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Myth as the Cognitive Process of Popular Culture in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*: The Dialectics of Knowledge

Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya appeared in 1972, quickly earning a place in Chicano literary history as its first truly transcendent work of long prose fiction.[1] The novel has since captured more readers and critical attention than any other single work of Chicano literature and the debate continues concerning the implications of the author's use of what might be termed magical or even mythical realism.[2] Was the novel merely an apolitical expression of local color or *costumbrismo,* New Mexico style? And if so, how did the work fit into the overall social and creative context of *chicanismo*? As the first best seller novel of Chicano literature, it was impossible to dismiss *Ultima*'s introduction of compelling mythic themes into the disjunctive context of the combative and polemical ethnic literatures of the late sixties. *Ultima* was serene in the face of this turmoil, full of conflict, yet noncombative, a portrait of the developing consciousness of the young protagonist, Antonio. The metaphysics of this emerging consciousness were so convincingly drawn that no reader doubted that the seeds of social conscience were deeply sown if yet untested in the chief character.

Rudolfo Anaya strikes a deep chord in portraying two primordial ways of relating to the earth, the pastoral and the agricultural. *Bless Me, Ultima,* (BMU), is not a quaint, historical sketch of rural folkways, but rather a dialectical exploration of the contradictions between lifestyles and cultures. At the novel's heart is the process which generates social and historical consciousness. A Marxist-Structuralist perspective defines this process as myth, the collective interpretation and mediation of the contradictions in the historical and ecological experience of a people.

In his account of the relationship between a *curandera* (folk healer) and her young apprentice, Anaya penetrates deeply the mythical conscience of the reader. Despite their enthusiasm for his novel, critics have thus far been unable to define the parameters of this response nor prove the reason for its depth. Contributing elements in the narrative include: the primordial quality of the rivalry of the Luna and Márez clans, the religious conflicts and rich dream life of the boy Antonio Márez, and the power of Ultima herself which in the end is nothing more nor less than "the magical strength that resides in the human heart" (BMU, p. 237). From the first reviews to later articles, an increasing body of vague but glowing commentary points to a rich "mythic" or "magical" dimension that underlies the novel.[3] To those who prioritize the social relevancy of Chicano literature, this psychic plunge seems disturbing or even reactionary in its irrationality. Despite these claims, there appears to be something exceptional about the emerging consciousness of the boy. It is mystically harmonious with nature, yet also incorporates a dynamic, even dialectical awareness of historical forces, from the colonization by Hispanic farmers and ranchers to the coming of the Anglos and World War II. These seeming contradictions invite a reexamination of the relation of myth and social consciousness, often defined as antithetical, incompatible categories which erode and undermine each other. Since the novel apparently transcends this impasse, we are obliged to consider a critical model comprehensive enough to explain this achievement. A review of commentary on the novel is the first step in this direction.

Bless Me, Ultima has undergone extensive

dream and thematic analyses which include attempts to link its "mythic" elements to precolumbian roots.[4] The preponderance of interest in these "irrational" aspects plus the sometimes supernatural tone of the narrative has lead progressive critics to characterize the novel as ahistorical, having only limited and passing value in depicting the "quaint" folkways of rural New Mexico.[5] Thematic analysis has enumerated various tendencies, especially the folkloric, but is unable to characterize the book as anything more than a local color or *costumbrista* piece.[6] Dream analysis has been more productive because of the consistency and symbolic unity of the many dream sequences.[7] Analysis of the mythic and religious systems, notably the "Legend of the Golden Carp" is unconvincing simply because Anaya's alleged allusions to Aztec or other precolumbian mythologies are not literal enough.[8] True, the idea of successive worlds, intervening apocalypses and the exile of gods is common in Native American religions. The suggestion of analogical patterns achieves credibility for the Golden Carp without having to invoke Huitzilopochtli or Quetzalcoatl as other Chicano writers have done. The political analysis which deems the novel reactionary seems to be based on the assumption that Chicano novels should document only the most relevant social and political struggles. These diverse and fragmentary approaches have fallen short of estimating the overall impact and unity of the work and the structural integrity it has achieved on a number of levels.

