

Bless Me, Ultima Study Guide

Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya

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Plot Summary

Bless Me, Ultima is considered a classic piece of Chicano literature and helped earn Chicano novels a place in mainstream American literature. The book was first published in 1972 and was the first novel of Rudolfo Anaya. He published a second version in 1999 that includes an introduction where he says that he is “especially pleased when young readers read and discuss my work.” Bless Me, Ultima is the first in a trilogy about the life of Antonio Marez y Lunas and though it is not autobiographical, Anaya says that he wrote parts of his own personality into Antonio’s character. The book has been included on several banned book lists for its use of strong language and sexual themes, but has also been recognized with several literary awards.

When Bless Me, Ultima begins, Antonio Marez y Lunas is just six years old. He is the youngest of six children and the only son who still lives at home. His mother hopes that he will become a Catholic priest one day and his father hopes that he will become a vaquero and work on the land like a cowboy. An elderly curandera, or shaman, named Ultima comes to live with Antonio’s family and he is immediately drawn to her wise ways. Ultima sees the potential in Antonio and takes him under her wing. She mentors him about the medicinal powers of herbs and gently shows him why evil cannot win out against good. An owl arrives on the property when Ultima moves in and Antonio understands it to be the protector of Ultima and her spirit.

Ultima is called to reverse a curse that is placed on Antonio’s Uncle Lucas, and she insists on taking Antonio with her. Antonio stays by her side for three days as she uses herbal medicine to heal Lucas, who has been cursed by the evil Trementina sisters. Ultima confronts the father of the young witches, Tenorio Trementina, and tells him that the evil will not go unpunished. Following this event, Antonio begins to question his own spirituality and why God was unable to do what Ultima could. He attends school for the first time in the fall and though he feels like an outsider at first, he quickly learns English and is passed from first to third grade at the end of the year.

Antonio’s brothers return from fighting in World War II and they are changed. They are more restless than ever and spend all of their fighting pay on alcohol and prostitutes. Two of the brothers decide to leave for Las Vegas, while one stays behind to work at a local grocery store. Tenorio shows up at the Marez homestead with a few other men, demanding that Ultima be handed over. He accuses Ultima of practicing witchcraft that killed his daughter. The men leave without Ultima, but the threat remains.

Antonio begins attending catechism classes in order to be confirmed in the Catholic Church but begins to develop doubts about his proclaimed faith. He sees the healing power that Ultima finds in plants from the earth and learns about the mythological “golden carp” from his friends Samuel and Cico. Confusion enters Antonio’s mind as he debates his own spirituality and what it means to maintain his family honor.

As the book progresses, Tenorio becomes more determined than ever to kill Ultima and kills a man named Narciso in his quest. Tenorio nearly kills Antonio on several



occasions and is blinded in one eye by Ultima's protective owl. When his second daughter dies, Tenorio shoots the owl that belongs to Ultima and it leads to her death. Antonio asks for Ultima's blessing before she dies and he makes peace with what has happened because he can tell that Ultima is at peace with her life ending.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1. Bless Me, Ultima is a story about the time that six-year-old Antonio spends with a New Mexican shaman named Ultima. When the story begins, Antonio is almost seven-years-old and shares the attic space in his New Mexican home with his two older sisters. His three older brothers are away, fighting in World War II overseas. Antonio's mother hopes that he will become the family priest and his father hopes that Antonio will follow in his footsteps and become a vaquero, or cowboy. Antonio overhears his parents discussing a curandera, or healer, that has reached old age. The woman helped deliver all of their children and both of Antonio's parents have the highest level of respect for her. They decide that they are going to invite her to come live with them.

Antonio has a dream about his birth that includes a woman who he believes is Ultima. In the dream, the family of his mother and the family of his father argue over what type of man Antonio will become. When Ultima arrives at Antonio's house, he feels a special connection to her and greets her warmly. His sisters are afraid of Ultima and some of the people in the village are also superstitious about her spiritual powers, but Antonio finds her to be soothing. An owl takes up a home outside Ultima's window and Antonio knows that it is the traditional symbol of shamans.

Chapter 2. Ultima adjusts to life with Antonio's family easily. Each family likes her being there for a different reason; Antonio's mother appreciates the company, his sisters like the help with their chores that Ultima provides and his father enjoys telling stories about his life as a vaquero. Antonio keeps Ultima company as she wanders the land near their home in search of plants and herbs for her medicinal purposes. On their walks, Antonio asks her many questions about his future and she is pleased at his inquisitiveness.

One night a village man named Chavez shows up at Antonio's home and tells his father that another man named Lupito has shot the sheriff. The sheriff was Chavez's brother and he wants to exact revenge. Gabriel, Antonio's father, grabs his rifle and leaves with the man to go find Lupito by the river. When Antonio's mother is safely busy praying with her Catholic symbols, Antonio slips out of the house and follows his father and Chavez. He hides in the brush by the river and can see several men from the village up on the bridge, debating what to do about Lupito. The men realize that Lupito is not in his right mind and that being in the war has made him crazy.

Antonio realizes that he is mere feet from Lupito who is hiding in the brush as well. Lupito begins firing into the air and it causes the men on the bridge to all fire at Lupito. He is killed and Antonio watches his body float into the river in a sea of blood. Antonio runs home and Ultima greets him outside. She takes him inside and gives him a special tea that calms him. Antonio falls asleep and dreams about his three brothers and what he witnessed that night.



Analysis

The young character of Antonio Marez y Lunas is introduced and immediately shown as a wise young man. Though he is the youngest in his family, he seems to possess the most inherent wisdom. Ultima sees this immediately when she arrives at the home and takes him under her wing. Antonio is still young and impressionable and Ultima does not take advantage of this fact. She simply answers his questions when he has them and imparts her wisdom through action.

When Antonio witnesses the death of Lupito, he is immediately changed. He sees the insanity in Lupito's eyes and is acutely aware that Lupito's death is an injustice. He is unable to go to his parents with his questions and seeks out the guidance of Ultima instead. She does her best to ease his fears without sugar-coating the truth. She knows about his intense dreams that cause him anguish and realizes that the dreams are both a blessing and a curse. Ultima does her best to help Antonio obtain peace without interfering with the supernatural gifts that she sees within him.

Vocabulary

contorted, hombre, contrition, curandera, vaquero, tenaciously, brujas, verdad, forage



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3. The next morning, Antonio's family gets ready to go to Mass. His parents do not speak about what happened to Lupito but do keep referencing the fact that the night before was a bad one. The entire family, including Ultima, walks to Mass together. When they arrive at the cathedral, Antonio runs around the side of the building to where the other boys play before the service. The boys are all older than Antonio and play rough with each other. An especially gruff boy named Horse calls Antonio over to him and attempts to rough him up. Antonio flips Horse onto the ground, much to the surprise of the other boys. Instead of being angry, Horse is amused by Antonio and the rest of the boys crowd around to meet Antonio. Mass begins and the boys go inside.

