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**SAMPLE EXCERPTS FROM THE MONKEYNOTES FOR**

**"Bless Me, Ultima"**

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# **BLESS ME, ULTIMA**

by

**Rudolfo Anaya**



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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The present setting of the novel is Guadalupe, New Mexico. Two surrounding villages that have a strong influence on the people of Guadalupe are Las Pasturas, New Mexico, the land of the llano where the vaqueros or.....

### CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Antonio Juan Márez y Luna** (Anthony, Tony, Tonio) - the boy who is the subject of the story and man who is the present-day narrator.

**Ultima** - la Grande, a curandera; Antonio's mentor in curandismo.

**María Luna** - Antonio's mother, a devout Catholic from a farming family descended from a priest.

**Gabriel Márez** - Antonio's father, a llanero who has moved to the town to satisfy his wife.

#### Minor Characters

**Deborah** - Antonio's sister.

**Theresa** - Antonio's sister. Her mother says she has too much Márez in her when she speaks only English.

**Benito Campos** - Marez's vaquero friend to whom he gives his horse when he leaves the llano.

**Bonney** - vaquero friend of Márez.....

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - Antonio, a boy who is the son of people from two different traditions within Mexican-American.....

**Antagonist** - The fact that there is more than one god in the protagonist's heritage. In order to reconcile.....

**Climax** - The climax occurs during Antonio's first communion. He has been told that he will gain understanding when he takes communion, but he does not. He doesn't feel any communication from the .....

**Outcome** - Ultima dies and Antonio is left to find his own way. He has been fully prepared for .....

### PLOT

*Bless Me, Ultima* begins when Ultima comes to stay with Antonio's family one summer when he is seven years old. She is a curandera, a healer who uses herbs and sympathetic magic to cure people and to stop curses. Antonio dreams of his own birth the night before Ultima arrives. When he was born, his father's people, the vaqueros, and his mother's people, the Lunas, who are farmers, fought over which direction Antonio's life would take. At the moment of crisis, Ultima, who had delivered him as a midwife, says she will be the one who sees what Antonio's destiny is. The night Ultima arrives, Antonio dreams that Ultima's owl (a physical embodiment of her spirit) lifts the Virgin and carries her up to heaven. Antonio helps Ultima gather herbs and learns from her the uses for all the herbs and the ancient method for gathering them.

One night a man from town who has been emotionally hurt by the war kills another man. A posse comes after him and Antonio sees the man shot. At the edge of the river, Antonio takes his confession and prays the Act of Contrition for him. Antonio senses a presence in the river. He dreams that night of his three brothers, who are away at .....

## **THEME**

### **Main Theme**

The main theme of the novel concerns Antonio's struggle to come into his own, to fuse the two parts of his heritage. This heritage is embodied in his mother and father. His mother is a Luna, descended from a priest who founded a colony in what is now New Mexico by getting a land grant from Mexico. The Lunas are farmers. They use the.....

### **Minor Theme**

The minor theme of Anaya's novel concerns the combat between Ultima's vision of the.....

## **MOOD**

The mood of the novel is nostalgia. It is written by an narrator relating the events of his .....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

Rudolfo Anaya was born in 1937 in the town of Pastura, New Mexico. He went to school in the nearby town of Santa Rosa and then studied in Albuquerque where he continues to live. He studied English and.....

## **LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

*Bless Me, Ultima* was published at an important time in Latino/a history in the United States. A powerful movement was happening in political, economic and cultural spheres which affirmed the value of Latino/a experience and protested the discrimination Latino/as suffered. "Bless Me, Ultima" was one of the first Chicano novels to celebrate this movement. It affirms the varied parts of the heritage of Mexican Americans in New Mexico, the Spanish conquistadors, the Aztecs (the Indians of Mexico), and the Comanche (the Indians who inhabited the land that is now New Mexico). It is set in the schools where the hero undergoes the process of assimilation that always begins.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **Summary**

Ultima comes to stay with Antonio's family in the summer of his seventh year. "When she came the beauty of the llano unfolded before my eyes, and the gurgling waters of the river sang to the hum of the turning earth." The magical time of childhood stops for Antonio. The mystery of the earth's pulse enters into Antonio's own blood. When Ultima takes his hand, "the magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun-baked llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun's home." As Antonio walks barefoot, he feels the earth's throb. "Time stood still, and it shared with me all that had been, and all that was to come."

