

## RESHAPING THE OLD CHICANO TRADITIONS: ULTIMA – THE EMBODIMENT OF GOODNESS AND TRUTH IN RUDOLFO ANAYA’S *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*

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*Abstract: The present paper aims at highlighting the importance of goodness and truth in Rudolfo Anaya’s novel entitled “Bless me, Ultima”, which is a repatterning of the Chicano world. Ultima or la Grande is a curandera, a miracle-worker. She blesses Antonio, she gives him guidance in life teaching him what is right holding the secret of Antonio’s destiny. If, on the one hand, Ultima is the embodiment of goodness and truth in the novel, a strong and complex female character, performing healings to the others, using knowledge and power to do good, on the other hand, Tenorio is the embodiment of evil. The message of the book is that good is always stronger than evil and the smallest bit of good can stand against all the powers of evil in the world. Anaya’s novel is rich in narrative techniques and storytelling turns the novel into an exquisite piece of prose which preserves and at the same time reshapes the old Chicano traditions.*

*Key words: good, evil, truth, Chicano, tradition.*

Rudolfo Anaya can be considered the father of the Chicano literature in English due to the richness of the narrative techniques used in the novel and to storytelling that turns the novel into an exquisite piece of prose. A seven-year-old boy narrates a story “in flashback form”; this is “the story of his relationship with his spiritual guide, Ultima. He struggles with spirituality, confused about the teachings of the Catholic Church, and with his discovery of a genuine spirituality and legitimate morality outside the church, in nature” (Day, 1999:11). The novel is somehow reminding us of James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in the present case Antonio being under study and the flashback technique being again used with success.

Rudolfo Anaya in *Bless me, Ultima*, probably the most successful Chicano piece of literature, “re-creates life in the countryside of New Mexico, where the people have kept their traditional way of life” (Baker, 1982:24). The novel preserves and reshapes the old Chicano traditions and customs.

Ultima can be considered the embodiment of goodness in Anaya’s novel. She came to stay with Antonio’s family when he was almost seven. Antonio’s parents entrust his care to Ultima. Antonio’s mother called Ultima *la Grande* out of respect as she is not only an old woman but especially a very wise one. Antonio’s parents provided a home for Ultima. This was an important custom, an old tradition in the Chicano world, namely, providing for the old as well as for the sick.

Ultima is considered to be a *curandera*, “a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick” (Anaya, 1972:4). Thus, she used to cure with herbs and magic. Ultima “could lift the curses laid by brujas and she could exorcise the evil in the witches planted in the people to make them sick”

(Anaya, 1972:4). But unfortunately, Ultima's power has often been misunderstood. Thus, there were people who considered her to be a *bruja*, suspected by practicing witchcraft.

Ultima is minutely described by Anaya as "her face was brown and very wrinkled. When she smiled her teeth were brown" (Anaya, 1972:11). A black shawl covered her hair and shoulders. There was a large blue-tin trunk which was used to keep together Ultima's earthly belongings: "her black dresses, her shawls and the magic of her herbs" (Anaya, 1972:13). There was an old custom to greet the old. Antonio's mother used to greet Ultima as follows: "Buenos días le de Dios, Grande" (Anaya, 1972:11). She used to hug and kiss the old woman.

With Ultima came the owl. The owl is usually a symbol of evil in the Chicano literature where the so-called *nagual* is generally considered to be the companion of witches. But in Anaya's work, the owl is the guardian spirit of Ultima. "The effect is to dramatize Ultima's powers and the air of mystery surrounding her, for although she exercises her magic primarily for the good of the community" (Baker, 1982:68).

"The owl was one of the disguises a bruja took ... But not Ultima's owl" (Anaya, 1972:13). Her owl used to sing hooting softly. Ultima's owl was a good owl. Her owl's song sounded as a lullaby having a soothing effect. It watched over the people, protecting them. Thus, Ultima's owl was associated with goodness offering protection.

Antonio was happy with Ultima. She was like a mentor for him, offering guidance in his life. Ultima held the secret of Antonio's destiny. They used to walk together in order to gather plants, herbs, roots for medicines. Ultima taught Antonio the names of the herbs, birds and animals. Ultima's teachings are very valuable for Antonio.