Chapter 4. As the summer gets closer to fall, Antonio continues to walk with Ultima through the fields to collect plants and herbs. He is becoming anxious about attending school in the fall and asks her a lot of questions about his fate. Ultima gives no answers, except to say that he will know the answers when they come to him. Antonio's family gathers in the front room to pray the rosary and Antonio admires the statue of the Virgin Mary. He feels a connection to her because she serves as the intercessor for God. Antonio is frightened of approaching God but not afraid of speaking to the Virgin Mary. When Antonio drifts off to sleep that night, he dreams about the beautiful Virgin statue.

Analysis

Antonio's first encounter with the boys from Los Jarros is memorable and telling. Though he is younger and smaller than the group of boys, Antonio is able to hold his own by sheer will. He does not try to fit in with the others by acting the way that they do, but simply stands by his own beliefs. Though the boys tease him initially, and throughout the rest of the novel, Antonio earns their respect immediately. They know that he is considering a life as a priest and they can see in him the leadership that the role will require, even if they give him a hard time about it.

Antonio's fascination with the mysteries of religion become apparent when he ponders the Virgin Mary statue in his home. Unlike God, who Antonio views as frightening and judgmental, he sees the Virgin as a gentle spirit. He is happy that she is able to act on his behalf with God and has dreams where the beautiful statue saves him from God's wrath. Antonio associates the same characteristics with Ultima and the Virgin Mary. Both are gentle, wise and shrouded in mystery. The only difference is that Ultima is a live presence in his life and the Virgin Mary is an intangible ideal.

Vocabulary

yucca, mesquite, catechism, sulfur, chingada, yerba del manso, dysentery, rheumatism, oregano, labyrinth, nopal, succulent, mollera, manzanilla, droning, alfalfa, plaintive



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5. Antonio accompanies his mother, sisters and Ultima to El Puerto – the farmland where his mother's family still lives. Every year the family makes the trip to help with the late summer harvest. Antonio's father stays behind to work. Antonio enjoys the warmth of the family trip and working hard in the fields to help with the harvest. His mother's family's name is Luna, for the moon, and they base all of their planting and harvesting decisions on the position and type of moon. He overhears his Uncle Pedro tell his mother that Antonio should come live with them for a summer after he has taken his first communion in order to learn the ways of the family.

Chapter 6. Antonio prepares to go to his first day of school. He speaks no English, like the other kids do, and will be in the first grade. Ultima blesses Antonio and his sisters before they set off on the path to the schoolhouse. Antonio is overwhelmed by the chaos of the schoolyard and manages to find his classroom and teacher. She immediately has him sit and begin practicing writing letters and his name. At lunch, the other kids take out sandwiches and Antonio has tortillas and beans from his mother. The kids laugh at him and he cannot communicate with them, so he goes outside to eat alone. He sees several other kids who are doing the same thing and the boys form an unspoken outsiders' bond.

Analysis

Antonio is immediately at ease with the ways of the Lunas side of his family. He enjoys going to help with the harvest and feels comfortable in the role of the farmer. His uncles are pleased with his work and begin to get hopeful that one of Maria's sons will follow in the Lunas family footsteps. Antonio can sense their excitement and is anxious to please his mother – though he is not sure if the Lunas way of life is his calling. He feels the heavy pressure of pleasing his family, especially since his three older brothers have failed to do so.

Though Antonio is incredibly intelligent, he feels like an outsider at school. He does not speak any English, which puts him at a disadvantage for fitting in. He also unwraps a lunch of beans and chiles while his classmates are eating sandwiches. The Los Jarros boys are a grade above Antonio and so he does not often see them. Despite feeling uncomfortable and out of place, Antonio studies hard and tries to unravel the "mystery of the letters." Antonio recognizes the fact that he is different from the others and accepts that he must work harder to achieve the same, and higher, success.

Vocabulary

melee, menacing, cavernous, blasphemy, twister, juniper, mesas, calloused, chile, rstras



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7. News that World War II has ended reaches Antonio's home. His brother Andrew writes to his mother to tell her that all three brothers – Eugene, Leon and Andrew-- are going to meet up in San Diego and then come home together. Antonio's mother directs everyone to the living room where they all pray to the Virgin Mary statue and thank her for the safe return of the brothers. Antonio and his sisters fall asleep during the vigil, and their father carries them to bed.

The next day, the brothers arrive home. Antonio's mother weeps and his father asks them several

questions about California. He suggests that now that his sons have returned, the family should move to California. The brothers seem uncomfortable with their father's idea.

Antonio is excelling at school and his teacher sends a note home telling his mother about his excellent progress. Antonio's mother is thrilled that her son is doing so well in school and says that she knows Antonio will become a priest.

Chapter 8. In the winter months, Antonio's brothers spend the days sleeping and the nights out getting drunk in town. Their father keeps talking about plans to move to California and live on a vineyard but the brothers do not encourage the idea. Antonio listens as his brothers discuss their plans in the barn as Antonio feeds the animals. The brothers are making plans to pool their money and move to either Santa Fe or Las Vegas. They criticize their father for expecting them to stay with the family after they have already been abroad and seen the horrors of war. Andrew is the only one who protests, saying that he is not sure about leaving their mother or home. The brothers decide that Antonio will fulfill their mother's dreams by becoming the priest of the family. They tease him and spank him in jest before running off to town to drink and see women.

Analysis

The return of Antonio's brothers from the warfront causes a dynamic shift in his home. Though his parents have been praying for their sons' safe return, they are discouraged by the new attitudes that the boys demonstrate. The young men are arrogant and boisterous and seem to have no interest in their family or hometown. They spend their money on alcohol and women and have no desire to move to California as their father dreams. While the attitudes hurt Antonio's parents, they are unsure of how to interact with their sons because they realize that they are grown men who have fought in a war.

Antonio longs to know his brothers as more than the giants from his dreams. The more he hangs around them and listens to their conversations, the more distant he feels from

them, however. Just like the other students at school, Antonio is simply different than his brothers and will never be able to “fit in” with them. After hearing his brothers talk, Antonio realizes that they have no intentions to fulfill his parents dreams and that the responsibility will fall on his shoulders instead.

Vocabulary

spectral, fatigue, hijos, abrazos, heaved, audacity, turgid, restlessness



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9. Antonio hears his brothers arguing with his parents about their plans to leave and head west. His father is angry that they are neglecting his dream of moving to California and his mother cries that they are forsaking her. After the heated debate, Leon and Eugene decide to leave but Andrew chooses to stay home. Andrew takes a job at the local grocery store and starts walking to town with Antonio every day. The two discuss life and Andrew tells Antonio that he understands what it is like to have so many expectations on his life but that he will have to make his own choices in the end.

School lets out for the summer and Antonio learns that he will be passed to the third grade instead of second grade. This pleases his mother and Ultima. Antonio spends his summer afternoons helping Ultima gather herbs and wandering by the River of the Carp. His schoolmate Samuel tells him the story behind why it is bad luck to fish for carp in the river and then tells him about a god-like “golden carp” that lives in the waters. When Antonio asks to see the golden carp, Samuel says that another boy named Cico will seek him out and lead him to the spot where the golden carp lives.

