

The journey to independence



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Although innocence may seem at times like a desirable state, a lack of innocence most often pertains to intelligence and maturity. In Rudolfo Anaya's novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, the main character, Antonio Maréz, loses his innocence through experiences of the world's harsh reality, which force him to cope with his beliefs despite his young age. Through early encounters with death, conflicts with faith, and problems with his family and friends, Antonio matures rapidly by dealing with injustice and conflict.

As only a young child, Antonio is quickly stripped of his outlook on the world when he witnesses the deaths of Lupito and Narciso. When Lupito is killed by the angry town mob, Antonio is introduced to the presence of injustice and violence. He quickly understands that the death was an act of suicide on Lupito's part when " he was shooting to draw [the mob's] fire" (Anaya, 22). Antonio must deal with the fact that, for some, death maybe an easier route than living life. He thought before that life was easygoing and rational, but the mob mentality that dominates Lupito's fate shows him that oftentimes there is no voice of reason among men. He quickly starts to question the ways of humans as they seem to be crueler than he expected. The death of Narciso, a close friend, is another blow to Antonio's precious childhood. Circumstantially different, this death is caused by revenge rather than as an act to preserve justice (as is the case with Lupito). Antonio falls into shock as he realizes that Narciso has died " for doing good" (170). As a Catholic, Antonio has been taught that killing another man is an unforgivable sin that would send one to hell. However, when Tenorio blindly kills Narciso out of his rage for his daughter, Antonio has to face the fact that God's laws are not always followed, and that evil lurks in the shadows. Because of this, he starts

to wonder why evil had prevailed over good, leading to a religious stalemate with his faith. This instance forces Antonio to grow and mature a tremendous amount, as he struggles to accept the wrongdoing that has escaped with no punishment and left Narciso dying in his hands. The shock of Tenorio's iniquity reintroduces him to the bloody tendencies of man, as he already witnessed with Lupito. Stripped of his innocence at an elementary age, Antonio is already required to deal with the guilt, suffering, and mourning that accompany cruel injustice.

Another cause of Antonio's loss of innocence is his constant questioning of his own religion. The deaths of Lupito and Narciso cause him to start doubting the reliability of God and His actions. When Lupito dies, Antonio cannot draw the fine line between who would be punished when he asks Ultima, " will [Lupito] go to hell?" (25). In practice, Catholicism clearly defines the difference between good and evil, but in reality Antonio is unable to discern whether Lupito is at fault with his mental state, or if the mob is for killing a criminal, or even if his father is for being in the mob. Antonio learns that what the church taught him has no accountability until it takes the form of an actual experience. When he asks for the forgiveness of Narciso in a dream, God responds by saying only if "[Antonio] also asks me to forgive Tenorio," the murderer (173). Antonio is utterly perplexed and distraught about why God would treat good the same way as evil. In his search for answers, Antonio starts accepting new systems of belief, while trying to remain open to Catholicism. Expecting all his questions to be answered during communion, Antonio works hard through catechism, but he hears " only silence" from God, which only leads to more questions (221). The

absence of his God coupled with the appearance of the pagan, golden carp, and Ultima's dominating power lead Antonio to doubt tradition and to sample a different belief under the magical carp. In this process, Antonio trades his innocence for security and faith in a God that he knows actually exists.

Another factor which causes Antonio's separation from Catholicism is the constant questioning of Florence, an atheistic thinker. Florence often attacks Antonio's faith with questions that are impossible to answer, such as the reason for the existence of evil. When the Catholic God is absent during Antonio's communion and questioning, he starts to wonder, "was the golden carp a better God?" (197).

The last cause of Antonio's loss of innocence is the strife that he encounters within his family and group of friends. His three brothers are in a troubling state when they return to Guadalupe: they have already lost their innocence through death and destruction from the war. Gene says "we are men now," explaining they have grown up through the hardship (72). Antonio is sad because his brothers start to exhibit their individuality, which destroys their parents' dreams in the process. Their own actions and desires as men cause them to sin, especially with prostitutes. Gene says they "have to say goodbye to the girls at Rosie's," and although Antonio is too young to understand, he knows they have done wrong (68). Soon, only Andrew remains in Guadalupe to finish his education, but instead he deals another huge blow to Antonio. When Antonio discovers him at Rosie's, he feels that Andrew, his former role model, has betrayed and deprived him of his innocence. During a dream, Andrew says that he will "not enter until [Antonio] loses [his] innocence," indicating that Antonio already knows too

much about the world's cruelty to be considered a child (71). Not only has Antonio witnessed sin and unfairness within his family, he also encounters them among his friends. When Antonio acts as a priest and forgives Florence for his deeds, his friends quickly turn on him and cause physical harm because they are unable to accept an atheist being forgiven. The torture Antonio endures proves again that the mainstream Catholic doctrine results in conflict rather than moral rightness. However, Antonio “ stood [his] ground for what [he] felt to be right” (214). This step in his mental thinking points to a self-governing method of reasoning and action which previously he had not considered before. His friends and family ultimately lead him to think for himself, resulting in a huge step in maturity and knowledge.

When a person is brought up following a certain belief, he or she blindly follows it, with innocence. There is nothing to contradict it until an actual, personal experience leads him or her to a self-developed conclusion. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, Antonio starts out as a naïve, Catholic child, but through cruel experiences of death, religion, and injustice, he is able to reevaluate his beliefs in order to start thinking about his own ideas. When he buries Ultima's owl, he essentially buries away his innocence and childhood away to start a new life of intellectuality. This finally marks the point that symbolizes Antonio's loss of innocence throughout the novel as a positive pattern, for he can finally search for his own truths and start a “ new religion,” thus achieving in the end self-responsibility, wisdom, and individuality (247).