But the most important thing that Antonio learned from Ultima was the fact that "there was a beauty in the time of the day and in the time of night, that there was peace in the rivers and hills". Ultima taught Antonio "to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time" (Anaya, 1972:15). She taught him to understand nature and live a simple life. Nature played a very important part in the life of the Chicano people.

Antonio's soul evolved under Ultima's careful guidance. We can see Antonio developing his personality due to Ultima's teachings. Ultima considered that "the ways of men are strange and hard to learn" (Anaya, 1972:25), which is true. It is not an easy task to see the unseen in a person, to see his/ her soul, to understand his/her ways. Ultima told Antonio that he would *learn* much from his own experiences and *see* much in everything that exists around him, thus learning and seeing are valuable assets in one's life. *Seeing* refers here especially to being able to perceive the unseen, to infer from the context, to feel nature. The Chicano people lived their lives according to the rules of nature, thus their lives were simplified, they could feel nature, they could *see* the unseen, the essence of things.

There were certain people who considered Ultima to be a *llorona*, "an old witch who looks for the soul of Antonio" (Anaya, 1972:26). But other people could see the "bright power" in Ultima's eyes which "held Antonio spellbound" (Anaya, 1972:33). On the one hand, some people consider Ultima to be *una mujer que no ha pecado*, a woman

who has not sinned, or *una curandera*, a healer; on the other hand, she might be considered by some other people a *hechicera*, an enchantress/ a sorceress, or *una bruja*, a witch (Anaya, 1972:33).

Ultima's teachings are of paramount importance in Antonio's life. She taught him "to never judge who God forgives and who He doesn't" (Anaya, 1972:33) and if a person really wants to *know*, then he/she will *listen* and *see* and *be patient*. "Knowledge comes slowly. A curandera cannot give away her secrets" (Anaya, 1972:34). In order to *know*, one must, first of all, *listen* to the message given by nature, then *see* and understand, but understanding comes only if one is *patient*, understanding needs time.

Ultima and Antonio used to "walk in the hills of the llano, gathering the wild herbs and roots for her medicines" (Anaya, 1972:39). They roamed freely up and down the river. Ultima taught Antonio to observe where the herbs and plants grew and how their leaves looked. For Ultima, even "the plants had a spirit" (Anaya, 1972:39). She taught Antonio to speak to the herbs and tell them why he had to pull them out from their home, the earth. She taught Antonio to talk to nature and to listen to the messages provided by nature. She taught Antonio what disease each herb could cure. For instance, *la yerba del manso* could "cure burns, sores, colic in babies, rheumatism" or *oshá*, just like *la yerba del manso*, was "a cure for everything" (Anaya, 1972:44).

Ultima was happy in the hills. Ultima told Antonio about the common herbs shared with the Native Americans of the Rio del Norte. She taught him about the ancient medicines of the Aztecas, Mayas, Moors. Very prized were the herbs that were from the mountains curing numberless diseases.

Ultima's blessing, "en el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y el Espíritu Santo", gave great force to Antonio. Ultima taught Antonio how important God is one's life. Ultima used to bless Antonio, they used to pray together making him understand the power of the cross and the power of good. The Virgin of Guadalupe was venerated by the Chicano people. They prayed obediently at the foot of the statue of their Lady of Guadalupe who is more than a religious icon for the Catholics. The Virgin of Guadalupe holds a special place in the religious life and culture of the Chicano people.

Antonio felt Ultima's hand on his head while she used to say that "the power of God is so great ... No evil can challenge the cross ... But how could the blessing of Ultima be like the whirlwind? Was the power of good and evil the same?" (Anaya, 1972:55). Ultima used to pray her thanks by kneeling obediently at the foot of the Virgen de Guadalupe burning sweet incense.

Antonio could hear on a regular basis Ultima's owl sing and he knew it was Ultima's owl because it was *singing in the daylight*, high at the top of a *juniper tree*. Its song gives confidence. The owl sang by day on the top of the juniper which was sacred in the Chicano world. Its song is a good one, a symbol of goodness, not a symbol of evil.

Ultima and Antonio used to work in the garden every morning "struggling against the llano to rescue good earth in which to plant" (Anaya, 1972:83). They exchanged a few words, but they shared a lot. Silence was full of meaning. Nature used to speak and convey important messages. It was very important for them to listen to the messages

and understand them. Ultima said that “she will go with one understanding ... 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” (Anaya, 1972:85).

