

Teacher Guide

Grades 9–12

Bless Me, Ultima

Rudolfo A Anaya

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BLESS ME, ULTIMA

by
Rudolfo Anaya

Teacher Guide

Written by
Gloria Levine, M. A.

Note

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Please note: Please assess the appropriateness of this book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with your class.

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Novel Units, Inc.
P.O. Box 97
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Chapters 9-10, pages 70-105

To the distress of their parents, Leon and Gene leave for Santa Fe. Andrew remains, saying he plans to finish school. Tony's teacher, Miss Maestas, is pleased with his progress in reading and writing in English and he is passed from first to third grade. School ends and Tony goes fishing with Samuel, who tells him about the golden carp, lord of all the waters. Tony's uncle Lucas is now ill and it is said that an evil "bruja"—witch—is slowly killing him. When the priest washes his hands of the matter, Ultima takes Tony with her to cure Lucas. She goes to the saloon of Tenorio and demands that he tell his evil daughter to lift the curse. When he refuses, she works her magic, sticking pins in three clay dolls. With Tony's help she brews an herbal remedy down Lucas' throat and after he vomits up a hair ball, he recovers.

Vocabulary

under 71	innocent 71	stoically 72	disowning 72
ominous 75	hobnob 72	girders 78	marisk 78
subside 79	code 72	virgin 70	promotion 82
dejected 80	guffing 84	transmuted 85	incantations 87
stencil 77	washing 87	escort 88	furies 88
administered 83	decreed 89	parents 90	atoll 90
contraband 92	emanated 90	chronies 93	howl 93
mantas 95	bravado 95	stupor 99	spasms 100
pungent 100	acid 102	pallor 102	line 102

Discussion Questions

1. What conflicting desires are revealed in Tony's dream (page 70-71)? (He has sexual desires, but wants to please his mother by becoming a priest.)
2. Why don't Tony and the boys want to go to California with their father? (They want to live on their own; they don't want to work on a highway crew.) Would you? What other choices do they have? Do you think they are making the best choice? List and rate their choices.

better pay?

better living conditions?

Go to California:

Leave for Santa Fe:

Finish school:

other:

3. Why do you suppose Andrew said that some day Tony would beat the Vitamin Kid and “Some day you will beat us all” (p. 75)? Do you think he is right? How do these brothers feel about each other? (The older and younger brother seem to respect and love each other.)
4. Why do Tony and the others wait for the world to end? (a rumor that it will end has spread among the boys) Does that remind you of anything you thought about, as a kid? How does Tony’s first grade experience compare with your experience of school at that age? (He remembers learning to read and write, Willie’s “busted head” and “pissing contest.”)
5. What story does Samuel tell Tony about the carp? (People were sent to the valley by God where they lived well for 40 years; then a drought came and they angered the gods by eating carnal food, consequently turned into carp, themselves; one kind god turned himself into a carp so that he could protect his people.) Who told that story to Samuel? (Jason’s Indian told the story to Samuel’s father.) How do you think the story makes Tony feel? Does that story remind you of stories you have heard? Has a story ever filled you with wonder?
6. Who is Lucas? (Tony’s mother’s brother) What does he see before he grows ill? (He sees the Trementina sisters conducting a Black Mass in the woods, dancing, pouring a rooster’s blood into a pot.) How does Ultima succeed? (She makes him drink a kerosene herb mixture; after he vomits, she feeds him atole made from corn and milk.) Why does she take Tony along? (She says she needs him with his sun and luna blood.) Is he afraid? (No, he wants to help, but notices strange power on the way.) Why do you think he throws up in the morning?
7. Why do you suppose Ultima succeeds in a cure for Lucas when others have failed? Why wasn’t she called in to help sooner? (The priest would not have liked it. He wants all “mystical” power to remain with the church.)
8. Why does Ultima stick a pin into each of the dolls? (She has warned Tenorio that his three daughters should not have tampered with fate. The dolls represent them.) Does this remind you of anything? Do you think Ultima is a witch or healer?
9. What does Grandfather give Ultima following the cure? Why (cuppers of silver, as is customary) What have you learned so far about Mexican custom from this story?

Prediction: Will Tony’s classmates praise or find fault with Ultima?

Literary Analysis: Allusion

An **allusion** is a figure of speech that makes brief reference to a historical or literary figure, event, or object.

Ask: "To what is Tony's uncle alluding when he says that the Trementina sisters screamed 'like furies' when he caught them performing their devilish mass?"

(In classical mythology, the Furies were three female divinities, daughters of Gaea, who punished crimes.)

Writing Activity

Ultima says, "when anyone...tampers with the fate of a man, that sometimes a chain of events is set in motion over which no one will have ultimate control." Write a short short story based on that premise. Outline your ideas on a graphic organizer:

When and where is the story set?	Who interferes with someone's destiny? Why?
one-sentence summary of plot about tampering with someone's destiny:	
What problems are set in motion?	Why can't the character(s) control the problems?

Research Activities

1. Find out more about the breeding behavior of the carp. What other fish return to their spawning grounds?
2. Ultima says that the Indians hold blue corn more sacred. Learn more about the place corn holds in Mayan culture.

For information about how the Mayan culture used corn, plus some great teaching ideas related to an episode called "Newton's Apple", see:

<http://www.mnonline.org/lc/newtons/12/ethnobot.html>.