



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Virtues of Appreciating Nature in Rudolfo A. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*

Dr. Albertine Minderop

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Darma Persada, Jakarta,
Jakarta Raya, Indonesia.

Abstract

Bless Me, Ultima (1972) is a literary work written by Rudolfo A. Anaya featuring a boy of six-year old named Antonio Marez (Tony) as its protagonist. Tony watched a life full of suffering experienced by the people around him. Both his parents have the opposite cultural values, thus making Tony confused and weak. Luckily there is a character named Ultima who taught him how to appreciate nature. Appreciation of nature makes Tony tough and confident to face the future. To achieve happiness, Tony is determined to be a good person.

Keywords

Virtues, appreciation of nature, good human being, moral teaching, happiness, *Bless Me, Ultima*.



Bless me, Ultima (1972) is a wonderful story based on the “Chicano” or Northern New Mexico native people culture, religion, and customs that tells us about a young Mexican boy, Antonio (Tony) Marez. It begins when he is six years old, and Ultima, a *curandera* or healing woman, comes to live with his family because she is too old to live by herself. This novel shows how Tony faces a lot of difficulties and has to deal with curses, healings, dead people and mean friends. Tony becomes a man of learning throughout his childhood with Ultima’s help. Through Ultima’s gentle guidance and support, Tony faces his uncertainties and learns to go on with life (Anaya 3). Tony’s parents are opposites, his father being a Marez, people of Ilano (the desert land in New Mexico) wants Tony to grow up free to roam the land and become a vaquero, as he once was. His mother being a Luna (farmer), she wants Tony to be a priest, a man of learning (Anaya 8). Tony is torn between them regarding his future. The novel shows realistic concepts about life and living of people. One important view of the novel is the power struggle that is a result of acculturation (Black 146). Faith and spirituality play a crucial role in Anaya’s novel. Antonio is going on a spiritual quest trying to reconcile the Catholic faith with the worship of nature which he learns from Ultima. This old woman is a *curandera* — a healer and a medium for the world of spirits. Ultima is a guardian of the ancient wisdom which is based in viewing humans as an inseparable part of nature. The secret of carrying on a spiritual relationship with the land, animals and plants is the message which Ultima passes to Antonio (www.artstudio.org/bless-me-ultima-and-wild-beauty). Appreciation of nature has taught virtues to Tony.

Virtues are motives, moral character, moral education, moral wisdom or discernment, friendship and family relationship, a deep concept of happiness, the role of our emotions in our moral life and the fundamentally important questions of what sort of person I should be and how we should live (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>). The concept of a virtue is

the concept of something that makes its possessor good; a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should. All usual versions of virtue ethics agree that living a life in accordance with virtue is necessary for *eudaimonia* (happiness). According to *eudaimonism*, the good life is the happy life, and the virtues are what enable a human being to be happy. The good life is the life characteristically lived by someone who is good human being, and the virtues enable their possessor to live such a life because the virtues just are those character traits that make their possessor a good human being.

Some studies have been done on this novel, one of them was written by Tumoutou Passah Kaunang (2012) who discussed the conflict of cultural values and Anaya's criticism of Catholicism. In his thesis Kaunang discussed Anaya's criticism of the church practice conveyed through Tony. Other researcher discussed the reflection of Transcendentalism in this novel that believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; in inspiration, and ecstasy, which is achieved through retrospection, contemplation, and meditation (<http://www.transcendentalists.com/terminology.html>). Criticism of *Bless Me, Ultima* revealed that Antonio's character caught the maternal and paternal cultural conflict as well as Chicano and American cultural conflict. This conflict is a reflection of Anaya's life in New Mexico in 1940 (http://www.clifnotes.com/study_guide/literature/bless-me-ultima/criticism). Other research is connected to mysticism content (<http://www.enotes.com/bless-me-qn/themes-characters>). There is also a research that discusses the search for identity and reconciliation of old and new American cultures that is considered as the central theme of this novel. This novel has also provoked strong reactions in contemporary Chicano literature, as it relates to Catholicism; in addition, this novelist is considered unique with his interesting

narrative techniques, and the story is conveyed accurately and gracefully ([file:///D:/rudolfo anaya critics files/translate_p.htm](file:///D:/rudolfo%20anaya%20critics%20files/translate_p.htm)).