Chapter 10. Word reaches Antonio’s house that his Uncle Lucas is deathly ill after falling under a curse by three sister witches. Antonio’s Uncle Pedro comes to the house and tells the story of Lucas coming upon an evil ceremony of the three witches and confronting them. Shortly after the confrontation, he fell ill and no one – not even the priest – has been able to heal him. Pedro asks Ultima if she will come with him and try to break the curse. Ultima agrees but insists on bringing Antonio too.

Ultima and Antonio go to El Puerto to try to cure Lucas. Before they see him, Ultima takes Antonio to the saloon that is owned by the father of the three witches, Tenorio. She confronts him and tells him to tell his daughters to reverse the curse. Tenorio refuses and Ultima warns him that harm will befall his daughters as a result. She and Antonio lock themselves in a room with Lucas for three days where Ultima makes various potions and goes through several rites before breaking the spell cast over Lucas. Antonio can hear coyotes outside the walls of the room at night and Ultima’s owl attacks them to keep them away.

When the spell has been broken, Ultima asks Pedro to drive her to the spot where Lucas witnessed the witches performing their ceremony. She takes fabric where she wrapped a ball of hair that Lucas coughed up and sets it on fire on the site. When she has completed the task, she tells Pedro to drive her and Antonio home.

Analysis

The first mention of witchcraft appears in this section of the book. Antonio witnesses firsthand what the power of evil can do to a “good” person and he questions why God is



unable to save his Uncle Lucas. Ultima is able to do what God apparently cannot and Antonio begins to wonder about the merits of his chosen religion. He wonders if it is possible to believe in multiple faiths at the same time but then immediately feels guilty for having those thoughts. Antonio can see the presence of evil in his Uncle Lucas but is unable to see something tangible to represent the good – aside from Ultima, who is not a god or a symbol of Catholicism.

Tenorio is introduced at this point in the novel and he is a menacing figure. Antonio can sense the evil in Tenorio from the moment he and Ultima enter the saloon where he sits with his back towards them. Despite being a terrifying figure, Antonio is not afraid of Tenorio when he is standing beside Ultima. He knows that he is no match for Ultima and the power of her goodness. It becomes clear that Ultima brought Antonio on the trip in order to face the evil and begin to form strength against it. She can see the potential in Antonio and uses the trip as a test of his true character and resilience in the face of evil.

Vocabulary

listlessly, maize, carp, ominous, stoically, irrevocable, yucca, unsurpassed, bosque, incantations, cohorts, portents, emphatically, gnarled, contrivance, ominous, sheathed, bravado, stupor, elation, acrid, pallor



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11. Antonio is fishing alone when Cico approaches him. Antonio has been waiting all summer for Cico to find him to unveil the mystery of the golden carp. Cico tells Antonio to follow him and they wade through the river to the other side. As they walk to the place where the golden carp is found, Cico points out Narciso's garden. Cico says that he is a friend of Narciso's and the boys walk through the gate into the garden. Antonio is amazed at how lush and prosperous Narciso's garden is and Cico agrees. He tells Antonio that despite the fact Narciso is known as the town drunk, he is a good man and the proof is his beautiful garden that is unlike anything else in the area.

Antonio and Cico pass some of the other boys on the way to the secret spot of the golden carp and the boys try to get them to stay and play. They sneak off when the boys are in a tussle and approach the shaded area of the golden carp. Cico and Antonio wait patiently for the fish to swim past and discuss spirituality. Cico tells Antonio about a rumored mermaid that draws in vulnerable people near two lakes. He says that all of Guadalupe is surrounded by bodies of water and that it will one day be consumed by all the water and swallowed up.

Soon, the large fish comes into view and Antonio is amazed at its grandeur. The golden carp shimmers in the sunlight and Antonio is awestruck. He tells Ultima about the story and she does not dispute the existence of the golden carp. Antonio dreams that night about his internal conflict between Catholicism and belief in something pagan like the golden carp and comes to the conclusion that they are all intertwined.

Chapter 12. Antonio continues to ponder his thoughts on spirituality as the summer goes on. He

thinks about Ultima's cure of his uncle and the golden carp and wonders what the true religion is. Ultima gives Antonio a sacred scapular that she keeps around her neck and tells him that it is for protection. She makes him promise not to tell anyone that she gave it to him.

Narciso shows up late one evening to warn the family that Tenorio is coming to try to kill Ultima. One of his daughters has died and he blames the witchcraft of Ultima. Tenorio and three other hooded men show up and demand that Ultima be delivered to them. Antonio's father goes calmly to the porch and tells them simply to leave his property. He pokes holes in their claims that Ultima is a witch but they persist in their accusations. Narciso comes onto the porch and suggests a test: if Ultima can walk through the threshold of the home while a cross is pinned above it, she is clearly not a witch. Tenorio is displeased with the rationale, but the other men with him agree to the test. Narciso makes a cross and Ultima walks through the doorway with no problem. The men leave, defeated, but Tenorio makes it clear that the issue is far from resolved.



Antonio notices that the cross has fallen to the ground but is thankful that no one else sees it.

Analysis

The boundaries of Antonio's spirituality are stretched again when he sees the golden carp. While the God of Catholicism is intangible and shrouded in heavenly mystery, the golden carp is something that Antonio can actually see. There is something majestic about the giant, golden fish that leaves Antonio awestruck. It is the first time he has seen a supposed "god" in the flesh and he is unsure if he should feel reverence, disgust or guilt for even entertaining the idea that there may be a god in the form of a fish. He dreams about all of the opposing spiritual viewpoints in his life. In the dream, the figure of Ultima directs him to the understanding that all religions are "right" in their own ways.

Ultima's life is first threatened when Tenorio and several other men show up and accuse her of witchcraft. Though Antonio is only six, he accompanies his father onto the front porch to confront the evil men and stand up for Ultima, who has come to love and revere. Antonio's suspicion that Ultima's powers are not derived from the God of the Catholic church are confirmed when she is able to walk through the door with the cross pinned above it. He is the only one that notices the needles forming the cross have fallen from the doorframe, hinting that Ultima is more powerful than the spirituality that the cross represents.

Vocabulary

tempest, quizzically, contemptuously, scapular, vigilantes



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13. The next morning, Antonio's family packs up to go to El Puerto to help with the annual harvest. His father decides to make the trip for the first time in order to protect the family from Tenorio, who lives near the Lunas farm. The morning after they arrive at El Puerto, the funeral is held for Tenorio's deceased daughter. Ultima dresses in all black and watches the procession from a hill outside the Lunas homestead. When the wagon carrying the body arrives at the church, the priest refuses to allow it inside. It seems that all of the town is watching the scene and this angers Tenorio even more.

Antonio and his family return to the harvest and by the afternoon, they are happily working together and have forgotten about the events of the morning. Before they leave to return to Guadalupe, Antonio's Uncle Juan tells his mother what a good job Antonio did in the harvest. He asks her to have him return the next summer and stay to help for several months.

