of a person (with reference to financial means and the social position), engaging in conversation and connecting with other members of the community seems to allow an individual to feel accepted and appreciated. The participation in gossip is a means to receive approval and affection.

As previously mentioned, it could be argued that focusing on other people’s problems can facilitate the neglect of the own, difficult situation for a short period of time. Other people’s scandals and issues might seem to help an individual who is actively involved in a judgmental conversation to feel better about him- or herself, and to openly demonstrate a certain kind of superiority over other individuals. Gossip, according to this interpretation, can be seen as a mechanism to show a person who is involved in the “defamation” of another individual in a better light. However, it needs to be noted that it seems to be more likely that the characters in *The Bluest Eye* seek benefits of a different kind; instead of trying to improve their own images at expense of others, they might simply intend to form part of a community in order to prevent solitude. Mutual respect and appreciation can be demonstrated by engaging in conversation. The social act of exchanging ideas and opinions can help an individual tremendously with reference to the stabilization of his or her interpersonal relationships.

The conversation below demonstrates that gossip can be a highly animated conversation, which allows the active participants to form part of a community. This social interaction takes place shortly before Henry Washington, the roomer of the MacTeer family, moves into their house. Mrs. MacTeer converses with her friends about the situation, and various, obviously typical, characteristics of gossip can be observed:

“You know him,” she said to her friends. “Henry Washington. He’s been living over there with Miss Della Jones on Thirteenth Street. But she’s too addled now to keep up. So he’s looking for another place.”
“Oh yes.” Her friends do not hide their curiosity. “I been wondering how long he was going to stay up there with her. They say she’s real bad off. Don’t know who he is half the time, and nobody else.”
“Well, that old crazy nigger she married up with didn’t help her head none.”
Did You hear what he told folks when he left her?”
“Uh-uh. What?”
“Well, he run off with that trifling Peggy–from Elyria. You know.” (10-11)
It seems that the members of the conversation are exceptionally curious about the man’s life, and apparently, they feel an urgent need to share their opinions on the situation. Furthermore, the reader of the novel can observe a tendency to make assumptions; phrases such as “they say” indicate smattering. Superficial, second-hand knowledge, wrong assumptions and the intense desire to share this type of information result in the spreading of rumors. Individuals who participate in conversations of this kind are portrayed to be in search of social connections; hence, it could be argued that gossip does not necessarily serve to jeopardize the reputation of the targeted person, but, for the “gossiping” individual, to find a place in society. It could potentially be assumed that a person who engages in an apparently malicious conversation seeks personal benefit at the expense of other people (by willingly spreading rumors); however, upon closer inspection, the reader of the novel can observe that gossip does not only bring along personal benefit for the conversing party (such as connections and participation in social activities), but also for the so-called “victim”. Gossip and rumors can be seen as a means to show interest in a person, and by showing interest, the person who is talked about receives a certain form of attention. Even though gossip might, at first glance, seem to portray an individual in a negative way, it enables the “target” to be, in an unconventional manner, part of the community. Gossip therefore seems to bring along effects which can be considered positive; as opposed to ignorance and indifference, interest, cognition, and notice helps an individual who might be situated on the margins of society to feel, to a certain degree, as part of a community.

Morrison’s novel exemplifies the effects gossip might bring along. The author deliberately makes clear that numerous individuals find themselves in a rather low social position, but gossip seems to help them to stay part of the community. Three prostitutes named Poland, China and Miss Marie (also denominated as “the Maginot Line”) constitute a prominent example for this assumption. These women’s profession is portrayed to be generally considered as shady and dubious; consequently, they are situated on the margin of society. At this point it should be mentioned that the low social position of the three women seem to occupy does not implicate that they feel inferior and discontent; it can be observed that they do not feel a desire to enhance their social status. Even though at first glance, Poland, China and Miss Marie seem to be regarded as incomplete and inferior human beings (as their characters and personalities seem to be neglected due to their generally disreputable jobs) it can be observed that other members of the community in a certain way try to pay regard to them. On the surface it seems that most
members of the community, who are portrayed in *The Bluest Eye*, tend to reduce prostitutes to their profession and do not give them the chance to integrate themselves into society. However, the reader should be aware of the fact that gossip might be a despicable act at first sight, but in reality, it can have positive effects on the subject of the conversation. In the case of the three women it can be argued that the attention and the recognition they receive by means of gossip and other forms of conversations allows them to form part in a community.