Since the "mythic" dimension of *Bless Me, Ultima* is a point of confluence in the above commentaries, a definition of terms is necessary at this point. Thus far, the study of myth in Chicano literature has been scholastic. The neoclassic allusions to Aztec and other precolumbian mythological and religious systems are fairly common in Chicano Literature, especially in poetry and theater. Critics have been quick to point this out, elaborating only superficially by tracing the origins of the myths and speculating on how they pertain to the socio-cultural identity of the present day Chicano.[9] Freud was able to tap Greek mythology for insight into the European psyche and on it founded the basis for Western psychology. Inspired by the work of Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes on the Mexican national psyche, an analogous process has been initiated in Chicano literature and criticism, although it is doubtful that an institutionalized Chicano psychotherapy will be the result. The underlying assumption that would prevent this is that these mythic or collective psychological patterns supposedly lie outside time, eternally remanifesting themselves in different epochs.[10] This same danger plagues Chicano cultural studies in general, which often tend to analyze culture and its values as something eternal and independent of history, instead of the dynamic product or actual embodiment of history, conflict, and change.[11]

What is proposed here is a more dynamic critical approach to myth which goes beyond scholasticism and the tracing of classical mythologies. Myth is here considered to be an ongoing process of interpreting and mediating the contradictions in the everyday historical experience of the people. Such a structuralist approach to myth offers some analytical tools which can be applied in a way that avoids ideological analysis and is potentially much more penetrating and historically relevant than traditional thematic or culturalist approaches.

The reader of *Bless Me, Ultima* recognizes the elderly *curandera* as a kind of repository for the wisdom and knowledge invested in Indo-Hispanic culture. The novel functions well at this level, for Ultima is indeed in touch with the spirit that moves the land and is intent on conveying this knowledge to Antonio in her indirect and mysterious ways. Yet, the knowledge she commands and the role she plays go far beyond the herbs she utilizes, the stories she saves for the children and her dabbling in "white" witchcraft. The crossed pins, the demon hairballs, the rocks falling from the sky and the fireballs are "colorful" touches which are authentic enough in terms of folk legend. Anaya inserts the "witchery" only after having won the readers' trust in a clever conquest of their disbelief. However, the enumeration of the standard paraphernalia and the usual supernatural feats of a *curandera* are neither the reason for nor a barrier to the novel's success.

There is an ancient system of knowledge that Ultima exercises that in this novel does not happen to be in the herbs she uses. Any anthropologist is aware that taxonomies such as those of ethnobotany actually contain the philosophical roots and perceptual conventions of the culture.[12] However, herbs and related folk knowledge are not the ultimate focus

of the novel, although it is understood that Ultima is intimately familiar with them. It is her role as a cultural mediator and Antonio's natural inclination towards a similar calling that link them to their real power, which is the ability to recognize and resolve the internal contradictions of their culture. These oppositions are clearly defined in both social and symbolic terms. The rivalry of the Lunas and the Márez, the struggle of good and evil, innocence and experience, Jehovah and the Golden Carp are not simply narrative devices. If they were, they would then be merely pretexts for a combination mystery story, morality play and Hatfield-McCoy saga with a New Mexican flavor.