Ultima could exercise *el encanto*, the curse. In fact, she helped people. She worked miracles. “She learned from the greatest healer of all time, the flying man from Las Pasturas” (Anaya, 1972:85). She could do battles with the evil. She was dressed in black and she considered that evil was not easy to destroy. But good is stronger than evil and Antonio should know this.

Ultima is very courageous, she does not fear the threats of people like Tenorio who is the embodiment of evil as her powers were given by *el hombre volador* (Anaya, 1972:94), a great healer from Las Pasturas. Ultima could see Tenorio’s inner ugliness, his dark soul. Ultima was a curandera, able to lift curses. She knew that Tenorio’s daughters used to do evil and they were brujas. She knows that his daughters will not lift the curse and she “must work the magic beyond evil, the magic that endures forever” (Anaya, 1972:94).

Ultima tells Antonio that “good is always stronger than evil ... the smallest bit of good can stand against all the powers of evil in the world and it will emerge triumphant” (Anaya, 1972:98). She spoke to the *brujas* as follows: “You have done evil .../ But good is stronger than evil, / And what you sought to do will undo you...” (Anaya, 1972:101).

Ultima teaches Antonio telling him that as he grows into manhood, he must find his own truths: “Stand, Antonio, she commanded, and I stood. You both know, she spoke to (Antonio’s) father and mother that the sweet water of the moon which falls as rain is the same water that gathers into rivers and flows to fill the seas. Without the waters of the moon to replenish the oceans there would be no oceans. And the same salt waters of the oceans are drawn by the sun to the heavens, and in turn become again the waters of the moon. Without the sun there would be no waters formed to slake the dark earth’s thirst. The waters are one, Antonio. I looked into her bright, clear eyes and understood her truth” (Anaya, 1972:121). Ultima tries to make Antonio understand the message of life, what is the truth in life and be aware of the *great cycle* which brings us all together. She brought understanding in his life and peace due to the fact that he could decipher the mysteries of life with Ultima’s help.

Ultima and Antonio continued to look for plants and roots in the hills and he felt more attached to Ultima than to his own mother. He empathized with Ultima as she tried to teach him little by little with a lot of patience, kindness and goodness. Antonio spent most of his time with Ultima. They used to talk, to gather and store herbs. They used to play cards. She told him the *cuentos* and legends of his ancestors. He learned a lot from Ultima. “He learned the glory and the tragedy of history of (his) people and he understood how that history stirred in his blood” (Anaya, 1972:123). For the Chicano people, “folklore is the foundation of a cultural identity” (Baker, 1982:68). Antonio

learns a lot from the so-called *cuentos* as he is immersed in the oral tradition which is, in fact, the foundation of the Chicano culture.

Ultima took her scapular from around her neck and told Antonio that when he makes his first communion he will receive his own scapular which will protect him from all evil. In the meantime she wants to wear her scapular, "a small pouch of helpful herbs" (Anaya, 1972:124). She has had it since she was a child. She tucked her scapular under his shirt and told him to promise her that he will tell nobody about it. That scapular will keep Antonio safe.

Ultima was accused of witchcraft by Tenorio: "La mujer que no ha pecado es bruja, le juro a Dios!" (Anaya, 1972:130). Antonio could not believe that anyone could ever think that Ultima was a witch. "She did only good" (Anaya, 1972:128). She is courageous. But unfortunately, Tenorio and his daughters did only evil and they have no courage. This is the clear-cut distinction between Ultima and Tenorio.

It seems that anyone has the right to charge someone with witchcraft and to discover the truth of that charge. There is a very simple test. Everybody knows the test for a *bruja*. It is very simple. "Take the holy needles and pin them to the door. Put them in so they are crossed – and in the name of God ... you all know that a witch cannot walk through a door so marked by the sign of Christ" (Anaya, 1972:133). There was no doubt that Ultima could walk by the way of the holy cross.