This paper presents how Tony overcomes crisis in his thoughts and feelings by appreciating nature. *Bless Me, Ultima* teaches the readers the virtues. It can be seen from the experience gained by Tony. He has the motivation to be a good person and to pursue happiness. To lessen the disturbing feelings and thoughts, Tony gets closer to nature. Appreciation of nature gives him the feeling of freedom: “I guess because only in that wide expanse of land and sky could they feel the freedom their spirit need” (BMU 2). According to Tony, when people can enjoy the beauty of nature, they should not do evil deeds: “Ilano was beautiful in the early morning, beautiful before the summer sun of August burned it dry ... It was hard to believe that in this wide beauty there roamed three souls trapped to do evil” (BMU 217). Tony realizes that his father enjoys the essence of freedom because he was always close to nature:

But from my father and Ultima I had learned that the greater immortality is in the freedom of man, that freedom is best nourished by the noble expanse of land and air and pure, white sky. I dreaded to think of time when I could not walk upon the Ilano and feel like the eagle that floats on its skies; free, immortal, limitless. (BMU 220)

Tony closeness to nature gives him clarity of thought – a clear mind and a sense of wholeness: “The white sun and the fresh air cleansed me” (BMU 8). “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 11). Although the reality around Tony is not always clean, he always felt mentally and physically comfortable because he is able to appreciate nature,: “I felt the sun of the east rise and heard its light crackle and groan mix into the songs of the mockingbirds on the hill ... I opened my eyes and the rays of light

that dazzled through the dusty window of my room washed my face clean” (BMU 25). Tony was very happy and felt that he was not the person who used to be full of suffering, but he is now the new born: “I love to watch the sun beams of each new morning enter the room, they made me feel fresh and clean and new” (BMU 26).

Someone, in order to obtain the virtue of appreciating nature perhaps needs a mentor. Tony is always guided by Ultima and he could feel the benefit of it: “And I was happy with Ultima ... She taught me to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time ... My soul grew under her careful guidance” (BMU 14). When someone is able to appreciate the essence of nature through guidance and persistence, even though he was a little boy, he could feel something beautiful that perhaps others cannot reach it. It is happiness that is difficult to express in words:

We walked together in the llano and along the river banks to gather herbs and roots for her medicines. She taught me the names of plants and flowers, of trees and bushes, of birds and animals; but most important, I learned from her that there was a beauty in the time of day in the hills. (BMU 14)

A virtuous one is someone who wants to help others. Virtue that leads to happiness is a person's desire to do good to others. Tony is not only obtained the goodness of character, but also gained useful knowledge about herbs to cure some diseases:

We were also lucky to find some osha, because this plant grows better in the mountains. It is like la yerba del manso, a cure for everything. It cures coughs or colds, cuts and bruises, rheumatism and stomach troubles, and my father once said the old shepherds used it to keep poisonous snakes away from their bedrolls by sprinkling them with osha powder. It was with a mixture of osha

that Ultima washed my face and arms and feet the night Lupito was killed. (BMU 37)

Although nature has given everything to humans, they are destructive by nature due to human greed. Virtuous person is one who is able to control himself of his lusts:

The wind says the Ilano gave us good weather, it gave us mild winters and rain in the summer to make the grass grow tall. The vaqueros rode out and saw their flocks multiply; the herds of sheep and cattle grew. Everyone was happy, ah," he whispered, "the Ilano can be the most beautiful place in the world – but it can also be the cruelest. It changes, like a woman changes. The rich rancheros sucked the earth dry with their deep wells, and so the heavy snows had to come to replenish the water in the earth. The greedy men overgrazed their ranches, and so now they pick up the barren soil and throw it in their faces. 'You have used me too much, the wind says for the earth, you have sucked me dry and stripped me bare' He smiled and said: a wise man listens to the voice of the earth, Antonio. He listens because the weather the wind brings will be his salvation or his destruction. Like a young tree bends with the wind, so man must bow to the earth – 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. It is not manly to blame our mistakes on the bomb, or any other thing. It is we who misuse the earth and must pay for our sin. (BMU 184-185)

Bless Me, Ultima teaches us the way to achieve happiness, such as to foster friendship with other. As Tony to be good a person, he needs to foster friendship with Ultima: "I had been afraid of the awful presence of the river,

which was the soul of the river, but through her I learned that my spirit shared in the spirit of all things” (BMU 14). By getting closer to nature, all scary things turn into pleasure: “A low, sad mournful cry tore itself from his throat and mixed into the lapping sound of the waters of the river” (BMU 19).

Appreciation of nature and its contents give a sense of peace and tolerance to Tony: “He looked up at me and his face was bathed in water and flowing, hot blood, but it was also dark and peaceful as it slumped into the sand of the riverbank” (BMU 20). Nature also gives him a sense of tolerance. He did not favor the wishes of his father or his mother, but he took to show a tolerant attitude to combine both their expectations: “The sun was good. The men of the Ilano were men of the sun. The men of the farms along the river were men of the moon. But we were children of the white sun” (BMU 25). The owl as a part of nature gave him a sense of peace: “I realized that the owl had been with me throughout the night. It had watched over all that had happened on the bridge. Suddenly the terrible, dark fear that had possessed me was gone” (BMU 21).

Appreciation of nature fosters a sense of compassion. The feeling of love does not belong only to humans but also to all living beings including animals, plants, and everything:

For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug she made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it from its home in the earth. ‘You that grow well here in the arroyo by the dampness of the river, we lift you to make good medicine,’ Ultima intoned softly and I found myself repeating after her. ‘Now touch it,’ she would say. The leaves were smooth and light green. Of all the plants we gathered none was endowed with so much magic as the yerba del manso. It could cure burns, sores, piles, colic in babies, bleeding dysentery and even rheumatism. (BMU 36-37)

Closeness to nature teaches human of tenderness and serenity. With deepest appreciation for nature, one can be more gentle and quiet: “It is the *presence* of the river,’ Ultima answered. ‘Can it speak?’ I asked and drew closer to Ultima. ‘If you listen carefully’ – she whispered” (BMU 38). This novel states that the farmers who are always together with nature can become more calm and patient:

The rest of my uncles were very gentle and kind, but they were very quiet. They spoke very little. My mother said their communication was with the earth. She said they spoke to the earth with their hands. They used words mostly when each one in his own way walked through his field or orchard at night and spoke to the growing plants. (BMU 44).

Tony’s closeness to nature when he was on vacation to his uncle’s house strengthened his confidence that nature is able to establish men’s mental ability and character. They were very quiet and calm and all was peaceful:

All of August I worked in the fields and orchards, I worked alongside my uncles and cousins and their companionship was good ... I learned to be at ease in the silence of my uncles, a silence steeped as deep as a child’s. I watched closely how they worked the earth, the respect they showed it, and the way they care for living plant. Only Ultima equaled them in respect for the life in the plant. Never once did I witness any disharmony between one of my uncles and the earth and work of the valley. Their silence was the language of the earth. (BMU 237)

Tony was very patient when he sat down with his friend, Cico waiting for golden carp to come to the surface of the lake:

We sat for a long time, waiting for the golden carp. It was very pleasant to sit in the warm sunshine and watch the pure waters drift by. The drone of the summer insects and grasshoppers made me sleepy. The lush green of the grass was cool, and beneath the grass was the dark earth, patient, waiting. (BMU 109)