Chapter 14. Antonio returns to school and is in the same class as the older, tougher boys. They tease him about Ultima being a witch and killing Tenorio's daughter but Antonio fights back and the teasing stops. As Christmas break nears, Antonio's class plans a Christmas play. On the day of the play, a blizzard rolls into town but Antonio decides to go to school anyway. His sisters stay home for the day and he walks with his older brother Andrew into town. Very few students come to school and none of the girls show up. Antonio and his classmates have to adjust the play and a boy named Horse is forced to play the Virgin Mary. Children from the younger classes come to watch the play and it is a disaster. Antonio stays to help clean up and then heads home in the dark, cold blizzard alone.

As he walks through town, he comes upon Tenorio and Narciso fighting outside the bar. They are both drunk and angry and it takes several of the bar patrons and bartender to pull them apart. Tenorio tells Narciso that he will kill Ultima. Antonio watches from the side and they do not see him because of the storm. Narciso sets out for Antonio's house to warn the family of Tenorio's plot. Antonio follows Narciso from a distance. Instead of going straight to Antonio's home, Narciso stops at Rosie's, the house of prostitution. He calls for Andrew, who is inside with a woman. Andrew tells Narciso that Tenorio is a madman and does not take the warning seriously. Antonio is shocked to see his brother in the house of prostitution but vows never to bring it up to anyone. Narciso sets back out to get to Antonio's home.

As Narciso nears the house, Tenorio is lying in wait for him. He shoots Narciso in the chest and when he aims for his head, Antonio screams. Tenorio sees Antonio and flees. Antonio knows that there is not enough time to get a doctor or priest and so he reads Narciso his last rites. Narciso dies in Antonio's arms and Antonio wanders home in a



daze and tells his family what happened. He slips into a deep sleep and is nursed back to health over the following days by Ultima.

Analysis

Antonio witnesses the murder of Narciso in this section of the book and must act as a priest to the dying man. Though Antonio is averse to the idea at first, he realizes that he is the only person able to administer last rites for him. Antonio slips easily into the role of priest and sends Narciso off in a peaceful state. He thinks about witnessing the death of Lupito and wonders again why God would take a life in a senseless manner.

The admiration that Antonio held for his brother Andrew quickly fades after he sees him at Rosie's with a prostitute. Not only is Andrew clearly at home in the brothel, but he seems to have no compassion for Narciso or Ultima. Instead of trying to help, Andrew is content to stay at the brothel and drink his money away. Antonio realizes that though he is the youngest in the family, he must be the one to act responsibly. He demonstrates maturity by not mentioning the incident to anyone, not even Andrew, and simply accepting his fate as the one who must stand up for his family honor.

Vocabulary

excommunication, mitote, perdition, tumultuous, Eucharist, chasm, putrid, curative, flagellation, decapitated, pesadilla



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15. When Antonio recovers, his brother Andrew comes to talk to him. Antonio can sense that Andrew feels guilty about what happened to Narciso, but Andrew never admits where he was or seeing Narciso just before the murder. Tenorio is not arrested for the murder because the sheriff says that there is no proof except for a delusional kid.

Antonio's brothers Leon and Eugene return home and tell a story about how they bought a fancy car but wrecked it. They talk about their adventures and Antonio's mother is happy that they have returned home. Antonio's father talks again of California but the brothers leave town a few days later, taking Andrew with them.

Chapter 16. Antonio returns to school after Christmas break and at first, the other kids ask him about Narciso's murder all the time. Antonio refuses to talk about it though and they soon leave him alone. He questions the ways of God, for letting Narciso die when he was trying to do a good deed and also for allowing Tenorio to go free. On the way home from school one day, Antonio sees Tenorio standing by the juniper tree where he murdered Narciso. Tenorio tells Antonio that his second daughter is dying and that he will find a way to kill Ultima. He does not harm Antonio and retreats into the swirling dust after his threat. Antonio tells Ultima what happened and she tells him not to worry about Tenorio. Antonio has bad dreams in which Tenorio shoots Ultima.

Analysis

The guilt from Narciso's death proves to be too much for Andrew, who decides to leave Guadalupe and go west with his two older brothers. It is unclear if Andrew realizes that Antonio knows his secret about the brothel, but he is clearly uncomfortable around his little brother. While Antonio is still disappointed in his brother, he has a basic understanding of what his brother is going through and feels sympathy towards him.

Tenorio begins to stalk Antonio and threaten him in regards to Ultima. Instead of being afraid, Antonio stands up to Tenorio and lets him know that Ultima will not be taken without a fight. The difference in physical power between Tenorio and Antonio is drastic – one is a grown man and the other is just a boy in elementary school – but the mental fortitude is a match. Antonio is maturing rapidly from his studies with Ultima and even Tenorio can see it. If Tenorio did not view Antonio as a threat, he would not waste his time seeking him out.

Vocabulary

cistern, diphtheria, empanaditas, unperturbed, disquietude, ambushed, defiance



Chapters 17-18

Summary

Chapter 17. Antonio begins the catechism classes that will lead to his first communion on Easter Sunday. Most of the kids in his class go to the catechism classes taught by the priest, including Florence who tells Antonio that he does not believe in God. Florence explains that both of his parents were dead by the time he was three and that his sisters work as “whores” at Rosie’s. He cannot understand how a just God would allow such things to happen and Antonio wonders the same thing. The priest explains the difference between mortal and venial sins and warns the children about eternal damnation.

Chapter 18. Holy Week arrives and Antonio participates in Ash Wednesday and Good Friday ceremonies. He must make his first confession and is nervous about the process. As the children wait outside the church to go to confession, they begin to tease Antonio about becoming a priest. They tell him to practice by hearing the confession of some of the other children, including Horse and Bones. Antonio plays along until the kids demand that he hear Florence’s penance and punish him. When Antonio “forgives” Florence without assigning any penance, the other kids become angry. They attack Antonio and tear his new clothing. The kids go inside when it is time for confession and Antonio follows after trying to get back to normal. He makes his first confession to the priest.

Analysis

Antonio faces disappointment following his first communion. His whole life he had been waiting to “know God” by becoming a member of the church, and he realizes that simply eating a piece of bread is not all that it takes. He does not understand God any more than he did before taking the sacrament and he feels betrayed by it. God becomes even more of a distant idea in his mind and a being that seems impossible to ever truly know.

Readers get a glimpse of “mob mentality” when the other kids in Antonio’s catechism classes gang up on him. Like the people who do not understand Ultima and want to harm her as a result of what they view as “witchcraft,” the other kids in Antonio’s class want to harm Florence. When they see Antonio standing up for Florence’s beliefs, or lack thereof, they turn on Antonio. They do not understand how Antonio can defend Florence and simply let him off without any punishment. Antonio experiences on a small scale what he already faces on account of Ultima and what he will face in the coming chapters.

Vocabulary

diablitos, haughtily, intermingled, barren, heresy, genuflected, mortal, venial, purgatory, damnation, penance, nebulous



Chapters 19-20

Summary

Chapter 19. Antonio attends Easter Sunday services and takes his first communion. He hopes that once he has tasted the “body of Christ” he will have answers to all of the questions in his mind. He feels exactly the same after taking Communion, however, and does not feel that he has changed or come to know God any better.