Something more profound is at work in *Bless Me, Ultima,* for the oppositions are dialectical, and they are mediated in a way that has counterparts in many different cultures around the earth. In his comparative studies of origin myths, Claude Levi-Strauss extracts the two most basic and primordial ones which occurred either exclusively or in combination in every culture studied.[13] The "autochthonous" origin myth is exactly as the meaning of the word implies: "one supposed to have risen or sprung from the ground of the region he inhabits." This version often has a vegetative model: man springs from the earth like a plant. The rival origin myth is more empirically based: man is born from woman. Then comes the task of finding the first woman. In *Bless Me, Ultima* the opposition between the agricultural Lunas and the pastoral Márez has roots that go as deep as the very foundation of human consciousness as it moves from the paleolithic into the neolithic. Each lifestyle and the world view it is based on is as compelling, soul satisfying, and original as the other. The opposition as it occurs in the novel may be schematized as follows:

— pastoral economy	— agricultural economy
— the Márez family	— the Luna family
— live in Las Pasturas on the open plains	— live in El Puerto de la Luna in a fertile valley
— people of the sun	— people of the moon
— descendents of conquistadors and seafarers	— descendents of a priest
— baptized in the salt water of the sea	— baptized in the sweet water of the moon
— speak with the wind	— speak with their plants and fields
— tempestuous, anarchic freethinkers	— quiet, introspective pious people
— live free upon the earth and roam over it	— live tied to the earth and its cycles
— the Horse is their totem animal	— Corn is their totem plant

The earthshaking impact of the passage from hunting and gathering (paleolithic) into agricultural (neolithic) economies is recorded in mythologies the world over.[14] The crises and contradictions that history, economic change and technological innovation bring are the chief motivating factors for the collective cognitive process called myth. The settling down of humankind into the sedentary ways of the neolithic brought with it the emergence of social classes and institutionalized religion and all the economic and social contradictions that accompany the birth of civilization. Likewise, the agricultural developments of horticulture and animal husbandry are distinct enough to carry with them their own ideologies as evident above. Relating more specifically to the novel in question is the history of the colonization of New Mexico and the tremendous impact of the advent of large scale pastoralism. As grazing became more important, the communal egalitarianism of agrarian society began giving way to an emerging class system based on the *partidario* grazing system and the rise of *patrones* (bosses). However, such developments are not evident in the novel, perhaps because its locale, eastern New Mexico, was the last area to be settled before American annexation.[15] The anarchic freedom enjoyed by the Márez clan was ephemeral and creates the basic historical irony of the story. The coming of the Texas ranchers, the railroad and the barbed wire destroyed the freedom of the plains. As the popular saying goes, "Cuando vino el alambre, vino el hambre" (when the barbed wire came, so did hunger). When an economic system is threatened, so is its ideology, which becomes nostalgic as its dreams are shattered.

These historical pressures intensified the oppositions listed above and made the birth of the boy Antonio Márez Luna especially portentous for the two clans whose blood coursed through his veins. Each felt the importance of having their values dominate in the boy and both vied to establish their influence at the dream scene of Antonio's birth:

> This one will be a Luna, the old man said, he will be a farmer and keep our customs and traditions. Perhaps God will bless our family and make the baby a priest.
>
> And to show their hope they rubbed the dark earth of the river valley on the baby's forehead, and they surrounded the bed with the fruits of their harvest so the

small room smelled of fresh green chile and corn, ripe apples and peaches, pumpkins and green beans.

Then the silence was shattered with the thunder of hoof-beats; vaqueros surrounded the small house with shouts and gunshots, and when they entered the room they were laughing and singing and drinking.

Gabriel, they shouted, you have a fine son. He will make a fine vaquero. And they smashed the fruits and vegetables that surrounded the bed and replaced them with a saddle, horse blankets, bottles of whiskey, a new rope, bridles, chapas, and an old guitar. And they rubbed the stain of earth from the baby's forehead because man was not to be tied to the earth but free upon it. (BMU, p. 5)

The disposal of the baby's umbilical cord and placenta was also a point of contention. The Lunas wanted it buried in their fields to add to their fertility and the Márez wanted it burned to scatter the ashes to the winds of the *llano* (plain). The intervention of Ultima to settle the feud illustrates her role of mediator and demonstrates the basic mechanism of myth. As in all cultures the thrust of mythical thought progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution.[16] Thus we see the importance in the mythic process of the mediator, which in many cultures assumes the form of powerful tricksters like the coyote and the raven in Native American mythology. In *Bless Me, Ultima,* both the *curandera* and the boy serve as mediators between the oppositions within their culture. Their intermediary functions can be traced throughout the text.