Appreciation of nature provides moral teaching. Tony learned from Ultima about loving others, from his mother he found a sense of security and safety. Nature gives a sense of security and to gain confidence in God, and gratitude to the Almighty for all the blessings given by God to his people:

‘And there is no beauty like this earth,’ Ultima said. They looked at each other and smiled, and I realized that from these two people I had learned to love the magical beauty of the wide, free earth. From my mother I had learned that man is of the earth, that his clay feet are part of the ground that nourishes him, and that is this inextricable mixture that gives man his measure of safety and security. Because man plants in the earth he believes in the miracle of birth, and provides a home for his family, and he builds a church to preserve his faith and the soul that is bound to his flesh, his clay. (BMU 220)

Appreciation of nature provides very valuable lessons and the moral teachings. Nature has provided strength and satisfaction for man, and the power of reason that is constantly evolving as the essence of nature: “‘There is power here, a power that can fill a man with satisfaction,’ my father said. ‘And there is faith here,’ Ultima added, ‘a faith in the reason for nature being, evolving, growing’ (BMU 220).

Finally, terrible events seen by Tony and nightmares that are always shadowing him disappeared. Virtuous people always want to achieve happiness in life, and to realize this dream, one must be a good person. In Bless Me,

Ultima, goodness can be achieved through the appreciation of nature. Thus little Tony, who used to be very timid child, easy to feel sad, and always confused, now felt confident, strong, more mature, and is prepared ahead for the future:

The bad dreams which I had plagued me did not come, and I grew strong with the work and good food. I learned much from those men who were as dark and quiet as the earth of the valley, and what I learned made me stronger inside. I knew that the future was uncertain and I did not yet know if I could follow in their footsteps and till the earth forever, but I did know that if I chose that life that it would be good. Sometimes when I look back on that summer I think that it was the last summer I was truly a child. (BMU 238)

Tony has left the past that he considered very stupid. Now he is able to live a full life despite the challenges. He is ready to face the future although with difficulty. However, Tony does not forget the past. Past with feelings of love and grief has given him a very valuable moral teaching. Tony still remembered the shadow of his father figure, the corner kitchen where his mother was. All these wonderful memories give him peace and happiness.

Tony faced difficult reality because of differences in cultural values shared by both parents. His mother is devoted to Catholicism and his father has no interest in religion. It might be a picture of both Anaya's parents. Tony who experiences confusion in determining the choice of his life, in the end puts himself in between the two poles, between his father and mother by choosing the middle way - back to nature. This kind of experience can also be experienced by adults in real life. Luckily Tony has a friend, Ultima who can show him a way out by teaching him to appreciate nature.

Anaya indicates to the readers that to be a good person someone must have moral character and discernment. Anaya covered the theme in this novel

that had significance in his own life. Tony's experiences might be the reflections of Anaya's own experience. It also typified the experiences of many Hispanics struggling to reconcile two cultures.

Works Cited

Anaya, Rudolfo A. *Bless Me, Ultima*. California: TQS Publications, 1972. Print.
Black, Debra B. "Times of Conflict: *Bless Me, Ultima* as a Novel of

Acculturation." *The Bilingual Review* 25.2 (May - August 2000): 146-162.
Web. 29 Jan. 2015.

Kaunang, Tumoutou Passah. *Criticism on Rudolfo Anaya*. Diss. University of
Indonesia, Jakarta, 2012. Print.

"Virtue Ethics." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 8 March 2012. Web. 21
Jan. 2015.

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/bless-me-ultima/rudolfo.>

<<http://www.transcendentalists.com/terminology.html>.>

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>.>

<<http://www.amazon.com/Bless-Me-Ultima-Rudolfo-Anaya/dp/04466>.>

<www.artstudio.org/bless-me-ultima-and-wild-beauty.>

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Minderop, Albertine. "Virtues of Appreciating Nature in Rudolfo A. Anaya's
Bless Me, Ultima." *Literary Quest* 1.10 (2015): 38-48. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.