Chapter 20. A man named Tellez arrives at Antonio’s house. He is an old friend of Antonio’s father and has come to tell him about all of the awful things that are taking place at his house. He says that rocks rain down on his home and that an evil spirit presides over the dwelling. Tellez begs for Ultima to come and try to cure his home. She agrees to go, along with Antonio and Antonio’s father. They drive to the home and see the evil for themselves. Ultima asks the men to build a specific altar outside out of juniper branches. When it is complete, she tells them to burn branches on it. Ultima stays inside and works on reversing the curse. After nightfall, she comes outside to tell the men that the curse has been lifted. Tellez thanks them for coming and then confides in Antonio’s father that he believes it was Tenorio who cast the spell on his home. Tellez had seen him a few weeks earlier and when Tenorio spoke ill of Ultima, Tellez defended her. Shortly after, evil things started happening at his home.

Analysis

Antonio is sent on another curse-breaking mission with Ultima. This time his father is along for the ride and instead of bonding more closely with Ultima, Antonio is able to bond with his father instead. They discuss spirituality as they work together to try to reverse the horrible curse that has been placed on Tellez’s home. Antonio’s father discovers that his son is more knowledgeable about spirituality than he anticipated. While his father has always taken it for granted that Antonio is going to be a Catholic because of the influence of his mother, he begins to see that his son may have a mind of his own when it comes to matters of spirituality.

Once the spell at Tellez’s home has been broken, readers discover that Tenorio is behind the evil. It is no coincidence that Ultima is the only one who is able to break the bad spells that are caused by Tenorio. She can stand up to his evil unlike anyone else and seems to be the only one who can reverse the bad circumstances he causes.

Vocabulary

chalice, spittle, sodality, Resurrection, tumult, emaciated, sardonically, inextricable, altar



Chapters 21-22

Summary

Chapter 21. Antonio and Cico go to seek out the golden carp as the weather improves. Shortly after arriving at the right spot, the golden carp appears and is as dazzling as Antonio remembers. As they walk back toward town, they see a group of boys from class who look worried. They tell Cico and Antonio that Florence jumped from a cliff into the water below and has not been seen for several minutes. They believe he has drowned. They try to flag down a lifeguard from across the river and Florence's body emerges from the water, floating and lifeless. Antonio tries to revive him but it is too late. The lifeguard comes over and clears the water from Florence's lungs but he is dead.

Chapter 22. After Florence's death, Antonio's family and Ultima are worried about him. He prepares to go away for the summer to spend it harvesting with his uncles in El Puerto. His father drives him there and they discuss spirituality. Antonio discovers that his father's beliefs are similar to Ultima's – that man needs to be one with the earth and respect other people in order to be righteous. Antonio works hard all summer and is not haunted by his dreams.

On the night before Antonio is supposed to return home, news reaches the Lunas that Tenorio's second daughter has died and that he is drunk and howling revenge against Ultima. Antonio's Uncle Pedro decides that they must leave at once to warn the family and he sends Antonio back to the house to gather his things. Antonio encounters Tenorio on the walk back and Tenorio tries to kill Antonio by trampling him with his horse. Antonio manages to escape but realizes that he will not make it back to the house alive. He decides to run the ten miles to Guadalupe to warn his family. He runs consistently, taking few breaks, until he arrives on the edge of his property. He sees that he is too late, however, and that Tenorio is already there. Antonio's uncle Pedro arrives in the truck and alerts the family that Antonio is missing.

Tenorio shoots Ultima's owl and the bird falls to the ground, dead. Antonio calls out in horror and Tenorio turns to shoot Antonio as well. Uncle Pedro shoots Tenorio first and the man dies, still uttering curses to Ultima. Antonio realizes that the owl is synonymous with Ultima's spirit and he knows that she will die too. He rushes to be by her side and she tells him to go bury the owl near a forked tree. Before he leaves, Antonio asks for Ultima's blessing. He realizes that Ultima will die before he returns. As he walks back from burying the owl, Antonio thinks about how Ultima taught him to not live a life of mourning, but to go forward stronger from every situation and he silently accepts her death.



Analysis

Antonio faces three more deaths in the final pages of the book. First he sees his friend Florence just minutes after he has drowned and is part of the group who tries to revive him. Shortly before coming upon the scene with Florence, Antonio and Cico had decided that Florence should be told the secret of the golden carp and brought into the brotherhood. The fact that Florence dies before he is told the story is a tragedy, especially to Antonio who had hoped to help Florence find some spiritual peace.

The death of Tenorio is a necessary evil. If he had not been stopped, he would have continued his murderous streak. Still, there is a sadness that accompanies Antonio as he looks at Tenorio's dead body. Perhaps it is sadness in knowing that he could not help Tenorio, much in the way that he could not help Florence in time. Antonio does not feel vindicated in Tenorio's death and realizes that it is still a tragedy, even if it one that could not be avoided.

Ultima's death is not described in great detail, but rather alluded to by Antonio in the final paragraphs of the book. When he buries the owl, Antonio realizes that he is symbolically burying Ultima. He asks for her blessing before he leaves to bury the owl, knowing that she will not be alive when he returns. Readers get a glimpse of an Antonio that has changed since the start of the book in the ending text. He does not view Ultima's death as a tragedy but rather as something he must be strong to overcome. Antonio knows that if he gives in to despair and grief, the evil of Tenorio will have won out. He can see that Ultima is at peace and so he accepts her death with respect and vows to move forward without vengeance or hatred in his heart.

Vocabulary

subterranean, cynically, personified, diablo, quagmire, cabrito, pallor, velorio, immaculate conception



Characters

Antonio

Antonio Marez y Lunas is a six-year-old boy when the story begins and it covers roughly two years of his life. He is the first-person narrator of the story and the protagonist. Antonio is the youngest of six children and lives on a plain just outside Guadalupe, New Mexico with his family. He is the only boy living in the home, as his brothers are older and all away fighting in World War II. Antonio takes his role as his mother's pride and joy seriously and tries to be a respectful, helpful child. When Ultima comes to live with his family, Antonio is immediately drawn to her as a mentor and begins a spiritual journey that she facilitates in part.

A lot happens to Antonio in the short period of time that the book covers. He learns about religious beliefs outside of the Catholicism he has always accepted, starts attending school and is skipped a grade for his intelligence, and witnesses five deaths. Through every circumstance in his life, Antonio shows great resilience and seems to be wise beyond his years. He is smart enough to question the accepted ways that others take for granted but humble enough to keep his doubts internalized. He deals with all of his confusion in isolation, choosing only to speak to Ultima about the biggest issues that trouble him. At the end of the novel, Antonio has grown from a trusting young boy to an adolescent with his own set of beliefs and the courage to seek out the answers he hopes to find.

Ultima

Ultima, or "La Grande," is a curandera that comes to live with Antonio and his family when he is six. She uses herbs and plants to heal the ailments of others and is considered to be a shaman by some and a witch by others. Ultima moves in with Antonio's family because she is very old and his parents do not like the idea of her living alone. They feel indebted to Ultima because she was the midwife at the delivery of all of their children and she has healed so many of their friends. Antonio quickly bonds with Ultima and has a respect for her knowledge and unconventional methods.

