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The Triumph of White Magic in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*

Magic, often used by contemporary writers to produce works of debatable literary quality, was once an important theme in Western literature. Soothsayers, healers and magicians of various categories can be found in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Greek tragedies, and the Arthurian myths. In these works, the power of the magicians is formidable, and their presence is central to the plot.

As the Western world became Christianized, magic was either subsumed into the church through saintly miracles, or ruthlessly suppressed by the tribunals of the Inquisition. However, rites of exorcism continue to be a part—albeit a somewhat neglected part—of church practice. Gradually the Christian cosmology became dominant in Europe and America. Other belief systems were destroyed or forced underground. Demonolotry, nonetheless, as exemplified in the Black Mass, continues as a minor rebellion against Christian beliefs. In a Christianized Europe, when magic lost its cultural significance, it largely disappeared from Western literature, except in ghost stories and gothic novels.

The popularity of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* and of like productions, is a demonstration of our American fascination with demonology. However, the shallowness of the novel relegates it to minor literary status. Despite *The Exorcist*'s shortcomings, its commercial success clearly shows that American readers remain enthralled with the powers of darkness. With the exception of the stories of Hawthorne and Poe, few important works of American literature have developed magic as a major theme until Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*.

Anaya has created a finely-textured work that can be interpreted on several different levels. It is a novel about a boy growing up in the Chicano Southwest; it is a religious work which questions the tenets of the Christian cosmology; it is a sympathetic portrayal of the pleasures and occasional travails of life in an extended family. Also a historically accurate document, *Bless Me, Ultima* depicts some of the beliefs and practices of the Indians who have lived in the Southwest for at least one thousand years. Each of these readings is coherent, I believe, because of Anaya's adept use of magic—Nahuatl Indian magic. Through this theme, the dramatic interest in the story develops, and through magic, the historical data is woven into the novel. The practice of non-Christian white magic leads to a deeper philosophical theme in the novel: the incompatibility of Christianity with the spiritual needs of the Mexican

American. *Bless Me, Ultima* is deep and full where other novels using magic as a theme seem shallow and empty.

Pre-Columbian myths form a significant part of *Bless Me, Ultima.* Demonstrated through rituals which dramatize Indian beliefs, the myths serve at once to connect the reader to a past often ignored by American history, and to provide the basis for the development of a contemporary Chicano worldview. A reinterpretation of the past is necessary, Anaya seems to say, because it offers Chicanos a sense of identity they would otherwise lack; in *Bless Me, Ultima,* traditional sources of support, the family, the church, the school fail to give the youthful protagonist, Antonio, the spiritual depth he requires:

> ... the priest was talking to us. He said something about being Christians now, and how it was our duty to remind our parents to contribute to the collection box every Sunday so that the new school building could be built and sisters could come to teach us. I called again to the God that was within me but there was no answer. Only emptiness. (p. 211)[1]

Anaya rejects traditional Christianity and, instead, creates the basis for a religion more compatible with the spiritual needs he feels. "If the old religion could no longer answer the questions of the children then perhaps it was time to change it" (p. 236). The result is a syncretism of Roman Catholic Christianity and Nahuatl-Aztec myth, which gives Antonio the hope he is reaching for. "Every generation, every man is part of his past. He cannot escape it, but he may reform the old materials, make something new" (p. 236).

White magic is the instrument of Antonio's spiritual awakening. The rites of healing and exorcism are his starting points, demonstrating ancient truths which had never interested him before. Consequently, magic, both black and white, is a dominant theme in the novel. Through the use of black magic, witches cast spells upon the innocent to avenge imagined affronts. Only through the practice of white magic can these spells be overcome and the balance of nature restored to the world. In *Bless Me, Ultima* the presence of magic is indisputable, and its effects are *tangible.* Anaya has created for us a mythical world which provides glimpses of experience at once contemporary and ancient, rational and non-rational, Christian and pre-Christian. The paradox inherent in these pairs creates tension which drives the novel.

Ultima, a *curandera* (healer), performs the white magic in the novel. By so doing, she acts as Antonio's spiritual guide, revealing to him the pre-Columbian myths and beliefs that give her power and knowledge. Of indeterminate age and origin, Ultima is Antonio's link to the past. Through her, he participates in a uniquely Chicano syncretic world view, which dates to the Aztecs and their Nahuatl ancestors.