The middle ground that Ultima and Antonio occupy is evident even in special and geographic terms. Ultima has lived on the plain and in the valley, in Las Pasturas as well as in El Puerto de la Luna, gaining the respect of the people in both places. Antonio's family lives in Guadalupe, in a compromise location at mid-point between Las Pasturas and El Puerto. Through the father's insistence, the house is built at the end of the valley where the plain begins. Antonio mediates between father and mother, trying to please the latter by scraping a garden out of the rocky hillside:

Everyday I reclaimed from the rocky soil of the hill a few more feet of earth to cultivate. The land of the llano was not good for farming, the good land was along the river. But my mother wanted a garden and I worked to make her happy. (BMU, p. 9)

Even within the town Antonio occupies a centralized neutral position: "Since I was not from across the tracks or from town, I was caught in the middle" (BMU, p. 212). This positioning makes it impossible to take sides in the territorial groupings of his peers.

Anaya explains the power of the *curandera* as that of the human heart, but in fact demonstrates that it is derived from the knowledge of mythic thought processes, the awareness and resolution of contradictions within the culture. People turn to Ultima and Antonio at crucial moments in their lives because they are instinctively aware that mediators (*curanderos* and tricksters) possess an overview or power of synthesis that can help them resolve their problems. The multiple episodes of Antonio playing the role of priest are especially significant in this light. It is his mother's and her family's dream for Antonio to become a Luna priest and man of knowledge. In fact he performs the role seriously, administering last rights to Lupito, a war-crazed murderer and Narciso, an ally of Ultima and Antonio's family. The blessings he bestows on his brothers and his friends are real and invested with a power they never fully realize as they taunt him. In his spiritual searching, Antonio discovers the contradictions in Christianity and realizes that the scope of his mediations would include the "pagan," animistic forces implicit in the very synthesis that he will be a part of: "Take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp—and make something new. . . . That is what Ultima meant by building strength from life" (BMU, p. 236).

The dynamism of mythic thought and its power of synthesis is poignantly expressed in Antonio's description of the feelings and emotions that are aroused by contact with Ultima:

She took my hand and I felt the power of a whirlwind sweep around me. Her eyes swept the surrounding hills and through them I saw for the first time the wild beauty of our hills and the magic of the green river. My nostrils quivered as I felt the song of the mockingbirds and the drone of the grasshoppers mingle with the pulse of the earth. The four directions of the llano met in me, and the white sun shone on my soul. The granules of sand at my feet and the sun and sky above me seemed to dissolve into one strange, complete being. (BMU, p. 11)

The power invested in the mythical process is the knowledge derived from seeing the world as a totality and understanding its contradictions in a dialectical manner. There are other characters in the novel who demonstrate differing degrees of awareness of this totality, proving that it is indeed a mechanism of popular culture rather than a mystery reserved for a privileged visionary few. A good

example is Narciso, a powerful man of the *llano* who nevertheless lives in the valley, having discovered its secrets. Ample evidence of this is his exuberant, drunken garden, the likes of which not many *llaneros* (plainsmen) could foster. (BMU, p. 101)

In perhaps the most global or cosmic synthesis of the novel, Ultima in a dream reveals to Antonio the totality which subsumes the oppositions contained in his culture at the moment when they seemed about to split into a dichotomy and create another apocalypse:

> Cease! she cried to the raging powers, and the power from the heavens and the power from the earth obeyed her. The storm abated.
>
> Stand, Antonio, she commanded, and I stood. You both know, she spoke to my father and my 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.
>
> You have been seeing only parts, she finished, and not looking beyond into the great cycle that binds us all. (BMU, p. 113)

The implied definition of apocalypse in this system of thought is the destructive result of changes which are not assimilated, of oppositions which are not mediated. The awareness of the characters of the apocalyptic threat of the atomic bomb, first tested just to the southwest of their fertile valley, demonstrates a real and historical dimension of apocalypse. They sense that the previous balance has been disturbed. The bomb seems to have changed the weather just as surely as World War II has twisted the souls of the men from the area who had fought in it. The need for a synthesis is as urgent as ever in this new time of crisis. Ultima involves herself in the healing of men who were suffering war-sickness and it is Antonio's role to continue the tradition of mediating old and new contradictions.