Ultima is wise from experience and has supernatural abilities, but she lives discreetly and does not boast about her life. Instead, she only offers her assistance when it is requested and stands up to evil forces when she feels that they must be confronted. Antonio describes Ultima as being small and frail, with bright child-like eyes that sparkle. She does not try to protect Antonio from the dangers of the world, but mentors him to know how to deal with any situation that he may encounter. Ultima dies at the end of the book but feels no grief because she knows that she has lived a fulfilled life and passed some of her knowledge on to Antonio.



Tenorio Trementina

Tenorio is the epitome of evil in the novel. He has a slender, crooked face and owns the saloon in El Puerto. Legend has it that Tenorio married a witch and that when she died, she passed her evil powers onto their three daughters who still practice black magic. When Tenorio's first daughter dies after Ultima reverses a curse the daughter had placed, Tenorio swears revenge on Ultima. He kills Narciso when he tries to stand in the way and tries to kill Antonio on several occasions. In the process of seeking revenge, Tenorio is blinded in one eye by an Ultima's owl. He later kills the owl and is shot by Antonio's uncle before he can do any more harm.

Gabriel

Gabriel Marez is Antonio's father. He is a former vaquero, or cowboy, who has a restless spirit. Though he is a good provider and takes pride in his family, Gabriel longs to be away from the stability of the llano and wander the world instead. He has a dream of moving his family to California and becomes bitter when his older sons want nothing to do with the plan. Gabriel is respected by the citizens of Guadalupe and is able to stop Tenorio and his cohorts from taking Ultima when they arrive on his property.

Maria

Maria Lunas is Antonio's mother. She is a devout Catholic who prays over everything, whether it is good or bad news. Maria takes pride in her children and is especially hopeful that Antonio will become a priest and fulfill her dream for him. Like her husband, Maria longs to be somewhere other than the llano. She misses the place where she grew up, El Puerto, and yearns to return to the land where her family still farms.

Deborah

Deborah Marez y Lunas is the older sister of Antonio and a twin to Theresa. She is the most worldly of the Marez family and uses word like "gosh." She is nosy, often asking questions that are inappropriate.

Theresa

Theresa Marez y Lunas is the older sister of Antonio and a twin to Deborah. Unlike her sister, Theresa is more subdued. She tends to follow Deborah's lead and is frightened of the events that take place in the house.



Leon

Leon is the oldest of Antonio's brothers and always follows what Eugene wants to do. When he returns from fighting in World War II, he is restless to get out and see the rest of the world. He spends all of his war money drinking and playing pool in town before leaving with Eugene for Las Vegas.

Eugene

Eugene, or "Gene," is the second oldest of Antonio's brothers and the ringleader of the three older boys. He is the most outspoken of the older Marez sons and visibly annoyed when his parents make suggestions about him staying close to the homestead. He points out that Antonio is the one that will make their mother proud, so there is no reason for the other boys to stick around to please her.

Andrew

Andrew is the third-oldest Marez brother and Antonio describes him as being the most like his mother. Though Andrew is younger than the other two, he does his own thing and is not influenced by the whims of his older brothers. When Leon and Eugene leave for Las Vegas, Andrew stays behind and takes a job at a local grocery store. Antonio discovers that Andrew spends his nights at Rosie's house of prostitution but never tells anyone. When Narciso is murdered, Andrew feels guilty because he did not take Narciso's warnings seriously. After his brothers visit home for a brief period, Andrew leaves with them – preferring to run away than to stay and face his guilt.

Narciso

Narciso is a large, muscular man who is known as the town drunk, though he is actually a man of principle. He goes to Antonio's house twice to warn Ultima that Tenorio is coming to try to murder her. The second time that Narciso goes to warn Ultima, he is murdered by Tenorio before he can reach the property. Antonio witnesses the murder and reads Narciso his last rites as he bleeds to death in the snow.

Florence

Florence is a schoolmate of Antonio's who is outspoken about not believing in Catholicism or any god. Florence confides in Antonio that he does not believe that there is a god because both of his parents died when he was three and his sisters have been reduced to working as prostitutes. He goes to catechism classes with the other students but tells Antonio it is only because he does not want to be alone while they are in class. Florence dies by drowning in the river after jumping in from a cliff. His death makes Antonio question the ways of God even more than he did before.



Lupito

Lupito is a man from Guadalupe who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder after returning from World War II. He goes crazy and shoots the town sheriff and is hunted down by the other men in the city. Though some of the men plead his insanity and try to convince the others that Lupito should not be killed, he is shot down by the river. Antonio witnesses the shooting from close range.

The Trementina Sisters

Tenorio has three daughters that are known to practice witchcraft. They cast a spell on Antonio's Uncle Lucas that nearly kills him. After Ultima reverses the curse, two of the Trementina sisters die in close succession.

Uncle Pedro

Antonio's Uncle Pedro Lunas is his mother's oldest brother and a farmer in El Puerto. He comes to Antonio's home to ask Ultima to lift the curse off his brother Lucas and he also is the one that insists that Antonio spend a summer on the land with the brothers. He speaks to Antonio about the possibility of becoming a priest or a farmer and tells him that he is always welcome on their land if that is what he decides to do.

Uncle Lucas

Antonio's Uncle Lucas Lunas is a brother of his mother and during the course of the book, becomes cursed. The curse is so strong that it nearly kills Lucas and the priest from the Catholic church is unable to reverse the curse with holy water. Lucas is cursed by the Trementina sisters when he walks into one of their witchcraft ceremonies. Ultima is able to save Lucas from the curse just before his death and he is forever grateful for her kindness.

Samuel

Samuel is a schoolmate of Antonio's who is a year older. Samuel is quiet, compared to the other children, and a deep thinker. It is Samuel who first tells Antonio about the golden carp and other surrounding mythology.

Cico

Cico is an older student at Antonio's school who shows Antonio where the golden carp swims. He tells Antonio about the mermaids that supposedly live in the Twin Lakes and about how the entire town of Guadalupe is surrounded by bodies of water. Cico single-

handedly sends Antonio into confusion about spirituality and the role that the Catholic church should play in his life.



Objects/Places

Guadalupe, New Mexico

Antonio and his family live just outside the town of Guadalupe, New Mexico. It is a small town that has one schoolhouse, a Catholic church, a saloon and a house of prostitution. The majority of the residents are Catholic and many of the young men have been taken away to fight in World War II.

Llano

Antonio's family lives in a house on the llano, or plain, just outside the town of Guadalupe. His father and older brothers built the home and the ground is much too rocky for any major farming to occur.

El Puerto

El Puerto is the former home of Antonio's mother and is located ten miles away from Guadalupe. Antonio and his family visit El Puerto at the end of every summer to help with the harvest and spend time with the family. Antonio spends one entire summer there helping his uncles farm the land.

Narciso's Garden

Despite the harsh weather conditions and dry soil in Guadalupe, Narciso maintains a lush garden at his home. Antonio sees it when his friend Cico points it out as they walk past. After Narciso is murdered, Antonio sees that his garden quickly withers and dies.

