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Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Bless Me, Ultima

by Rudolfo Anaya

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Notes

Published in 1972 by Mexican American author Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima* is the coming-of-age story of Antonio Márez y Luna, a young boy growing up in rural New Mexico in the 1940s. The story unfolds as Ultima, an elderly *healer*, arrives at the Márez home to live with six-year-old Antonio and his family. During their long walks together gathering healing plants and herbs, Ultima teaches Antonio about nature, beauty, peace, and the idea that the human spirit is in all things. Soon, however, the tranquility of Antonio's youthful existence is broken by a series of life-changing events, beginning when the young boy witnesses the killing of a traumatized war veteran at the hands of an angry mob.

As he navigates his way through early adolescence, Antonio must face the violence in his community, the conflicting hopes that his parents have for his future, his own potential loss of faith in the Catholic Church, and the question of why evil exists in the world. However, he is not alone in his struggles. Throughout it all, the wise Ultima is his friend and mentor, guiding him both morally and spiritually on the road to maturity.

Note to Teacher: There are many Spanish words and phrases in this novel. Frequently, the meanings of these words can be inferred from the context, but this may not be possible with all of them. In addition, the novel assumes the reader is familiar with some Mexican American folklore.

Bless Me, Ultima contains infrequent profanity, negative statements about Catholicism, and some strong sexual references.

All references come from the Grand Central Publishing edition of *Bless Me, Ultima*, copyright 1972.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. discuss the elements of Mexican American culture that are revealed through Antonio's family relationships, including respect for elders, family loyalty, and strong Catholic beliefs.
2. point out examples of Mexican American folklore and explain how ancient Indian beliefs remain a part of rural Mexican American culture.
3. relate the legend of la Llorona and discuss how the legend helps to stress the importance of avoiding sin.
4. provide details to support the following theme: There are consequences for tampering with another person's destiny. Cite incidents from the story to show that witchcraft, revenge, and war interfere with destiny.
5. draw inferences about characters and events when their meanings are not explicitly stated.
6. identify the conflict Antonio feels regarding his Márez and Luna family heritages; explain how Antonio resolves this problem.
7. define vocabulary words from the novel.
8. point out the prophetic nature of Antonio's dreams and explain how they foreshadow incidents in the story.
9. discuss *Bless Me, Ultima* as a loss of innocence novel; consider the ways Antonio learns to separate from his mother, becomes sexually aware, obtains spiritual independence, and grows in strength of character.
10. identify and discuss the following themes in the novel:
 - An education is necessary to succeed in the modern world.
 - Hard work and determination are necessary to achieve one's goals.
 - It is important to gain strength from hardship rather than sink into despair.
 - Despite life's hardships, it is possible to be successful.
 - Part of growing up is learning to adapt to change and recognizing that each person must create his or her own destiny.
11. relate the legend of the golden carp; discuss the impact this legend has on Antonio's search for understanding why there is evil in the world.
12. discuss the following as possible symbols in the novel and explain what they might represent: the golden carp, the black bass, the river, Florence.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Briefly describe Ultima. Why does Antonio's family want Ultima to live with them?
2. Relate three of Antonio's dreams. In what ways do his dreams foreshadow events in the story?
3. Summarize the legend of the golden carp and the legend of la Llorona. What does each legend teach Antonio about the consequences of sin and the power of forgiveness?
4. What warning does Ultima give to the Luna family before she agrees to cure Lucas by removing the curse? Cite incidents from the story to show whether this warning comes true later on in the novel.
5. Why is Antonio confused about his destiny? What does he hope God will reveal to him after he takes his first communion? Why is he disappointed?
6. Discuss whether *Bless Me, Ultima* is a loss of innocence novel. Consider the ways in which Antonio must separate from his mother and father, the lessons he learns from Ultima, and his early experiences with death.
7. Cite incidents from the story to support the following theme: It is important to gain strength from hardship rather than sink into despair.
8. Why do you think Antonio wonders if "the best god would be like a woman"?
9. In the novel, how are witches identified, killed, and buried? Why are many people afraid of Ultima's owl?
10. One of the themes in this novel is the idea that accepting changes in life is part of growing up. Cite examples from the story to support this theme.
11. What do Florence, the golden carp, the black bass, the river, and the livers of Antonio's brothers symbolize?
12. What do these events say about the power of a group versus the power of an individual to dictate morality?
 - Lupito is killed.
 - Tenorio and a group of men from the bar come to the Márez house to accuse Ultima of practicing witchcraft.
 - Tenorio goes unpunished after he murders Narciso.
 - Antonio's classmates force him to pretend to be a priest.