THE NAHUATL-AZTEC ROOTS

The Nahua people of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico can trace their history more than six hundred years.[2] Their mythology, depicting the world as an arena in which good and evil constantly compete, is passed from the Nahua to their descendents. Students of Nahuatl beliefs have two sources: written historical fragments and an extant oral tradition.

The efficiency with which the *conquistadores* destroyed Indian records makes it impossible to reconstruct Nahuatl-Aztec theology in detail. Fragments remain, but many of the valuable sources were obliterated. Today, incomplete documents provide hints rather than complete information. León-Portillo (1963), López Austin (1966, 1967) and Robelo (1980) have translated existing Nahuatl codices into Spanish and provided valuable exegesis. In addition, Taggart (1983) lived with contemporary Nahua Indians for more than a year to attempt to reconstruct their cosmology from their oral tradition. Their research has been most helpful.[3]

The Nahuatl universe consists first of the sky, ruled by the powerful god of the sun. Below the sky is the earth, which has a center, protected by the sun, where the Nahua live. At the periphery is the forest, which the sun does not always penetrate. Here devils from below the earth attempt to steal souls through temptation and the practice of black magic. White magic must be practiced to counter the powers of the devil. Health, knowledge, religion, and the performance of everyday tasks all rely upon magic. To be effective, practitioners must follow intricate rituals which have evolved over the centuries. Through the mystical Ultima, Anaya reveals to us significant portions of the Nahuatl magical rituals in *Bless Me, Ultima.*

BLACK MAGIC IN *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*

Through magic Anaya connects us to a distant mythical past which can be partially understood through analysis of the Nahuatl oral traditions. Taggert (1983) discusses black magic as an essential element of daily existence.

Life for the contemporary Nahua is a contest between the powers of light, led by Jesus Christ, and the powers of darkness, led by Satan. For power, wealth, greed or vengeance, certain people learn to serve the devil. Anaya uses this historical data skillfully. In *Bless Me, Ultima,* the three daughters of Tenorio Trementina, owner of the town bar and barber shop, have dedicated themselves to the service of the devil. They

cast the spell upon Antonio's uncle that Ultima must exorcise. Their power in the novel, while considerable, comes principally from the relatively modern European beliefs exemplified by the Black Mass. Ultima's powers, on the other hand, originate in the gods of the Nahuatl people. Her medicine is older, as Anaya carefully demonstrates, and more powerful than both the anti-Christian magic of the witches and the Christian forces of the priest who tried without success to ease Uncle Lucas' suffering. At first Antonio is astounded by the thought that Ultima's powers could be superior. "Would the magic of Ultima be stronger than all the powers of the saints and Holy Mother Church? I wondered" (p.90).

Ultima, while sure of her powers, does not underestimate the strength of the three witches. "Evil is not easy to destroy," she said, "one needs all the help one can get" (p. 84).

Ultima knows Tenorio's daughters and she describes them to Antonio during the exorcism.

> "They are women who are too ugly to make men happy," she answered, "and so they spend their time reading in the Black Book and practicing their evil deeds on poor, unsuspecting people. Instead of working, they spend their nights holding their black masses and dancing for the devil in the darkness. But they are amateurs, Antonio," Ultima shook her head slowly, "they have no power like the power of a good curandera. In a few days they will be wishing that they had never sold their souls to the devil—" (p. 92)

The spell Ultima must lift was cast upon Antonio's Uncle Lucas by the three sisters in retribution for disrupting one of their Black Masses. Ultima's struggle to save Lucas' life creates the dramatic conflict of the novel.

Anaya employs a further symbol of evil, a wild black horse, to add to the formidable retinue of allies with which Ultima must contend. Tenorio, whom Ultima calls "an evil man" (p. 83), tries on two occasions to trample Antonio atop his black stallion. The symbol of the frightening black horse is prevalent in Nahuatl legend. Taggert (1983) discusses a contemporary Nahuatl myth in which an Indian sees the devil mounted on "a big horse, a black horse that threw sparks".[4] Through the symbol of Tenorio's horse, Anaya gives the black witches at least one link to the Nahuatl gods who are also the sources of Ultima's powers.