Despite the benefits gossip might bring along, certain extracts from the novel reveal that the spreading of rumors can implicate rather problematic situations. Especially rather manipulable members of a community tend to blindly believe rumors and alleged truths instead of forming their own opinions. The following incident in the novel supports this declaration: Claudia and Frieda observe the roomer Mr. Henry, who obviously used the service of the prostitutes China and the Maginot Line. The reader of the novel learns about Claudia’s thoughts:

> China was not too terrible, at least not in our imaginations. She was thin, aging, absentminded, and unaggressive. But the Maginot Line. That was the one my mother said she “wouldn’t let eat out of one of her plates.” That was the one church women never allowed their eyes to rest on. That was the one who had killed people, set them on fire, poisoned them, cooked them in lye. Although I thought the Maginot Line’s face, hidden under all that fat, was really sweet, I had heard too many black and red words about her, seen too many mouths go triangle at the mention of her name, to dwell on any redeeming features she might have. (75)

This extract from the novel indicates that the image of the prostitutes which is transmitted through gossip is rather negative. Claudia gives an account of other people’s seemingly depreciative opinions on Miss Marie, and indicates that through gossip, she has heard of numerous negative characteristics the woman allegedly has. She herself briefly thinks about Miss Marie and finds positive aspects about her. Nevertheless, Claudia lets gossip influence her; the conversations between her mother and friends somehow seem to impede the girl from forming an own opinion. The last sentence of the text extract clearly shows that the girl does not dare to rethink and to question certain images distributed by other members of the community. Gossip is a powerful force; it might help the targeted person to receive attention and consequently to feel part of the community. However, numerous people show a tendency to believe in certain rumors and biased opinions which are transmitted through gossip. Claudia’s thought process proves that on the one hand, she has a personal opinion on the woman (“[…] I thought the Maginot Line’s face, hidden under all that fat, was really sweet [...]”), but on the other hand, she obviously does not dare to disagree with “more experienced”, or older
members of the community ("[...] I had heard too many black and red words about her, seen too many mouths go triangle at the mention of her name, to dwell on any redeeming features she might have."). (75) This observation leads to the conclusion that manipulable members of a community are prone to believe in prejudice.

Most members of the community use language as a tool to show interest in someone and to establish connections and communities; however, it can be observed that individuals mostly prefer to talk about a person who has a low social status rather behind his or her back instead of conversing with him or her in person. It could be assumed that gossip is the only possibility to establish connections between members of higher and members of lower social positions; communication hence can be observed to serve as a medium to include individuals in a community. Pecola, for her part, enjoys the presence of the prostitutes and visits them rather frequently, as they live in the same street as the girl. These women are portrayed to have a benevolent character; they seem to be the only people of the community (except for the MacTeer family) who do not despise Pecola. The girl, who is also marginalized by society, feels comfortable in the presence of other individuals who are apparently considered inferior by other members of the community. Among others, the fact that Pecola and the prostitutes are outsiders brings them together and is responsible for their friendly relationship. The girl seemingly does not know about the bad reputation of Poland, China and Miss Marie, or at least she does not care. Pecola, apart from feeling a certain form of affection for the ladies, somehow also admires them, as she perceives these women in an entirely different way, as compared with adults and other members of the community.

It can be assumed that the girl does not yet understand what their profession is about, nor how despicable the business these women work in is considered to be. It seems that Pecola, due to her young age and her naivety, holds the belief that the men she observes in the presence of the prostitutes must be their boyfriends: "I never seen nobody with as many boyfriends as you got, Miss Marie. How come they all love you?" (51) The reader of the novel gets the feeling that Pecola’s admiration for these women is a result of the amount of love they seemingly receive; the girl, who has never experienced the feeling of appreciation and fondness before, is obviously amazed by the affection Miss Marie and the other women, according to her, are lavished with. Pecola does not seem to notice the allegedly “scandalous” aspects of these women’s lives and hence does not judge them. It is unclear whether the girl knows about
society’s opinion on these women or not; in any case, she feels exceedingly alleviated to know the prostitutes, as they do not judge her either. Morrison implies that Pecola and the prostitutes somehow are comparable and equivalent, due to their positions in society. China, Poland and Miss Marie also treat her like one of them:

With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other. Marie concocted stories for her because she was a child, but the stories were breezy and rough. If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voiced any alarm. (55)

The fact that Pecola and the prostitutes share the same reputation and the same position on the margin of society somehow connects them. Other members of the community, the ones who usually spread rumors through gossip, on the one hand are interested in the lives of Pecola and the prostitutes, but on the other hand seem to despise them. The characters who are the subjects of gossip tend to know about other people’s perceptions on them and react in different ways. The prostitutes seem to show indifference; either they resign themselves to their low social status and do not see the point of fighting the situation, or they do not aspire a higher social position, because they feel at ease in their current situation. They are portrayed to have strong personalities and consequently do not seem to worry about other people’s opinions. Furman likewise claims that these women are honest and do not worry about their reputations; they refuse to defend hypocritical values and do not want to be pitied for their profession. (21) Pecola, on the other hand, seems to have an urgent desire to change herself in order to please her community.

The girl, without doubt, constantly seems to be a target of gossip. As mentioned in the previous chapters, Cholly Breedlove impregnates his daughter and this scandalous act arouses the curiosity of numerous people. The following scene visualizes how deeply-rooted sensationalism is among certain members of the community who are portrayed in the novel. The conversation between the unnamed characters clearly suggests that gossip is a medium to satisfy their curiosity on the one hand, and on the other, to give a certain type of attention to the targeted person.

“Did you hear about that girl?”
“What? Pregnant?”
“Yas. But guess who?”
“Who? I don’t know all these little old boys.”
“That’s just it. Ain’t no little old boy. They say it’s Cholly.”
“Lord. Have mercy. That dirty nigger.”
“Member that time he tried to burn them up? I knew he was crazy for sure then.”
“None of them Breedloves seem right anyhow. That boy is off somewhere every minute, and the girl was always foolish.” (187)

This conversation, in which originally Cholly is blamed for his despicable action, goes on and turns out to make the victim of the rape, Pecola, the subject of interest. Gossip, as portrayed in *The Bluest Eye*, among others serves to strengthen a community and to show interest in people who are usually situated on the margins of society. This interest might have its roots in compassion and in charitable feelings and attitudes. Nevertheless, it can be observed that gossip frequently contains highly radical ideas. At first glance it seems as if the speakers consider the “victims” to be subhuman and deny or ignore the fact that they have feelings; in certain cases, it can be argued that the apparent scapegoats are seemingly even denied the value of life.

Another extract from the same conversation between the unnamed characters supports this assumption:

“She be lucky if it don’t live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.”
“Can’t help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground.” (187-188)

The fact that Pecola’s ugliness constitutes the center of the present conversation extract seemingly implies that the enunciators take pleasure from stressing other individuals’ alleged defects and weaknesses. In the case of the conversation above, the alleged judgement directed towards Pecola and her (unborn) baby seems to be exceedingly harsh and contemptuous of human dignity. However, the reader of the novel needs to be aware of the different ways gossip and seemingly “malicious” talk can be interpreted. At first sight it might seem that numerous (mostly minor and unnamed) characters use gossip as a mechanism to present themselves in a positive way. Apparently, they try push other individuals to the margins of society which seemingly helps a person to feel better about his or her own life. Gossip might seem to bring the unscrupulousness and the sangfroid of numerous characters to light. The reader of *The Bluest Eye* might assume that the majority of the individuals involved in gossip might not be entirely content with their own existence; a rather low economic status and other personal issues might be responsible for a desire to cast a damning light on other individuals.
However, even though on the surface level it might seem that certain characters selfishly “victimize” an individual and seek personal benefit from this action, the underlying purpose of gossip can be considered to be different. Language, as previously mentioned, is a powerful tool which has various functions. The participation in a conversation enables individuals to form a community and to take part in it. Sharing opinions, observations and knowledge is a social act and enables the participants of the conversation to soothe their innate desire to interact with fellow human beings, and to satisfy their curiosity. Even though these interactions seem to victimize certain individuals, it should be noted that gossip, upon closer inspection, creates interest in the situation of the alleged “victims”, and interest, again, can be considered to be a positive quality. Language hence enables the characters of the novel to create a community and to include other individuals (even the ones who are generally considered to be in a low social position) in society.
Conclusion

