

Bless Me, Ultima

by Rudolfo Anaya

Magical Realism, Contrast,
Symbolism, Motifs, and Archetypes



Novel Overview

PLOT

The story of six year old boy, Antonio Marez, and the awakening of his consciousness. He is growing up in a small New Mexico town shortly after World War II. An old woman, Ultima, a curandera, comes to live with his family and guides him in his journey towards adolescence.

Novel Overview



SETTING

The novel takes place in rural New Mexico. It is a world of the vast plains of nature, the llano, yet is also close to the developing world of progress and established, restricted society.



Llano of West Texas and East New Mexico



Llano Estacado near Las Pasturas where the Marez's once lived



Llano countryside



Novel Overview

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Antonio - six year old protagonist, ages to eight years old, journey is similar to a heroic quest from innocence to maturity through experience

Ultima - an elderly curandera, an alternative medicine woman, comes to live with Antonio's family and serves as his guide, possesses mystical powers and enlightenment

Novel Overview

Gabriel Marez - Antonio's father, a vaquero or cowboy, feels free-spirited, restless lifestyle call of his ancestors

Maria Luna - Antonio's mother, likes farming tradition of being settled and tranquil, modest and devout Catholic, wants Antonio to become a farmer or priest



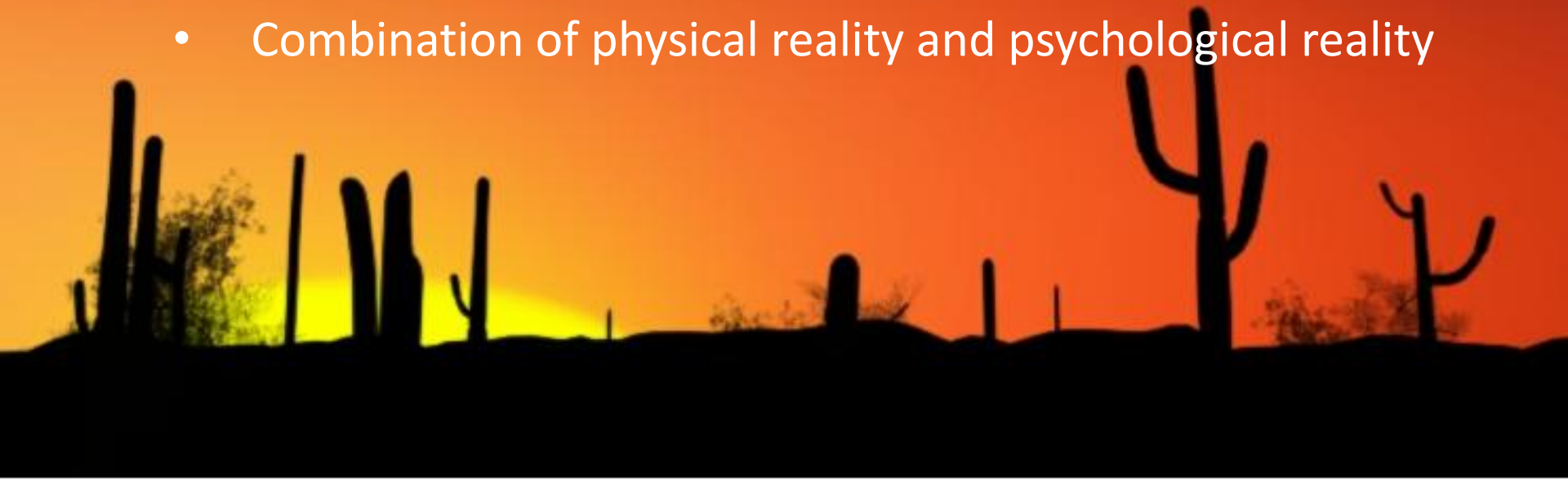
Magical Realism



DEFINITION

Fiction that maintains a realistic narrative while recounting fantastic or supernatural events alongside commonplace occurrences.

