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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Rudolfo Anaya's

## **Bless Me, Ultima**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

Bill McMahon



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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Introduction to *Bless Me, Ultima*

THE DETAILS OF RUDOLFO ALFONSO Anaya's early life mirror those of young Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima*. Anaya was born in Pastura, a rural village in New Mexico. Anaya's father and mother, like Antonio's, came from different backgrounds. His father was born to the wandering cowboy life of the *vaqueros*; his mother was from a long line of farmers. The family eventually relocated to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the *Barelas* neighborhood. Again, like Antonio, Anaya did not learn English until he started school.

Many of Anaya's books deal with the history and culture of New Mexico. The *llano* (a grassy plain), *La Llorona* ( "The Weeper," a woman doomed to walk the earth because she has killed her children and been rejected by her lover), and the Virgin of Guadalupe (a manifestation of the Virgin Mary who appeared to a Mexican peasant, and who is the symbol of Catholic faith in the region) feature in his most famous work, *Bless Me, Ultima*, as well as other novels. The same stories and images are examined in his poetry, plays, and children's books.

The problems of the modern, developed Southwest, especially in conjunction with the ancient spiritual traditions of the area, also appear frequently in Anaya's works. The novel *Albuquerque* (1992), for instance, deals with the clash between modern politics in the major New Mexico city and the native culture of New Mexico. Anaya also wrote a series of detective novels that examine these issues: *Zia Summer*, *Rio Grande Fall* (centering on the famous Albuquerque Balloon Festival), *Shaman Winter*, and *Jemez Spring*. All the books feature the detective Sonny Baca, who travels in both New Mexico's modern political environment and the ancient spiritual realm.

Furthermore, Anaya has experimented with autobiographical fiction; *Tortuga*, based on Anaya's real-life experiences, is about the physical and emotional recovery of a teenager injured in a diving accident.

Anaya is now recognized as a major Chicano writer. *Bless Me, Ultima*, which was initially rejected by many publishing houses, went on to win the *Premio Quinto Sol* Award and has been recognized as a classic of Chicano literature. Since its publication, Anaya has contributed to or edited numerous anthologies of Chicano literature.

Anaya is retired as Professor Emeritus from the University of New Mexico, from which he graduated.

## Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *Bless Me, Ultima*



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

#### Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



## Activity One

### Examining Aspects of the Personality in *Bless Me, Ultima*

1. As a class, review the Freudian interpretations of id (desire, passion), ego (conscience) and superego (mediator between id and ego).
2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following characters:
  - Tenorio
  - Ultima
  - Antonio
4. Have each group answer the following questions about its character:
  - Which of the three aspects of the personality does your character most closely resemble?
  - What qualities of your character suggest this aspect? Give specific examples.
  - With whom is your character in conflict, and why?
  - Which of the three aspects of the personality does this conflicting character most closely resemble?
  - What qualities of this conflicting character suggest this aspect? Give specific examples.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group report on its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the psychoanalytic/Freudian implications of the interplay of these three characters.

*NOTE: It is not necessary for the students to agree or even to come to consensus. The point of the activity is for them simply to examine the novel and the characters from this perspective.*



## Mythological/Archetypal Theory Applied to *Bless Me, Ultima*



### Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

## Activity One

### Examining the Characters as Archetypes

1. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
2. Assign each group one of the following three characters: Ultima, Tenorio, Narciso.
3. Ask the group assigned Ultima to debate which archetype is most relevant to her character: Sage (wise woman), Earth Mother/Goddess, Spirit/Intellect, Loner/Outcast, or Scapegoat.
  - Ask the group assigned Tenorio to debate which is his most relevant archetype: Villain, Loner/Outcast, or Scapegoat.
  - Ask the group assigned Narciso to debate which is his most relevant archetype: Loner/Outcast, Scapegoat, or Sage.
  - Each group should decide on one archetype for each character.
4. Reconvene the class and ask students to present their findings. You may want to use the blackboard to list the reasons each character represents his or her archetype.
5. Use the following questions to start a class discussion:
  - How does each of these characters function as an archetype within the story?
  - How does an archetypal view of the characters affect the reader's interpretation of the novel?
  - How many of the major characters fit the Loner/Outcast or Scapegoat archetype?
  - What does this tell us about the culture Anaya is portraying in the novel?
  - How is Antonio's journey a prototypical coming-of-age story?
  - How does Antonio's archetypal role as hero/protagonist inform that journey?

## Feminist Theory Applied to *Bless Me, Ultima*



### Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.





## Activity One

### Examining the Power and Importance of Women in the Novel

1. Copy and distribute the worksheet entitled: “*Development and Power of Women in Bless Me, Ultima*.”
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups. Have each discuss the characters and follow the instructions to fill out the worksheet.

*NOTE: If there are individuals who cannot agree with the members of their groups, allow them either to form new groups or work alone.*

3. Reconvene the class and review the rankings and information in each column.
4. Discuss and note any strong discrepancies and disagreements between groups.

*NOTE: At this point, students/groups do not need to agree or come to consensus as long as every group has had the opportunity to present and explain its findings.*

5. Discuss the roles the female characters play in the society portrayed in the novel. Ask students whether they think that the author believes that females in general are supposed to play those roles.
6. Optional: Using the archetypal categories used in the previous interpretation, have the students place each female character with the most relevant corresponding archetype, and then discuss what this reveals about the author’s view of women.