Community is a powerful construct which allows individuals to connect on various levels. As stated in the introduction, the main purpose of this thesis was to investigate different ways of forming social connections, as represented in *The Bluest Eye*. Special attention was directed to the role of language with regards to the establishment of community. As hypothesized, all individuals, in one way or another, are in search of community, regardless of their character traits and personal convictions. Communities take on different forms and are established by distinct types of human connections. As anticipated, language is one of the strongest forms of relating to other individuals, and this paper has given an account of the various functions language has, with reference the creation of community. The investigation has led to conclude that conversations of virtually all types, regardless of their apparent, superficial functions, serve to establish interpersonal relationships.

It is crucial to note that these relations are not bound to be balanced, as also social hierarchies and rankings are established through language. Despite certain forms of inequalities in terms of relationships, it needs to be stated that every individual who is actively or passively involved in a conversation, forms part of a community. Even though at first glance certain forms of interactions (such as gossip) might have negative impacts on certain individuals, it needs to be noted that on a more profound level, they can be seen as facilitators for the establishment of a community. Social hierarchies and unbalanced power-structures might have impacts of different forms and intensities on the involved individuals, but they indicate that a certain form of community exists. Even though certain characters of the novel seem to be discontent with their social positions and with their reputations to a certain degree, the reader needs to keep in mind that they, despite their seemingly unfavorable situations, are still considered as members of a community.

One of the most remarkable results to emerge from the investigation is that nothing in life is ultimate. Individuals are, as depicted in the novel, never inherently benevolent and good, nor inherently bad. Cholly and Pauline, who seemingly are neglecting and (mentally and physically) abusive parents, in an unconventional way contribute to Pecola’s salvation. The reader learns that despite the apparent despicableness of the parents’ action and attitudes, which at first glance seem to impede the girl’s happiness and freedom, she is able to establish
connections. Pecola’s madness, as explained in the analysis, can be seen as a state of liberation, as she finally is able to be content with herself, and with her place in community. Madness would stereotypically be associated with desperation and hopelessness. Thinking beyond stereotypes and disobeying conventional patterns might help an individual to see the world from a more interesting and maybe also from a more reasonable perspective. In the case of Pecola’s madness, the reader could interpret that the girl’s (imaginary) companion allows her to feel free and encourages her on numerous levels. Through language, the two connect and form part of a mutual narrative. As a consequence, it can be concluded that Pecola should not be seen as a “victim” of society; even though initially she seems to suffer, her negative experiences and feelings culminate and eventually result in her personal state of freedom.

Other aspects and concepts of society, which at first glance might seem to have purely positive or entirely negative characteristics turn out to have both, depending on the perspective. Notions such as “beauty” or certain, apparently ideal lifestyles do not solely exist to discriminate individuals who do not live up to certain, man-made standards; upon closer inspection, it can be observed that concepts of that kind facilitate conversation and hence can serve as ways to connect people and to create communities. Although certain concepts might have materialistic backgrounds, conversing about them can bring individuals together on different levels. Hence, it can be argued that despite the apparent superficiality certain materialistic ideas might embody, these notions can, from another point of view, have rather profound functions. The ideas of beauty, race, and a “proper” lifestyle might seem to have destructive functions, but on closer inspection and from another perspective, they seemingly serve to connect individuals. This approach might be considered rather unconventional, but an uncommon method of interpreting the novel with regards to certain ideals and standards seems appropriate to gain new perspectives on Toni Morrison’s work.

In conclusion, I argue that the author in her novel implies that there is no ultimate truth and no ultimate goal in life. Every idea, every notion, and every aspect is depicted to fluctuate, as different individuals deal with distinct ideas in distinct ways; the ultimate truth does not exist, and nothing is absolute. In Morrison’s words, “love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly [...].” (204) Love, a feeling usually associated with mere positivity, is portrayed to be an indefinite notion, an idea of uncertainty. Depending on the situation and on the
participating individuals, the concept of love, for example, can take on different dimensions. As a consequence, it can be presumed that “ideals”, such as beauty and race, are only creations, which in reality do not exist, at least not in an ultimate way. Standards of different forms are products of the human mind, and create possibilities to interact and connect. These notions and ideas can be observed to shape the dynamics of community, as they influence individuals on various levels.
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Secondary Sources


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