- “The ordinary as miraculous and the miraculous as ordinary”
- Magical elements appear in an otherwise realistic setting
- Combination of physical reality and psychological reality

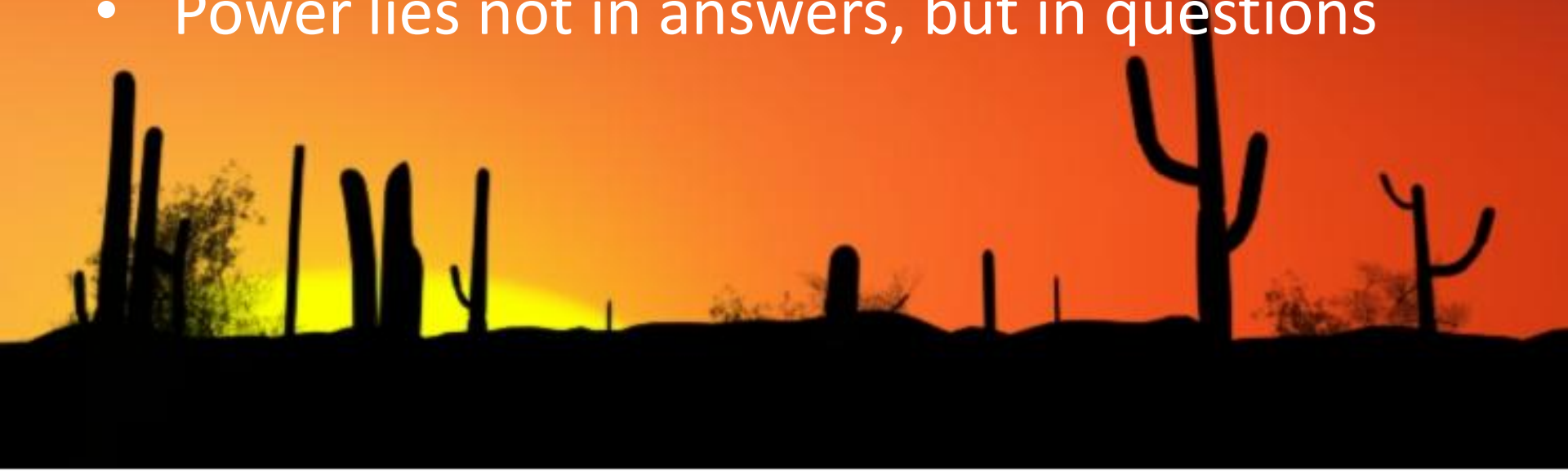


Magical Realism



DIFFERENT FROM FANTASY

- Remains grounded in the real world unlike science fiction and other non-realistic genres
- Stretches the definition of realism and reality
- Not so much a belief, but a “lack of disbelief”
- Power lies not in answers, but in questions

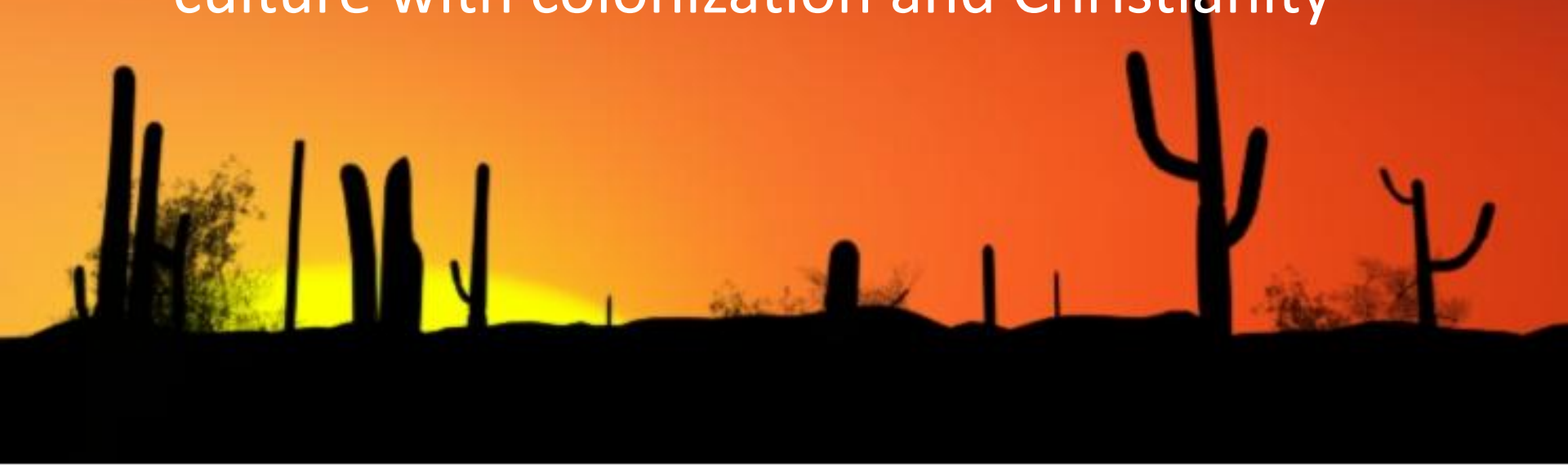


Magical Realism



LANDSCAPE OR SETTING

- Vast, mysterious terrain
- Snow capped mountains to volcanoes, and waterfalls to vast deserts
- Native influence - Blend of the old, mystical culture with colonization and Christianity