WHITE MAGIC IN *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*

Ultima is a midwife, healer and performer of white magic in the Nahuatl tradition. She can marshal the forces of the ancient gods as well as the strength of Christian healing to help her combat evil:

. . . Ultima was a curandera, a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle worker who could heal the sick. And I had heard that Ultima could lift the curses laid by brujas, that she could exorcise the evil the witches planted in people to make them sick. And because a curandera had this power she was misunderstood and often suspected of practicing witchcraft herself. (p. 4)

Through the novel, Ultima gradually reveals her beliefs to Antonio. This informal teaching is a fascinating demonstration of non-traditional education. Antonio learns Ultima's secrets by watching, listening and thinking. Frequently, Ultima avoids answering direct questions. Instead, she prefers to show her pupil the knowledge and power which has been granted to her:

"A curandera cannot give away her secrets," she said, "but if a person really wants to know, then he will listen and see and be patient. Knowledge comes slowly—" (p. 31)

Because Ultima is the central figure of the novel, Anaya provides her with an array of symbols and beliefs which reveal the meaning of her powers. These are the forces of white magic, the power of good, upon which Ultima calls in her struggle against evil. To understand the skill with which Anaya has infused his novel with Nahuatl symbolism, we need to look at these symbols and references in detail.

THE HEALER IN NAHUATL CULTURE

Ultima is the one character in the novel with direct access to the beliefs of the Nahuas. As such, she symbolizes knowledge and a way of life from a dimly-known past. She is an anachronism. The people do not know how to react to her. Anaya, however, portrays her as the inheritor of the proud tradition of Nahuatl healers known today only by the contemporary Nahua.

Healers, according to Soustelle (1955), were greatly respected:

The physician (ticitl), either man or woman, was above all a sorcerer, but a benign sorcerer, accepted and approved by the community; whereas the caster of spells, the black magician, was condemned.[5]

The Christian people of El Puerto, however, are ambivalent towards Ultima, even after she heals Antonio's uncle:

"La curandera!" (the healer) someone exclaimed. Some women bowed their heads, others made the sign of the cross. "Es una mujer que no ha pecado" (She is a woman who has not sinned), another whispered. "Hechicera" (Caster of spells). "Bruja—" (witch).

"No!" one of my aunts contested the last word. She knelt by Ultima's path and touched the hem of her dress as she passed by.

"Es sin pecado" (She is without sin), was the last I heard, then we were outside (My translation.) (p. 96)

Their ambivalence can be seen as an effect of the diluted spirituality Christianity has forced upon them. Ultima understands this, and accepts the spiritual hold the Church exerts:

"The church would not allow your grandfather to let me use my powers. The church was afraid that—" She did not finish, but I knew what she would have said. The priest at El Puerto did not want the people to place much faith in the powers of la curandera. He wanted the mercy and faith of the church to be the villagers' only guiding light. (p. 90)

So great is their belief in the Christian teachings that they fear Ultima, even when she demonstrates that she uses her powers only for good. Fortunately for Antonio, he has already begun to question Christian dogma. His willingness to doubt established truths enables him to see the importance of Ultima's victory without fear.

Soustelle has found that contemporary Nahua preserve many of the medical practices common in pre-Columbian Mexico. Sickness, he discovered, is attributed to four possible causes. Two of these, "the introduction of a foreign body into the person of the sufferer by black magic; (and) injuries or death inflicted upon the sufferer's totem . . . or naualli by an enemy . . ."*[6] are dramatically employed in *Bless Me, Ultima.*

The spell placed upon Antonio's uncle is an example of the first cause of illness, while the climactic murder of Ultima's owl and, consequently, of Ultima, is an example of the second.

To cure Antonio's uncle, Ultima avails herself of the same techniques employed by the Nahuas. Soustelle describes this process:

Once the nature and the cause of the malady had been decided, the treatment began. If it were an illness sent by a god, they'd tried to appease him with offerings. In other cases, the treatment including magical operations to a greater or lesser degree—invocations, insufflations, laying on of hands . . .—and medical treatment based upon positive knowledge—bleeding, baths, purges, dressings, plasters and the giving of extracts or infusions of plants.[7]

Ultima the healer is the connection between the narrative present and the mythic past. Her knowledge, her symbols, her power link us to the

* The other two causes: fate or destiny and the harmful effect of the night air are not mentioned in the novel.

Nahuatl past Anaya portrays so carefully. Each detail, each symbol Anaya provides for Ultima, makes the Nahuatl traditions more accessible to us and, consequently, more important to us.