Antonio begins his story in the beginning. He does not mean the beginning of his dreams from which he learned the story of his birth and the people to whom his father and mother belong, and the story of his three brothers. He means the beginning of Ultima.

Antonio sleeps in the attic of his home. He sleeps in one room and his two sisters, Deborah and Theresa, sleep in the other. The steps from the attic lead to the kitchen. Antonio's mother's kitchen is the heart of the home. From his place on the top of the stairs, Antonio would see Chavez bring the news of the sheriff's murder. He would see his brothers rebel against his father. He would frequently see Ultima return from the llano where she had been gathering herbs that had to be harvested in the full moon by a curandera.

On the night before Ultima's arrival, Antonio hears his parents speak of her as he lies in bed. His father speaks of her with great respect. He says she has always served the people of Las Pasturas, the village of his home. Antonio's father has been a vaquero all his life. The vaqueros date back to the time of the Spanish conquest of New Mexico. Antonio's father stayed on even after the big ranchers and the European-American Texans came to fence the llano (the grasslands). His father and other vaqueros (cowboys) feel free out on the llano. When Antonio's father says Ultima is now alone, his

mother says it is a pity that she should be so.

Antonio imagines what his mother must be thinking when she pictures Ultima living alone on the llano. Antonio's mother is not from the llano. She is the daughter of a farmer and she cannot see the llano's beauty and cannot understand the vaqueros. After Antonio's birth, his mother convinced his father to leave Las Pasturas and move to the town of Guadalupe so that the children could go to school. His father lost the respect of his fellow vaqueros when he did so. His father had to sell his small herd and give his horse to his friend Benito Campos. His horse refused to be penned up, so Campos let it run free. It would not allow any vaquero to rope it.

Antonio's father sees less and less of his vaquero friends. He works on the highway and when he gets paid on Saturdays, he drinks at the Longhorn bar. He never forms a strong attachment to the men in town. On some occasions, the llaneros (the men of the llano or grassland) would come to town for supplies and visit Antonio's father, men like Bonney or Campos or the Gonzales brothers. Antonio could see a difference in his father. He would brighten up as he and the men talked and told the old stories. However, when the men left, Antonio's father drank alone. He would wake on Sunday mornings hung over and annoyed at having to go to early mass.

Antonio's father talks about Ultima. She says Ultima has served the people all her life. Now the people are scattered by the war. It takes boys overseas and families move to California for work. Antonio's mother calls on María Purísima (the Virgin Mary) and says they cannot let la Grande (a term of respect for an old and wise person) live alone in her old age. She tells her husband about the first years of their marriage when she went to live with him. She says she could not have survived without la Grande's help. She thinks of them as hard years. Her husband counters her and says they were good years. She thinks of how Ultima helped every family when needed. Nothing would keep Ultima from doing her curing work for the people. She tells of Ultima's help at her own child labor. When she tells her husband, Gabriel, that they cannot let her live her last days alone, he agrees and says it is "not the way of our people." She says it will be a great honor to provide la Grande a home. Antonio explains that his mother calls Ultima la Grande as a term of respect. It means she is old and wise. Gabriel tells her he has already sent word with Campos that Ultima will come to live with them.

Gabriel asks his wife about how the children will fare with a curandera living in their home. Antonio explains that a curandera is a woman who knows the herbs and remedies of the ancients. She is a miracle worker who can heal the sick. Antonio had heard that Ultima was able to lift the curses of the brujas. Ultima could exorcise the evil planted in people by the brujas and make them well. Because of her power, the curandera was often suspected of practicing witchcraft. Antonio shudders with fear at the thought of brujas, the stories of whom he has heard in cuentos (stories). Antonio's mother replies to his father's question about bringing a curandera into the household. She says a woman who brought her children into the world can only be good. Gabriel tells her he will drive to pick up Ultima in the morning.

