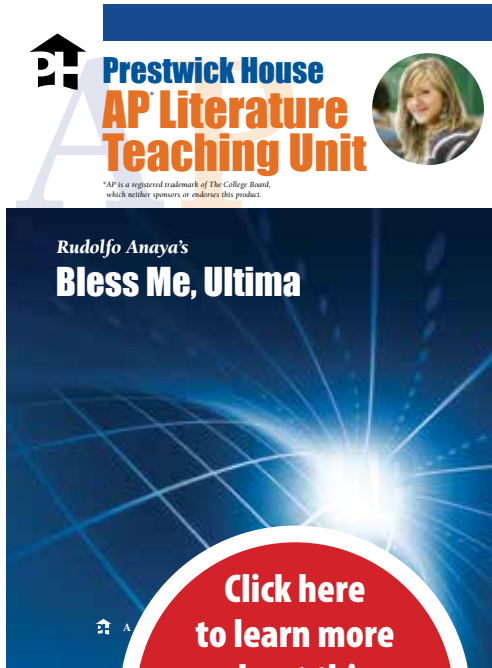




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Teaching Unit

Bless Me, Ultima

by Rudolfo Anaya

written by Bill McMahon



Prestwick House

Item No. 307034

Bless Me, Ultima

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will:

1. Analyze the novel on three levels
 - As a coming of age story.
 - As a religious allegory about the conflict between good and evil.
 - As a psychological exploration about the effect of culture on identity.
2. Chart the key moments in the story that define the growth of the lead character.
3. Analyze Anaya's development of the major symbols of the novel—such as the owl, the horse and the carp—and their contribution to the novel's theme.
4. Examine the novel's view of the differences and conflicts between men and women in traditional Mexican society.
5. Analyze the novel as an allegory for an individual's internal struggle and growth.
6. Examine each of the major characters as an archetypal figure.
7. Examine the elements of Magical Realism in the novel.
8. Discuss the novel as an example of *bildungsroman*.
9. Respond to multiple-choice items similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Communication exam.
10. Respond to free response items similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
11. Offer a close reading of *Bless Me, Ultima* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Introductory Lecture

RUDOLFO ANAYA

Rudolfo Anaya was born in 1937 in the small New Mexico village of Pastura. The details of his early life are nearly identical to those of his young protagonist, Antonio, in *Bless Me, Ultima*, and the novel can be seen as autobiographical in many respects. Anaya, like Antonio, was the son of parents from conflicting cultures. His father was a former *vaquero*—a wandering cattle-worker and shepherd, while his mother was from a long line of farmers, devoutly Catholic, and deeply rooted on the land. The 1930s and 1940s was a time of displacement for Mexican Americans; their traditionally self-sufficient agrarian economy was being subsumed by a progressively wage-labor economy, and Anaya's father was forced to become a laborer. The family moved from Pastura to Santa Rosa while Anaya was a small child. This experience is reflected in the sense of displacement, disillusion, and nostalgia intrinsic to the characters of both Antonio's father and mother and in the major theme of the impact of culture on the individual.

In 1954, a swimming accident left young Anaya temporarily paralyzed, and his period of immobility gave him much time to consider philosophical, religious, and cultural questions. This experience is closely paralleled in the novel with the drowning of Florence, Antonio's friend who refuses to believe in God and dies before Antonio can show him the golden carp. The need to be connected to a solid belief system, either religious or pagan or both, is underlined here; both Anaya and Antonio are survivors of near-death experiences, while Florence's lack of connection or belief is seen as a tragic vulnerability.

Anaya was one of ten children, and the importance of family, and their influence on the individual—both positive and negative—was doubtlessly fueled by his relationships with his parents and siblings. The need to learn from each member, but maintain an open, independent, and questioning mind is one of the major themes of *Bless Me, Ultima*, and the major lesson Antonio must learn through the course of the story.

BLESS ME, ULTIMA AS COMING OF AGE STORY

Bless Me, Ultima can be categorized as a *bildungsroman*—a literary term for a coming-of-age story, in which the protagonist progresses from child to adult. Seen in this light, it can be readily compared to other modern classics such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Shane*, or *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*, or for that matter, Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. All have young protagonists who experience violence, death, or other misfortune, and whose personalities are forged by those events, prodding each toward adulthood, perhaps prematurely but, nevertheless, with a sense of inevitability.

Antonio has not one, but several experiences of violent death, all of which he closely witnesses and all of which leave him with deep religious, moral, and emotional questions. Each experience, from Lupito's apparent suicide to the killing of Ultima's owl (and by extension, Ultima herself), deepens Antonio's exposure to the dark side of human nature and the cost of hatred and cultural

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What is the significance of the family's having left the *llano* for Guadalupe? How does the move represent the conflict between Antonio's father and mother?
2. Discuss the horse as symbol, and how it relates to not only Antonio's father, but to all the male characters in the story.
3. How does Ultima reflect the values and realities of the community of which she is a part? How does she stand apart from them?
4. There are many Christian allusions in the novel, along with many references to native Mexican folklore and traditions. Where do these conflict with one another? Do they ever dovetail? What does this tell us about the relationship between Catholicism and folklore?
5. How does Antonio's experience of violence and death form his character?
6. How does the symbol of the Golden Carp echo Antonio's inner religious conflict?
7. What kind of man do you think Antonio will become after the story ends? Will he become a priest, a farmer, or neither? Why?

Bless Me, Ultima

Chapter One (Uno)

1. How does Ultima come to be a part of the Marez family?

2. Why does the family address Ultima with the title *La Grande*?

3. What is a *curandera*?

4. What does Antonio's first dream portray, and what does it foreshadow?

Chapter Five (Cinco)

1. Why does the family, except Gabriel, go to El Puerto?

2. What do we learn about the history of the Lunas?

3. Describe the emotional tone of the visit to El Puerto, and what it says about the characters.

4. How does Uncle Juan perceive Antonio?

Chapter Ten (Diez)

1. Why is the trip with Ultima, to help cure his uncle, a turning point for Antonio?

2. How does the novel reveal itself as an example of Magical Realism here?

3. What is underlined by the introduction of Magical Realism?

4. How is Antonio's experience of his uncle's cure both an ordeal and a rite of passage?

5. How is Ultima's power as a *curandera* perceived by the people of the town, after Lucas' cure?

6. What might this ambivalence foreshadow?

Chapter Fifteen (*Quince*)

1. What is unspoken, but apparent, between Antonio and his brother Andrew at the beginning of the chapter?

2. What does Antonio’s approaching First Communion signify for him?

3. What clue reveals that Leon and Gene have returned to the family because of a misadventure? What does the misadventure say about their characters?

4. How does Gabriel reveal the effect of his sons’ return?

5. What does Antonio wonder when Andrew leaves with Leon and Gene? What is the implication of Antonio’s thoughts?

Chapter Twenty (Veinte)

1. What clues suggest that Antonio and his classmates are growing up?

2. Why does Tellez come to visit the Marez family?

3. How does Tellez's arrival underscore Antonio's doubts and questions?

4. How do the clouds that darken the Tellez house, and the rocks that fall on its roof, illustrate the literary convention of pathetic fallacy? How do they illustrate the literary school of Magical Realism?

5. What themes are advanced by Ultima's attributing the curse to the work of man and not the devil? Who else has echoed a similar sentiment?

6. What can be inferred by Antonio's dream about his brothers?