THE MAGICAL USE OF ANIMALS: *TONALISM* AND *NAHUALISM*

Reflecting Nahuatl beliefs, Anaya creates a supernatural affiliation between the practitioners of magic and the animal world. López Austin explains the Indian beliefs about the special relationship between witches (white or black) and animals:

> Among the Maya, Zapoteca and Mazatecas existed—and still exists—the belief of a mystical link between a man and an animal, which causes that the wounds and the fortunes of one are shared by the other. *Tonalism* implies that these individuals have a *tona*; a mystic relationship between one man and just one animal; that both share the same luck; but that there is no ability for either to change himself into the other. (My translation.)[8]

Because white witches usually had the power of *tonalism*, Anaya provides Ultima with a *tona*, an owl:

> And with Ultima came the owl . . . I knew it was her owl because the other owls of the *llano* did not come that near the house . . . In many *cuentos* I had heard the owl was one of the disguises a *bruja* took, and so it struck a chord of fear to hear them hooting at night. But not Ultima's owl. (p. 12)

The owl is an apt *tona* for Ultima. Long-lived, small and unobtrusive, the owl is nonetheless deadly to its enemies.

Practitioners of black magic, on the other hand, developed the power of *nahualism*. López Austin explain the difference:

> *Nahualism* is . . . the ability to change form; a power which belongs to a few individuals, who are considered supernatural; the possibility of one individual to transform himself into different beings. (My translation.)[9]

During the exorcism, the witches use their powers of *nahualism* to take the form of coyotes. The prescient Ultima, however, sends her owl to attack them:

> "There will be animals sniffing around your door at night, the coyotes will howl at your door—inform your sons that no shots are to be fired. I will deal with those who come to spoil the cure myself—" (p. 86)

That night, the coyotes face an unanticipated adversary:

The cry of hungry coyotes sounded outside. Their laughter-cry sounded directly outside the small window of the room. I shivered. Their claws scratched at the adobe walls of the house. I looked anxiously at Ultima but she held her hand up in a sign for me to listen. We waited, listening to the howling wind and the cries of the pack scratching at our wall.

Then I heard it. It was the call of Ultima's owl. "O-oooo-ooo," it shrieked into the wind, dove and pounced on the coyotes. Her sharp claws found flesh because the evil laughter of the coyotes changed to cries of pain.

Ultima laughed. "Oh those Trementina girls will be cut and bruised tomorrow," she said. (p. 92)

The attack by Ultima's owl is the first demonstration of her remarkable powers. Although Anaya hints at the might of Ultima's allies, the appearance of the owl as a warrior serves to signal the beginning of an important battle. As Ultima's retinue of allies and the sources of her knowledge are gradually revealed to us, we begin to comprehend the seriousness of the ensuing struggle. Ultima at once knows, and we come to understand, that far more than one life is at stake. If evil is permitted to triumph, catastrophe may follow.

ULTIMA'S KNOWLEDGE: THE HARMONY OF CREATION

Ultima's understanding of the world reflects Nahuatl cosmology, an important tenet of which is the harmony of the universe. The Nahua believe that in this present epoch, the god of light, Jesus Christ, set all things in balance.[10] The balance can be upset by immoderate behavior or by supernatural intervention. Once the harmony has been disturbed, a price must be paid to reestablish peace in the universe. Ultima refers to the idea of natural harmony when she warns that an exorcism may require a heavy payment:

You must understand that when anybody, *bruja* or *curandera*, priest or sinner tampers with the fate of a man that sometimes a chain of events is set into motion over which no one will have ultimate control. You must be willing to accept this responsibility. (p. 80)

Ultima knows that the results of this spell are so strong that finally, she will have to pay with her own life to restore a balance to the world. She alludes to her approaching murder upon completing the exorcism. "Perhaps someday the men of El Puerto will save my life—" (p. 96)

The Nahuatl concept of harmony in the universe is explained further by the mortally-wounded Ultima:

"My work was to do good," she continued, "I was to heal the sick and show them the path of goodness. But I was not to interfere with the destiny of any man. Those who wallow in evil and *brujería* cannot understand this.

They create a disharmony that in the end reaches out and destroys life—with the passing away of Tenorio and myself the meddling will be done with, harmony will be reconstituted." (p. 247)

The deranged Tenorio, having lost two of his daughters in the battle with Ultima and an eye to Ultima's *tona*, the owl, attacks Ultima at Antonio's home. The climax of the novel, Tenorio's suicidal murder of the owl, results in the death of Ultima as well.