It is said that "no person of evil, no bruja, can walk through a door guarded by the sign of the Holy Cross. If [Ultima] crosses the threshold, then she can never again be accused of witchcraft – we call God as our witness ... All the men made the sign of the cross and murmured a prayer ... everybody could see Ultima plainly as she walked to the door" (Anaya, 1972:134). Ultima had walked through the door! It is proven! The power of la curandera is GOOD.

Ultima gives another piece of advice to Antonio: "Take care of the evil in the wind" (Anaya, 1972:149). The wind can speak in a way and man should be able to *listen* and *see/* understand the meaning. She kissed Antonio's cheek and he put his hand on his chest where he wore her scapular. Her whole life, Ultima has struggled against evil and always good has prevailed.

Antonio confesses: "I had seen evil, and so I carried the evil within me, and the holy sacraments of confession and the holy eucharist were by far. I had somehow lost my innocence and let sin enter into my soul, and the knowledge of God, the saving grace, was far away" (Anaya, 1972:167). Only God, especially the knowledge of God, His grace can really save man.

Ultima tells Antonio *cuentos*, thus storytelling plays a very important part in the novel. Antonio used to spend time with Ultima in her room while "she did her embroidery work" (Anaya, 1972:178). The stories told by Ultima created a kind of intricate structure, *an embroidery*, consisting of *cuentos* and *leyendas* about the old people of Las Pasturas. He found out from Ultima that the old people always helped each other, "through good and bad they stuck together and the friendships that were formed in that desolate llano were bonds for life" (Anaya, 1972:179).

Ultima told Antonio not to worry about Tenorio's threats as he has no courage to carry them out. Ultima tells Antonio about Tenorio that "he is like an old wolf who drags around the ground where he has made his kill, his conscience will not let him rest. He returned to the tree where he committed his mortal sin to find some absolution for his crime. But where there is no acknowledgement of guilt and penance done for the wrong, there can be no forgiveness" (Anaya, 1972:189).

There is a dichotomy between Ultima and Tenorio. If Ultima is a strong character, a confident woman, full of courage, the embodiment of goodness being able to always reveal the truth, Tenorio is a very weak character, a coward, deprived of courage standing for the embodiment of evil.

Antonio is aware of the fact that God knows everything and Antonio wants to know the mysteries of God: "I want to take God into my body and have Him answer my questions. Why does evil go unpunished? Why does He allow evil to exist? I wondered if the knowledge I sought would destroy me. But it couldn't, it was God's knowledge" (Anaya, 1972:191). Knowledge is power. Knowledge is a key term in the present novel. Ultima uses knowledge and power to do good.

Ultima considers that "a man's destiny must unfold itself like a flower, with only the sun and the earth and water making it blossom and no one else meddling in it" (Anaya, 1972:223). This is a very poetic fragment. The author uses a metaphor and a comparison. Destiny is somehow compared with a flower. The *flower* blossoms if it is regularly *watered* with goodness and truth. We somehow forge our own destiny by the way in which we live, by the principles which guide our lives. It is up to us if we choose good or evil, if we are courageous or coward people, if we are strong or weak, if we use goodness and truth, knowledge and power or not.

Antonio could find in Ultima's company "a great deal of solace and peace" (Anaya, 1972:223). Everyone needs some kind of solace. One might find some solace in knowing. We can find solace in a beautiful world governed by peace. For Antonio, Ultima's company, solace and peace, represented more than he could find at church or at school. At night, Antonio heard "the owl cry in warning, not the soft rhythmic song we were so used to, but cries of alarm" (Anaya, 1972:223).

From Ultima, Antonio learned that "the greater immortality is in the freedom of man, and that freedom is best nourished by the noble expanse of land and air and pure, white sky" (Anaya, 1972:228). Freedom might be the most important aspect of one's life. Freedom can be associated with nature, with the birds flying on a blue sky. Freedom can be associated with purity and innocence, too.

Ultima tells Antonio that "life is filled with sadness when a boy grows to be a man. But as you grow into manhood you must not despair of life, but gather strength to sustain you... you are growing, and growth is change. Accept the change, make it a part of your strength" (Anaya, 1972:245). Changes and transformations bring development and growth in life. Life must be lived with all its ups and downs which bring their contribution to one's development of personality. All of us must learn from our own

mistakes, we must learn from our life experiences and get stronger in order to be able to overcome all the obstacles which cross our lives.

