

Good and evil in bless me ultima

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The polarized symbolism of good and evil in Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima

Hailed as one of the greatest Chicano novels of all time, *Bless Me, Ultima*, written by the American novelist Rudolfo Anaya, brings forth a mesmerizing blend of some of the most important and polemic topics invariably present in every aspect of modern human society. Through the coming of age of the main protagonist, a boy of seven, Antonio "Tony" Márez, Anaya has managed to portray growing up through a charming yet brutal world of magical realism, of good and evil, of life and death, of the old and the new, as well as craft a balanced story with sharply opposing main motifs. The aforementioned are juxtaposed throughout the book, leading to a, or rather many, conclusions the reader is able to draw from it. This paper is structured in a way as to clearly illustrate the relationships between some of the most symbolic characters and their influences on the life of the impressionable main protagonist, and to explore the ultimate power of what Anaya considers the most important factor in human interaction and coexistence - the power of the human heart and its kindness.

"And that is what Ultima tried to teach me, that the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart" (Anaya, 261). Ultima, or *la Grande*, is the old curandera - the healer - whose origins are rooted deep in Mexican tradition and folklore. She serves as the teacher, healer and guide to little Antonio and his family, as well as the neighboring folk. She is presented to the reader as a character with almost unlimited knowledge, magical in many of its elements. Yet as the story progresses, more and more does the reader find her to be a woman

with nothing magical about her, but gifted with mere human knowledge and the kindness of her heart. She dejects any sort of fundamentalism, be it educational and scientific or religious, yet rather insists upon Antonio to witness both the brutal and the beautiful of life, the good and evil – the characters of Narciso and Tenorio respectively – and offers naught but guidance. From the beginning of the story, upon Ultima's arrival to the Márez family house, she acts as a safety upon which little Tony, at that point at the fragile age of seven, depends on for advice. He is torn between the legacy of his father, the Márez part of the family, the free-spirited, free-roaming men of the llano, and his mother's, the Luna, the religious, quiet, hard-working farmers. " I am sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody" (Salinger 20). Yet the advice that Ultima provides for Tony is not one in the form of orders or preaching, but sharing the fragments of her knowledge as an attempt for him to understand and perceive things on his own.

Gabriel Márez, Antonio's father, is a roamer, a man with wind in his blood and nomads and travelers as his ancestors. He is secular, a hard-worker, grounded, a habitual drinker, unlike Antonio's mother, his polar opposite in more than just religious views. That opposition of attitudes and views has confused and affected Antonio from the earliest thinking age, as he himself claims, the age of seven. His father is the protector of the family and its provider, a man full of virtues and dreams. At the end of the novel, he also serves as the one whom Antonio turns to for advice.

Through the character of Tenorio, an evil saloon owner, the reader bears witness to the murder of innocents, of the bad at times triumphing over

good, horror, intimidation, fear, trepidation – Tenorio is the, besides evil itself – the penultimate symbol of the rotten in the human heart. He is clad in black and of horrendous, pale features, always scheming, plotting and with a mad desire upon killing Ultima. Tenorio has three daughters, all as evil and wicked as he is – Anaya created the daughters as a sort of counterweight to the three brothers of Antonio, good men, loving and caring men, but badly scarred by the war in Europe they went off to fight.

The three brothers, León, Andrew and Eugene, add the anti-war dimension to the story. Each of them is a living testament of how war and evil affect the man's soul. León and Eugene, soon upon arriving back home from the war, urged by their restless Márez spirit and the restlessness of soul the horrors of battle instilled them with, took off for California – leaving their Márez father, who had always dreamed of moving with his family to the land “ where there is work-” (Anaya 3) and where “ the land flows with milk and honey-” (51). “ My father's dream was to gather his sons around him and move westward to the land of the setting sun, to the vineyards of California” (14). As regular life became intolerable for them, as it often does after one returns from war, they turned to prostitution and gambling and gallivanting around Los Angeles and Las Vegas in search for quick pleasures. At first, Andrew, the brother who Antonio felt he could relate to the most, had decided to stay home and finish school, not follow in the footsteps of his other two brothers. But very soon he turned to prostitution and drinking and gambling as a way of making sense of the everyday mundane, and soon left home.

Through the concise descriptions of the five characters or character groups: Antonio, Antonio's parents, his brothers, Ultima, and Tenorio, it is possible to extrapolate, if not conclude, the crown motif of Anaya's novel. It is open to many an interpretation – regardless of what one says is correct – ranging from an anti-war novel, a novel about the Mexican culture and the difficulties the Mexican people had adapting to a new age, culture and lifestyle, about that which is transcending the obvious, about power, about the good and the bad of religion, the magic of nature – all of which is correct. Yet when they are interwoven with one another, as Anaya had masterfully done, one is soon introduced to a much broader understanding of the story. From the very beginning all the sub-stories and the sub-motifs serve their function as story aids, in order to propel the book forward and offer a clear polarization of the various symbols: Ultima as the good against Tenorio as the bad, war as the horrific against the village life as peaceful and tranquil, the golden carp which represents nature and the palpable beauty of the Earth against the Catholic church and God. Narciso, a brilliantly portrayed supporting character, the lonely village drunk, with a garden more beautiful and abundant than one had ever seen – his soul and kind heart – represents innocence in its truest form. He is brutally and cowardly murdered by Tenorio, the evil, later to be avenged by the good, one of Antonio's uncles. At the very end of the novel, as evil begets evil, Tenorio manages to kill Ultima's spirit – which Anaya portrayed as an owl – therefore, killing her in the process. On her deathbed, Ultima says to Antonio:

My work was to do good. 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 bruja 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. That is good. Bear him [Tenorio] no ill will— I accept my death because I accepted to work for life— (260).

Rudolfo Anaya neared the conclusion of his novel with this powerful paragraph, a brilliant portrayal of how, whatever comes upon one in life, a good heart with the other man in mind as much as himself shall lead one to a peaceful afterlife.

Because it contained so many different elements, the novel has been open to a variety of readings by a number of critics and many differ differently in the depth of meaning perceived within the novel. One reader-critic, Dyan Donnelly viewed the book as unproblematic:

This book is a simple and directly told story, and a moving one as well.

Basically it is the story of a small boy, Antonio Marez, growing up in the Southwest. The novel deals with his religious crisis, the several hard jolts shoving him into manhood, a theme that is not unfamiliar. (114).

In his essay “ The Evolution of Chicano Literature” Raymund A Paredes see the novel as “ reminiscent in some ways of Joy’s “ Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”, equating the “ boy, Antonio, who is coming of age during the 1940’s in a remote village in central New Mexico” (67) to the young artist, Stephen Dedalus. Paredes, however, examines Anaya’s use of folklore and

legend, contending that Antonio is immersed in oral tradition, “ by way of suggesting that for the Chicano, folklore is the foundation of a cultural identity” (68), which serves to create a” distinctive cultural ambience” (68). This attention to the use of folklore gives Paredes’ interpretation an added depth beyond Donnelly’s. Through his focus on the use of folklore, Paredes deals with one of the subplots at work within the novel, many which show the importance of the past in any search for identity. Yet what Paredes fails to do is acknowledge the underlying forces of acculturation that create the need to search so intensely for a cultural identity in the first place. It is a novel of many things: it is the story of a boy’s journey through the rites of passage as he moves into manhood; it is a story of the myths and folklore of a people holding tenaciously onto a past that is quickly slipping away; it is a story of beginnings and endings, but to me it was a book on life passages.