Antonio is dispatched to bury the owl near a forked juniper tree along the river. Contemplating the burial mound he has dug for the owl, Antonio reviews the knowledge he has acquired from the beloved healer:

> Tomorrow the women who came to mourn Ultima's death would help my mother dress her in black, and my father would make her a fine pine coffin. . . . In two days we would celebrate the mass of the dead, and after mass we would take her body to the cemetery in Las Pasturas for burial . . . But all that would only be the ceremony that was prescribed by custom . . . Ultima was really buried here. Tonight. (p. 248)

By effectively intertwining Nahuatl belief about the *tona* and the *nahual*, Anaya has added a dimension of timelessness to the struggle between good and evil. The belief in Ultima's world enables us to transcend the bonds of storytelling and enter the domain of myth. The *tona* adds to the mystique of mystery surrounding the Nahuatl healer. The communication process between owl and healer is never explained. Yet because the owl is there when needed, we *know* thoughts travel between them. The actual process is unimportant. Through her owl, Ultima is given supernatural powers. Her seeming omniscience becomes credible when we see that Ultima is privy to data unavailable to most people.

SYMBOLIC MAGIC

Amulets and charms, thought to contain special mystical powers, are another important aspect of Nahuatl magic. Soustelle states that "fantastic properties were attributed to stones, to animals . . . and to plants".[11] Ultima, too, uses amulets and other sources of symbolic magic.

Fearing retribution against Antonio for his part in the healing, Ultima gives him her scapular, which she tells him is "a small pouch of helpful herbs." She urges him to wear it because "it will keep you safe" (p. 118). The scapular protects Antonio, but tragically, leaves Ultima vulnerable.

A more powerful use of symbolic magic is Ultima's voodooesque creation of three clay dolls.*

* Normally considered an element of black magic, voodoo is here classified as white magic because its intention is to rid the world of the witches.

. . . she sat by the candlelight and sang as she worked the wet clay. She broke it into pieces, and she worked each one carefully. For a long time she sat and molded the clay. When she was through I saw that she had molded three dolls. They were lifelike, but I did not recognize the likeness of the clay dolls as anyone I knew. Then she took the warm melted wax from the candle and covered the clay dolls with it so they took on the color of flesh. When they had cooled she dressed the three dolls with scraps of cloth which she took from her black bag.

When she was done she stood the three dolls around the light of the flickering candle, and I saw three women. Then Ultima spoke to the three women. . . .

She lifted the three dolls and held them to my sick uncle's mouth, and when he breathed on them they seemed to squirm in her hands. . . .

Then she took three pins, and after dipping them into the new remedy on the stove, she stuck a pin into each doll. (p. 94)

Antonio sees the dolls again several weeks later in his home. Their appearance has changed somewhat. "I looked closely at one doll that sagged and bent over. The clay face seemed to be twisted with pain (p. 115)." This symbolic magic turns out to be extremely powerful. Before the novel concludes, two of the witches have died. The third, we suspect, will soon follow.

Anaya's accurate portrayal of white and black magic as understood by the Nahuas gives life to the novel. Even without knowing that his descriptions are historically valid, we feel drawn into Antonio's world by the narrative strength that flows from the incantations and invocations. They seem right. Our discovery that the details have been faithfully recreated from Nahuatl mythology only confirms what we already felt.

THE EXORCISM

Ultima, armed with the knowledge and power of the ancient Aztecs: her *tona*, her confidence that good is more powerful than evil, her ability to see the future, her magic potions, her ability to use amulets and charms, her secret rituals, prepares to battle the devil for the life of Lucas Luna. Her final weapon is young Antonio, whose robust health Ultima requires for the fight.

The struggle with the forces of evil, which will result in Ultima's death, begins when Antonio's Uncle Lucas is stricken with an undiagnosable illness. As he wastes away, he is taken to "the great doctor in Las Vegas . . . to no avail" (p.77). The priest is summoned next. He "came and blessed the house" and then left because "he does not want to

pit his power against those brujas!" Now he "washes his hands of the whole matter" (p. 77).