In one sense Ultima's knowledge may seem mystical because of the way it incorporates nature as well as culture, but when applied to society and history it is penetratingly comprehensive and valid. After Ultima's death, her knowledge continues in Antonio and the reader feels sure that whatever his fate may be, he possesses the conceptual tools to continue to help his people and culture with their internal conflicts as well as with the oncoming struggle between a whole new set of oppositions stemming from the fast approaching aggressive proximity of the Anglo culture and way of life.

In portraying power as the ability to think and understand in a dialectical way, Anaya demonstrates in *Bless Me, Ultima* the ancient collective cognitive process of mythical thought in Chicano culture and the importance of those individuals who take on the role of mediators (*curanderos,* tricksters or activists) in pointing out and moving towards the resolution of the contradictions generated by human history and new technology.

NOTES

[1]Rudolfo A. Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley, California: Quinto Sol, 1972). All quotations are from this edition. Page numbers are noted in text.

[2]Teresa Márquez, "Works by and about Rudolfo A. Anaya," in *The Magic of Words: Rudolfo Anaya and His Writings,* ed. Paul Vassallo, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), pp. 55-81.

[3]Among many others see Arnulfo Trejo, Review of *Bless Me, Ultima, Arizona Quarterly,* 29, No. 2 (Spring 1973), 95-6.

[4]Vernon E. Lattin, "The Quest for Mythic Vision in Contemporary Native American and Chicano Fiction," *American Literature,* 50, No. 4 (January 1979), 625-40.

[5]Juan Rodríguez, "La Búsqueda de identidad y sus motivos en la Literatura Chicana," in *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature,* ed. Francisco Jiménez (New York: Bilingual Press / Editorial Bilingüe, 1979), pp. 170-78.

[6]Carlota Cárdenas Dwyer, "Myth and Folk Culture in Contemporary Chicano Literature," *La Luz,* (December 1974), pp. 28-9. Carol Mitchell, "Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*: Folk Culture in Literature," *Critique* XXII, No. 1 (1980), 55-64. Jane Rogers, "The Function of the La Llorona Motif in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima,*" *Latin American Literary Review,* Vol. 5, No. 10 (Spring-Summer 1977), 64-9.

[7]Roberto Cantú, "Estructura y sentido de lo onírico de *Bless Me, Ultima,*" *Southwestern American Literature,* Vol. 4 (1974), 74-9.

[8]Febe Portillo-Orozco, "Rudolfo Anaya's Use of History, Myth and Legend in His Novels: *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Heart of Aztlán,*" M.A. thesis, San Francisco State University, 1981.

[9]J. Karen Ray, "Cultural and Mythical Archetypes in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima,*" *New Mexico Humanities Review,* 1, No. 3 (Septembr 1978), 23-8.

[10]Octavio Paz, *Posdata* (México: Siglo XXI, 1970). Carlos Fuentes, *Tiempo Mexicano* (México: Joaquin Mortiz, 1971).

[11]Joseph Sommers, "From the Critical Premise to the Product: Critical Modes and Their Applications to a Chicano Literary Text," in *New Directions in Chicano Scholarship,* ed. Ricardo Romo and Raymundo Paredes, Chicano Studies Monograph Series (La Jolla: University

of California, 1978), pp. 51-80.

[12]Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1962); rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 1-34.

[13]Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 210-18.

[14]*Ibid,* pp. 206-31.

[15]Marc Simmons, *New Mexico: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), pp. 107-67.

[16]Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology,* pp. 224-25.