Antonio is pleased with his parents' decision. He knows it is customary to provide for the old and sick. "There was always room in the safety and warmth of la familia (the family) for one more person." Antonio lies awake and repeats the Hail Mary over and over. He drifts into a dream. He remembers telling his mother about his .....

## Notes

The novel is narrated in the first person by Antonio. He is writing of his childhood, specifically the summer Ultima, a curandera (healer) came to stay with his family and chose him as a disciple to learn curandismo (the practice of healing). This narrator is reverent toward Ultima and toward his mother María Luna's adoration of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Later, when he describes the official practice of Roman Catholicism, he adopts an ironical tone. It is important for the reader to recognize the narrator's varying emotional distance from the actions he describes since it colors the way he shapes the events and the way he wants the reader to evaluate them.

The Spanish words are usually explained in context. Anaya leaves them in the text of the novel to give it a sense of the language-consciousness of Spanish. Nevertheless, as Spanish words come up in the text, they will be defined in the parentheses and, if necessary, further in notes.

"Ultima" is a Spanish word meaning ultimate or "the end." When Antonio says he will begin at the beginning that came with Ultima, he is touching on a very significant time concept. Ultima is for Antonio the unification between the

beginning and the end. Time stands still with her. Antonio almost sees her as a sort of deity.

"Llano" is a word meaning plains or prairie. It is a dry grassland. Antonio's father is from the llano. The Márezes are descendants of the vaqueros, the Mexican cowboys. Márez takes its root from the word for sea. Since the Spanish conquistadors came from the sea, the Márez name shows its roots in the sea. The Lunas on the other.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTERS

**Antonio:** The protagonist and the narrator of the novel, Antonio is a bridge figure. He bridges the divide between the various parts of his heritage. He learns to do this with the help of his mentor, Ultima. Part of what enables Antonio to bridge such large rifts in belief systems and ways of life is his open-minded questioning of all he learns and sees. He is a very sensitive and introspective boy, who often seems much older than his years. He is sensitive to the hypocrisies of the church, the faults of its doctrines, and the harshness of its members. Yet he is not a reactive kind a person. Despite his questions, he remains in catechism and goes through all the rites of children his age, namely first .....

**Ultima:** Ultima is truly the bridge figure in the novel. She is both a practicing Roman Catholic and a practitioner of sympathetic magic. Wit organic metaphors, she helps Antonio to see the unity of all life. His parents have been blind to this unity. His father, the Marex of the sea and his mother, the Luna of the moon, are really part of one cycle of life. Ultima helps Antonio to see that the warring sides of his heritage are really all one. She never encourages.....

**Maria:** Maria is really more of a stock figure than anything else. She is not given much of a voice. She functions as the warm memory of mother in the kitchen. She clearly favors her son over her daughters, calling him.....

**Gabriel:** Gabriel is a little more developed than Maria. This development only happens, though, at the end of the novel when he speaks to his son. Before that, he is a morose man who has lost his dreams and who blames .....

### PLOT

Anaya plots the novel according to the seasons of the year. The novel has the rhythm of the seasons. It opens in the spring when Ultima comes. It ends after the harvest time in the Fall when Ultima dies. In between, at least two years pass. Antonio goes to his first year of school, skips second grade, and goes to his third year of.....

### THEME(S)

The main theme of the novel concerns Antonio's struggle to come into his own, to fuse the two parts of his heritage. The world of the New Mexico of this novel is ruled by the Church. However, despite the Church's hegemony, the strength of indigenous belief system come to light. The people who have this dual heritage have managed to live under the Church's edicts while still practicing more ancient religious rites. This syncretism, or co-existence of two competing belief systems--is the struggle of the young narrator's boyhood.

Antonio has plenty of models in syncretism. Ultima is a practitioner of ancient religion of the .....

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the major syncretic (blending of systems of religious beliefs) moments in the novel?

How does Anaya represent the Roman Catholic Church in this novel? Does it come across as a life-giving or life-denying institution? .....

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