Dos

accustomed – adjusted

Act of Contrition – expressing sorrow for one's sins

aviso – a boat used for delivering messages

barrage – a heavy flood of gun fire as protection or to stop an enemy

catechism – a book that teaches the principles of Christianity

communion – a ceremony involving eating a wafer that is symbolic of Christ's body

composure – calmness; self-control

consolation – comfort, sympathy

contorted – twisted or distorted

countered – responded or challenged

cowered – crouched in fear

deputize – to assign the job of deputy

frenzied – extremely excited; with fast or violent movement

glistening – sparkling or shimmering

headlong – with great speed

interminable – continuous or endless

jeered – mocked or taunted

mournful – sorrowful or full of grief

resolution – a boldness or determination

shrill – high-pitched in sound

subsided – quieted or lessened

sustain – to support or maintain life

tinge – a hint or trace of something

transfixed – hypnotized or focused in one's attention

unison – together or as one

volley – a burst of shots fired at once

weary – tired; physically or mentally exhausted

1. What is the Act of Contrition in the Catholic Church?

2. What is Gabriel's dream?

Seis

cavernous – cavelike

debris – the remains of something that has been broken

intently – with great focus and attention

melee – a fight or struggle, usually involving several people

menacing – intimidating or threatening

realm – an area or territory

retorted – responded or replied, usually in a sharp or defensive way

sacred – holy; having religious or spiritual significance

sternly – seriously or strictly-stated

trek – to take a difficult journey or trip

1. Read the following passage. Why do you think Antonio feels that he is seeing his family for the last time when he is only going to school for the day? How does his description of his parents and Ultima summarize each one's dominant characteristic?

“I looked at the three of them standing there, and I felt that I was seeing them for the last time: Ultima in her wisdom, my mother in her dream, and my father in his rebellion.”

2. In the previous chapter, Ultima's owl was present to comfort Antonio when he was staying at his uncle's farm. Find a passage in this chapter where Ultima's owl is again a source of comfort for Antonio.

3. After crossing the bridge that leads to the town, Antonio leaves his family, where he speaks only Spanish, to enter the English-speaking world. List two ways in which Antonio's first day of school begins to erode his Mexican heritage.

4. How does Antonio cope with the loneliness and homesickness he feels on his first day of school?

Quince

audible – able to be heard
bustled – moved around in a hurried manner
cistern – a well or tank for holding water
diphtheria – a disease that causes difficulty breathing or swallowing
disquietude – a state of restlessness or agitation
epidemic – a widespread outbreak, usually in reference to a disease
lamely – weakly
melancholy – depressed and gloomy
pneumonia – an illness of the lungs
reprimanded – scolded or lectured
unperturbed – unbothered
treacherous – very dangerous

1. State a generalization about life that Antonio learns from the community's reaction to Narciso's death.

2. Gabriel knows his sons are leaving home again, ending his dreams of traveling with them to California. After reminiscing about working with his sons, Gabriel goes out alone to fix the windmill. Read the following passage from the story and then explain why Gabriel experiences a sense of fulfillment from repairing the windmill:

“When he came back into the kitchen his hands and face were frozen white and he was dripping with the sweat of exhaustion, but there was a look of satisfaction on his face.”