Owl

Ultima has an owl that goes with her everywhere. When she moves into Antonio's home, the owl sits outside the window, as if it is guarding Ultima. The owl blinds Tenorio in one eye when he comes to harm Ultima and Tenorio later shoots it for revenge. Not long after the owl is shot, Ultima dies too.

Herbal Medicine

Ultima places a lot of stock in the healing power of herbal medicines and plants. She spends time every day collecting the plants that she needs to have on hand to help with any type of ailment or curse. Antonio learns about the herbs and plants by spending time helping Ultima collect them on the llano.



Virgin Mary Statue

Antonio's mother has a statue of the Virgin Mary that she keeps in the living room. When she instructs the family to pray together, the statue seems to oversee the ceremony. Antonio finds the statue to be comforting and a reminder of the soft way that Mary intercedes on his behalf to God.

Golden Carp

Antonio learns about the myth of the golden carp from his friend Cico. According to legend, the golden carp is a god that presides over the other carp in the river who were once people. Antonio sees the golden carp and begins to wonder if there is some merit to the legend.

Rosie's House

The house of prostitution in Guadalupe is known as "Rosie's house." Antonio knows that it is a place of sin and stays away from it. He is surprised to learn that his brother Andrew is a regular customer there.

Communion Wafer

When Antonio takes his first communion, he hopes that taking the communion wafer, or "body of Christ," will help him to better understand the ways of God. After taking the communion wafer, Antonio does not feel any differently and is disappointed that nothing has changed within him.

Coyotes

Coyotes appear as symbols of evil in the novel. Often, coyotes are believed to be the spirits of Tenorio and his evil daughters by the other characters. When the coyotes come close to endangering Ultima, her owl attacks them and sends them whimpering away.



Themes

Spirituality

Several forms of spirituality are highlighted in the story, including Catholicism, mythology and communing with nature. Antonio is exposed to several types of spirituality throughout the book and sees each one played out in the life of another character. From Ultima, he learns a religion of treating others with goodness and being in tune with the ways of the earth. She shows him the proper way to pick herbs without harming the land and how to listen to signs of warning and goodness in nature. Before she dies, Ultima asks Antonio to bury the owl respectfully under a tree and hints that just as the owl is returning to the earth, she will too. She encourages Antonio to be accepting of this circle of life and not grieve the loss of life for too long.

Antonio learns about local mythology from his friends Samuel and Cico. They know the story of the carp in the river and most specifically, the golden carp. Samuel and Cico do not go around talking to everyone about these myths, but instead reserve them to tell specific, deserving individuals. Antonio is chosen to know the stories because Samuel and Cico know that he will be respectful of what they say – not necessarily because they believe that he will become a believer. Antonio feels guilty about showing interest in the “pagan” beliefs that his friends present but is captivated at the same time.

The most traditional form of spirituality presented in the novel is Catholicism. Ironically, this is the spirituality that Antonio most rejects throughout the novel. While he never fully breaks from his Catholic roots, and continues to go through the motions of the religion, he has doubts about the information he has been fed by his mother and the church. If God is really all-powerful, how can he allow evil to flourish? Antonio resents the truths that he has been taught at points in the book, but always returns to them to try to find what he may be missing. He is disappointed when he takes his first communion and does not feel the presence of God. The opposing viewpoints on spirituality that Antonio encounters are confusing but a necessary part of his maturation into a man and an individual.

Family Honor

The ideas of family loyalty and honor are explored in the book. Antonio is his mother's pride and joy. He is the youngest of six children and the only boy who still lives at home. His older brothers have already made the choice to go out into the world and blaze their own trails, however shallow. Antonio's mother has hope that her last boy will become a priest – a position of leadership that she views as the ultimate honor. As Antonio learns more about Catholicism and begins to form his own belief system, he has less faith in the church and feels guilty that his attitude may hurt his mother. He continues to go to church, takes his first communion and attends confession in order to try to find the



answers he so desperately wants in order to please his mother. He never voices his doubt to her, but internalizes the conflict in order to avoid hurting her.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are Antonio's three older brothers. Though his parents are proud of them for fighting in World War II, they are discouraged by the choices that the young men make. Leon and Eugene actively talk about how much they dislike farming and the "hick" town of Guadalupe, despite both of these things being part of their core identity. When Antonio's father discusses the idea of the family moving to California, his older sons roll their eyes and cannot believe that their father would expect them to give up their own lives for a dream like that. Readers are left to make their own determinations about which way is better – honoring the wishes of a family, even if they do not reflect your dreams, or completely abandoning family expectations in pursuit of personal goals.

Good versus Evil

The age-old battle of Good versus Evil plays a prominent role in the novel but seeing it through the eyes of a six-year-old boy gives fresh interpretation. At the beginning of the book, Antonio believes that the world is ruled by a just God who ensures that wickedness is punished. He has no practical basis for this belief system and bases it solely on what he has learned through his mother and her strict Catholicism. As events in Antonio's life begin to unfold, he starts to question this set of beliefs that he accepted blindly when he was younger. He sees evil go unpunished and good unprotected and questions how darkness is able to triumph over light in so many practical applications. What Antonio does not possess, and develops as the novel moves forward, is the knowledge that sometimes evil goes unpunished in the short-term and is dealt with in the end.

There are several symbols of good and evil throughout the book. Ultima is "good" personified and Tenorio is "evil" personified. Each one has extreme features that set them apart from the rest of the population and make other, average people fear them. There are lesser examples of good and evil in the novel as well. Narciso fights for the side of good, while the friends of Tenorio represent evil on many occasions. Other non-human representations of good and evil present themselves as well. The owl that guards Ultima is a symbol of the goodness of Ultima's spirit, and the coyotes that seem to accompany Tenorio represent his evil, murderous nature. Even the weather plays into the battle. Antonio mentions feeling the warmth and happiness of the harvest when he visits his family at El Puerto and he witnesses a murder in a violent, blustering blizzard. The climatic elements tend to reflect the mood and events of each section of the book, emphasizing the conflict of good and evil that exists in every situation.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written from the first-person perspective of six-year-old Antonio Marez who lives in New Mexico with his family. He is the story's protagonist and is present at all of the events described in the book, with the exception of some stories from the past that other people tell him. Readers see the world through Antonio's eyes and though he is only six and seven years old during the book, he has the insight and maturity of a much older person. In fact, many times it is easy to forget just how young Antonio actually is based on his advanced level of thinking and the strength that he demonstrates in challenging times.

The author presents the views of other characters most notably through dialogue. He gives the characters the chance to express their own views through their conversations with Antonio and then further explores those ideas as Antonio mulls them over. Several views of spirituality, family and the unfairness of the world arise in the dialogue and each is prompted by an event in the book. Antonio finds answers, and also more confusion, based on what he hears the other characters say. This is a strong narrative device and one that readers can relate to, especially young ones. Everyone faces "outside voices" on the journey towards finding individuality and seeing how that relates to Antonio makes his character more sympathetic.