Finally Ultima is asked to help. We can assume that the hesitation of the family to request her help is due to their ambivalence toward her. Ultima, however, needs no coaxing. Because she has dedicated her life to combatting evil and disease, she assents quickly, if somewhat cautiously. Her warning that "a chain of events is set in motion over which no one will have ultimate control" (p.80) proves prophetic. Five people die before the balance of nature is restored.

To prepare for the healing, Ultima withdraws briefly to prepare her herbs and to meditate. Her contemplation enables her to see how the spell was placed, and how it can be lifted.

The exorcism itself is described in vivid detail. Anaya dedicates twenty pages to this intense, carefully-written and culturally valid incident and its preceding events. Length alone would be an indicator of importance. More significant, though, is the sense of authenticity the healing gives to Ultima and to her beliefs. Each step in the healing process: the prescribed indirect request for assistance; the sympathetic transfer of the spell from the emaciated Lucas to the drugged Antonio, whose stronger body promises a greater opportunity for success; the creation of the clay dolls through which punishment will be exacted; and the culminating burning of the matter vomited up during the healing is so skillfully portrayed that Antonio's conversion is assured. He has seen and participated in religious rituals previously unknown to him. He can no longer accept that Christian Catholicism is the sole guardian of religious knowledge.

The healing produces a spiritual liberation for Antonio. Through the exorcism, he senses the might of the ancient beliefs. Feeling strength greater than anything the Church, as he knows it, can wield, he knows that he must look into his past to find the answers to his spiritual longings. These insights will enable Antonio to "reform the old materials, make something new" (p. 236) and create a pragmatic world view encompassing truth from many possible sources. With the exorcism, Antonio's emancipation from the dogmatic bands of orthodox Christianity is complete.

The accuracy of the Nahuatl healing ritual adds further credence to the exorcism. By dramatizing the way the Nahua actually heal each other, Anaya strengthens his fiction with historically valid practices. Anaya has crafted the scene very carefully to keep our minds on our reading. Testa (1977) identifies Anaya's ability to require the reader to concentrate on sections of the text as "narrative intensification":

> As with the exorcisms, what dramatizes the action is the gradual and careful preparation of details and the tension generated in the young boy's mind.[12]

Ultima herself adds to the dramatic tension. If instead of the aged Ultma, Anaya had given us a young, strong man as the healer, the magic would not have seemed so amazing. Yet here is one frail lady pitting her knowledge against the powers of three young witches, who have frightened all the people of the town of El Puerto, including the village priest. To succeed, Ultima has to work hard. From the outset, she is confident; yet Anaya makes Ultima's work seem difficult indeed. We are not as confident as she about the outcome. When she is successful, we feel relief and satisfaction. She has earned her victory!

We celebrate Ultima's triumph, even if she remains characteristically low key. The healing is completed with quiet dignity, but it is an amazing accomplishment. Lucas is near death. Antonio can sense death in the room as he enters, and he feels its absence when the rite is concluded. The success of the exorcism marks a true turning point for Antonio. Through the healing he sees that the powers of good are available to mankind, and that they are formidable indeed. Before the healing, he has been witness to the shooting of a murderer and has learned about sin and guilt in catechism class. He is very aware of evil, which, until the exorcism, seems the dominant force in the world. But now Ultima's importance is established. To this point in the novel, Ultima's teachings are pleasing curiosities—reminders of folklore almost disappeared. Now, however, she has established herself as a mysterious source of knowledge with fascinating spiritual power.

Cantu considers the movement from a mythic past, through a corrupt present and into a future of hopeful regeneration to be a major theme in *Bless Me, Ultima*. Ultima's healing uses the power of the past to overcome the decay of the present. Antonio's concluding soliloquy expresses Anaya's hope for the future. "Sometime in the future I would have to build my own dream out of those things that were so much a part of my childhood. . . . Ultima said to take life's experiences and build strength from them, not weakness." (p. 248)[13]

Despite witchcraft, murder, and a myriad of sociocultural, economic and familial difficulties, Antonio emerges an optimist. He has learned enough to construct a meaningful life. His year with Ultima has given him the knowledge to find in his past and in his present the elements to build his future. Ultima has shown him that he cannot be defeated. "Always remember that, Antonio. The smallest bit of good can stand against all the powers of evil in the world and it will emerge triumphant" (p. 91).