Tenorio wants revenge, he is cruel, he wants to punish the so-called *bruja* who is, in fact, a curandera, a miracle-worker. For Tenorio, Ultima's owl is a miserable bird, the spirit of the old witch. On the contrary, this bird represents, in fact, goodness and protection. But he cannot see this aspect. He wants to send this bird to hell. In fact, "the owl was the spirit of Ultima ... the owl was the protective spirit of Ultima, the spirit of the night and the moon, the spirit of the llano! The owl was her soul" (Anaya, 1972:255). The owl, just like Ultima, represents goodness and truth.

Antonio started to be really afraid for Ultima. He realized that the evil Tenorio had found a way to harm Ultima and he would do anything to hurt her. Antonio wanted to warn Ultima of Tenorio's intention. For Antonio, Ultima personified goodness. "Any risk in defense of goodness was right. She was the only person he had ever seen defeat evil where all else had failed. That sympathy for people ... had overcome all obstacles" (Anaya, 1972:255).

Antonio heard an owl cry its welcome to the night. The owl's cry reawakened Tenorio's threat: "this very night I will avenge the death of my two daughters! It is the owl that is the spirit of the old witch" (Anaya, 1972:256).

The owl had always been there. It sang to Antonio in his dreams guiding its footsteps in the dark. Antonio ran to save Ultima. But Tenorio cursed and fired: "that shot destroyed the quiet, moonlit peace of the hill and it shattered Antonio's childhood into a thousand fragments" (Anaya, 1972:258). Tenorio has killed the owl with "a bullet molded by the Prince of Death ... The witch is dead, my daughters are avenged" (Anaya, 1972:258).

When Antonio entered Ultima's room, he saw a candle burning and Ultima was lying on the bed. Antonio told her that the owl is dead and Ultima said: "not dead, but winging its way to a new place, a new time – just as I am ready to fly" (Anaya, 1972:260). This is another very poetic image. For Ultima, death is not the end, it represents a new beginning in a new place and a new time, entering a new dimension, having a new mission.

Antonio told Ultima that she cannot die, but she answered: "when I was a child, I was taught my life's work by a wise old man, a good man. He gave me the owl and he said that the owl was my spirit, my bond to the time and harmony of the universe" (Anaya, 1972:260). Antonio is not prepared to accept Ultima's death but she tries to explain him what her mission was on earth. Ultima's work was to do good, to heal the sick and guide them by showing them the path of goodness. But she "was not to interfere with the destiny of any man" (Anaya, 1972:260).

Ultima accepted her death as she accepted to work for life. Ultima blessed Antonio and her last words were the following ones: "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" (Anaya, 1972:261). These last words of Ultima

represent the last piece of advice for Antonio, Ultima's will under the form of a blessing. She blesses Antonio for the last time and teaches him the most cherished principles in a just and clean life: goodness, truth, strength, beauty and love. He should live his life at the fullest under her protection and care from another dimension.

Sometimes in the future, Antonio will build his own dream "out of those things that were so much a part of [his] childhood" (Anaya, 1972:261). Those things provided a foundation on which to build later a solid structure based on safe principles guiding his life. As Ultima taught Antonio, strength should be built out of life's experiences which must be lived and not out of weaknesses.

Ultima is a curandera of "immense wisdom and compassion. Antonio discovers that Ultima's greatness derives from her accumulation of cultural knowledge, her understanding of her people's experience, their values and customs ... her gift to Antonio is the lesson of honoring one's culture without being trammled by it, of using one's cultural identity as the foundation for the development of an individual spirit" (Baker, 1982:67).

Throughout the novel, "Antonio's trials are balanced with his association with Ultima. She allows him to participate in her life-affirming practices of healing and stabilizing negative forces" (Day, 1999:11). Antonio learned from Ultima the art of the *embroidery*, being able to combine in an exquisite way goodness and truth, love and beauty, strength and inner peace.

Ultima gave Antonio a valuable piece of advice, namely to "build strength from life", thus, his life under Ultima's guidance becomes a "storehouse of cultural riches" (Baker, 1982:68). What Ultima meant by building strength from life is "take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp – and make something new" (Anaya, 1972:247). This is a repatterning of the Chicano world by reshaping the old customs and traditions of the Chicano people.

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