Setting

The story is set in rural New Mexico, near the town of Guadalupe. Most of the action takes place just following the end of World War II. Antonio Marez and his family live on a llano, or plain, that is adjacent to the rest of the town. In Guadalupe, there is a schoolhouse, Catholic church, grocery store, saloon and house of prostitution. If anyone in the Marez family heads to Guadalupe, it is to visit one of these places. Despite being within walking distance of the downtown area, the Marez property has an isolated feel and is distanced from the rest of the world.

Other action takes place in El Puerto, the farming area of Antonio's maternal grandfather and uncles. Antonio visits there with his family at the end of every summer to help with the harvest. One summer, Antonio goes there for some months without the rest of his family and he describes the time as being a peaceful one where he is not haunted by his usual bad dreams. Antonio also spends a lot of time fishing in the River of the Carp and wandering the countryside looking for herbs with Ultima. He knows the land around him so well that when is cornered by Tenorio, he simply turns the other way and runs the ten miles from El Puerto back to his home in Guadalupe.



Language and Meaning

The majority of the novel is written in English, with occasional Spanish phrases and words. Ultima is referred to as “curandera” which is the Spanish phrase for a natural healer, or shaman. Those who believe that Ultima is a witch call her the Spanish equivalent, “bruja.” It seems that the author has characters speak in Spanish when the emotions of a scene are heightened. For example, when Antonio’s mother is worried, she calls out to the Virgin Mary in Spanish for intercession. During the fight-to-the-death battle between Narciso and Tenorio, the author relates the argument in Spanish. From this, the reader can infer that some events and descriptions simply cannot be accurately translated, especially in passionate situations.

The nature of the writing is a blend between lyrical and matter-of-fact delivery. Antonio relays the events of his life in an observational way which gives readers a clear picture of what is going on at each moment. When Antonio reflects on his confusion and explains his dreams, however, the writing becomes very poetic and metaphorical. Combining both styles of writing emphasizes the idea that growing up is not merely a series of events, but also includes the many confusing feelings of adolescence and how each individual processes those emotions.

Structure

The book is written in twenty-two chapters of varying length. The chapters are labeled in Spanish, so the first chapter is “Uno” and so on. Each chapter covers a complete event before moving on to the next one. Many of the chapters end with a description of a dream of Antonio that summarizes his feelings about what has taken place in the chapter. The book is written in chronological order, beginning when Antonio is six and ending when he is eight. The development of Antonio’s character and spirituality in that time frame is vast and he learns things that people much older do not yet know.

The main plot of the novel is the spiritual journey of Antonio as he tries to decide whether his true beliefs lie in Catholicism or the pagan traditions of his homeland. His relationship with Ultima influences this path and all of the events that Antonio witnesses lead him to build his personal set of ethics. Subplots include the tension between Antonio’s father and his three older brothers, the feud between Ultima and Tenorio, and the murder of Narciso. Antonio’s reaction to these subplots and how they shape his personal belief system are integral to the underlying themes of the novel.



Quotes

It was very sad to see my father cry, but I understood it, because sometimes a man has to cry. Even if he is a man. (chapter 2)

I wanted to run away to hide, to run and never come back, never see anyone again. But I knew that if I did I would shame my family name, that my mother's dream would crumble. I knew I had to grow up and be a man, but oh it was so very hard. (chapter 5)

It was very strange to see the women in black hurrying out of the house and into the howling storm. It was like seeing death leave a body. (chapter 10)

Good is always stronger than evil. Always remember that, Antonio. The smallest bit of good can stand against all the power of evil in the world and it will emerge triumphant. (chapter 10)

People, grownups and kids, seem to want to hurt each other – and it's worse when they're in a group. (chapter 11)

My own mother had said that losing your innocence and becoming a man was learning to sin. I felt weak and powerless in the knowledge of my impending doom. (chapter 11)

It is only when man grows old and refuses to admit his earth-tie and dependence on mother nature that the powers of mother nature will turn upon him and destroy him, like the strong wind cracks an old, dry tree. (chapter 17)

In the end, what we care most for lasts only a brief lifetime, then there is eternity. Time forever. Millions of worlds are born, evolve and pass away into nebulous, unmeasured skies; and there is still eternity. (chapter 18)

After Easter I went to confession every Saturday and on Sunday morning I took communion, but I was not satisfied. The God I so eagerly sought was not there, and the understanding I thought to gain was not there. (chapter 20)

The lonely river was a sad place to be when one is a small boy who has just seen a friend die. And it grew sadder when the bells of the church began to toll, and the afternoon shadows lengthened. (chapter 21)

Every generation, every man is a part of his past. He cannot escape it, but he may reform the old materials, make something new. (chapter 22)

For us Ultima personified goodness, and any risk in defense of goodness was right. She was the only person I had ever seen defeat evil where all else had failed. (chapter 22)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Antonio? Explain the differences between his mother's family and his father's family. What does the name "Marez" mean? What does the name "Luna" mean? Describe some of the influences on Antonio's spirituality as the book progresses. What does his mother want him to become when he is older? Do you believe that Antonio will follow his mother's dream? Why or why not? How many deaths does Antonio witness in the novel, and of whom?

Topic 2

Who is Ultima? What is a "curandera?" Why does Antonio's family ask Ultima to move in with them? Describe the relationship between Ultima and Antonio. Why does Ultima insist that Antonio go with her when she breaks the curse on his Uncle Lucas? What gift does Ultima give Antonio? Why does Antonio ask Ultima to bless him at the end of the book? What is the significance of the owl to Ultima?

Topic 3

Who is Tenorio? What does "bruja" mean? Is Tenorio evil or just insane? Why does Tenorio vow that he will kill Ultima? Who does Tenorio murder under the juniper tree? What animal symbolizes Tenorio in the novel? What does Tenorio call Antonio and why? How is Tenorio blinded in one eye? What occupation does Tenorio have? How does Tenorio die?

Topic 4

Describe each of Antonio's brothers – Eugene, Leon and Andrew. Why are the brothers so different after returning from World War II? How do they view Guadalupe? How does Antonio view his brothers? Why does Andrew stay behind the first time the other brothers skip town? How does Andrew spend his time after that? What secret does Antonio discover about Andrew? What plan does Antonio's father have for the family, with the help of the three older brothers?

Topic 5

Who is Cico? Describe the belief system that Cico has. What secret does Cico show to Antonio? What is the significance of Cico in the book? Who is Narciso? How does the town view Narciso? What tragedy took place that drove Narciso to alcohol use? How is Narciso killed? How does Antonio view Narciso after his death?



Topic 6

Explain Antonio's relationship to Catholicism in the beginning of the book. Why do you believe his mother is so pious? What piece of religious art is in Antonio's living room? How do his feelings about Catholicism change as the novel progresses? Do you think that Antonio will remain a devout Catholic into adulthood? Why or why not? Describe Antonio's reaction after he takes his first communion.

Topic 7

What role does mythology play in the novel? Describe the legend of the golden carp. What mythological creatures are said to inhabit two lakes near Guadalupe? How does Antonio respond when he hears "pagan" tales of spirituality? What, if any, religion does Ultima ascribe to? Why do you believe the needles forming a cross fell to the ground when Ultima passed by them? How does Ultima influence Antonio's views about his own spiritual journey?