It is possible to view the healing of Tío Lucas as "a psychological cure," instead of a magical one:

> The skeptic would believe that Lucas became ill because he feared the witches, that because he believed that witchcraft was the cause of his illness, he also believed that only magic could cure him. . . .[14]

However, this reading of the novel closes, in my opinion, some of the richest narrative possibilities in the text. Without magic, the novel still possesses sociological, historical and religious dimensions, but it loses its mythical power. The reader who is willing to suspend rationality and see the world instead, according to Antonio's (and Ultima's) *magical*, nonrational view will gain immeasurably by this temporary surrender of our system of beliefs. The Western-European cosmology has made the consideration of certain ideas, among them pantheism and animism, difficult. *Bless Me, Ultima* allows us to see a non-European universe, if just for a moment.

One of the values of literature, I believe, is that it enables us to examine our world in provocative ways. Brossard (1972) defines fiction as the revelation of a multi-dimensional universe:

> A true visionary fiction, like a myth structure, magically combines, orders and dramatizes multiple realities. A single level of action, or plot or behavior, does not hold sway, nor does arbitrary sequential time obtain sovereignty.[15]

Bless Me, Ultima invites interpretation which recognizes the simultaneous interaction of multiple layers of reality. Literal reality exists. People do things which cause tangible results. However, a mythical level is also present. At this level, Ultima and her *tona* as well as the Trementina sisters can be seen as symbols. They can represent the powers of good and evil which, according to Nahuatl legend, continue to struggle for control of the universe.

The triumph of white magic in *Bless Me, Ultima* provides us with a vision of a unique world where evil exists, but where good dominates. It is a primitive, rural, innocent world full of danger—yet where hope is rewarded. For the powers of good, the powers Ultima draws upon, are present, available and mighty. Yet to understand that Ultima's powers are beneficent, those who live in Anaya's world must struggle against the shackles of orthodox teaching. They have been taught to fear, and, consequently, to exclude, the powers which can save them. Like Tío Lucas, they have placed themselves at the mercy of the forces of evil. Unless they can transcend the limitations of the religious indoctrination they have received, they are at the mercy of the powers of darkness. Ultima's final blessing of Antonio reflects her belief that truth and knowledge are available to those who will seek it:

> "I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio. Always have the strength to live. Love life, and if despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills, I shall be with you—" (p. 247)

Bless Me, Ultima is a deceptively simple novel. The first reading provides us with a straightforward story of a boy learning to be a man under the tutelage of a rather extraordinary healer. This reading, however, does not account for the narrative power one senses in the text. When we examine the text more closely and discover the mythical and the historical levels that interact with the story, we sense the greatness and the depth of the work.[16]

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NOTES

1. Rudolfo Anaya. *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1973) p. 211.
2. See Miguel León-Portillo, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1963).
3. See León-Portillo. op. cit.; Alfredo López Austin, "Los Temacpolitotique: Brujos, Profanadores, Ladrones y Violadores", *Estudios de la Cultura Nahuatl* VI, Anel Ma. Garibay K., editor (Mexico City: National Autonomous University Press, 1966); Alfredo Lopez Austin, "Cuarenta Clases de Magos Mundo Nahuatl", *Estudios de la Cultura* V, Angel Ma. Garibay K., editor (Mexico City: National Autonomous University Press, 1967); and James M. Taggart, *Nahuatl Myth and Social* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).
4. Taggart, p. 77.
5. Jacques Soustelle. *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*. Patrick O'Brian, translator. (London: Wedenfeld and Nocholson, 1955 [1961 edition]) p. 193.
6. Soustelle, p. 192.
7. Soustelle, p. 195.
8. López Austin, 1967. p. 99.
9. López Austin, 1967. p. 99.
10. Taggart, p. 56.
11. Soustelle, p. 197.
12. Daniel Testa. "Extensive/Intensive Dimensionality in Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*", *Latin American Literary Review* V, 10 (Summer, 1977) p. 72.
13. See Roberto Cantu. "Degradacion y Regeneracion en *Bless Me, Ultima*: El Chicano y la Vida Nueva", *Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, Francisco Jiménez, editor. (New York: Bilingual Press, 1970) p. 248.
14. Carol Mitchell. "Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*: Folk Culture in Literature", *Critique* 22, 1. August, 1980. p. 61.
15. Chandler Brossard. "Commentary (Vituperative)", *Harpers*, June, 1972. p. 108.
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