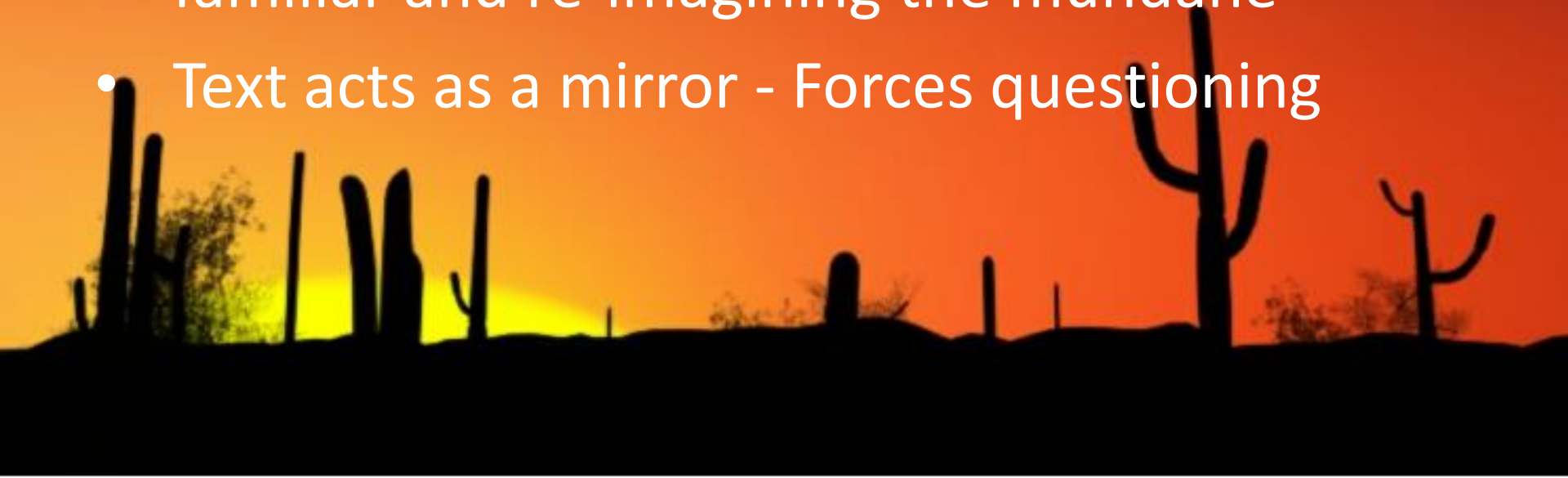


Magical Realism



COMMON LITERARY CONVENTIONS

- Juxtaposes opposite elements - Dreaming / Waking, Life / Death, Civilized / Wild
- Hyperbole - Exaggeration until something becomes “magical.” A childlike look at the familiar and re-imagining the mundane
- Text acts as a mirror - Forces questioning



Contrast



DEFINITION

- A way of developing ideas in writing by showing differences between or among things
- The differences in people or imagery or symbols allows the writer to emphasize a particular theme in most instances



Contrast

CONTRASTS IN BLESS ME, ULTIMA

- Antonio's Father **versus** his Mother - Marez (sea) / vaquero / restless / free-spirit / Llano and Las Pasturas / Powers of nature / magic **versus** Luna (moon) / farmer / settled / placid / Guadalupe / Catholic church / faith



Contrast

- Ultima the Healer **versus** perception as a witch - Ancient traditions and wisdom **versus** Nature, Owl as a symbol of insight **versus** Foreboding as a symbol of death
- Catholic Church / faith / priest **versus** Magic / Ultima
- Right **versus** Wrong - Innocence **versus** Guilt / Sin

Contrast

- Catholic tradition **versus** Folk tradition - Jesus / Priest **versus** The Golden Carp and the Virgin of Guadalupe
- Benevolent Mother figure (Ultima) **versus** Evil Father figure (Tenorio)
- Good **versus** Evil (witches and people)
- Male **versus** female
- Town / civilization **versus** Country / nature

Symbolism



DEFINITION

When things or people or events function on a level beyond their literal purpose

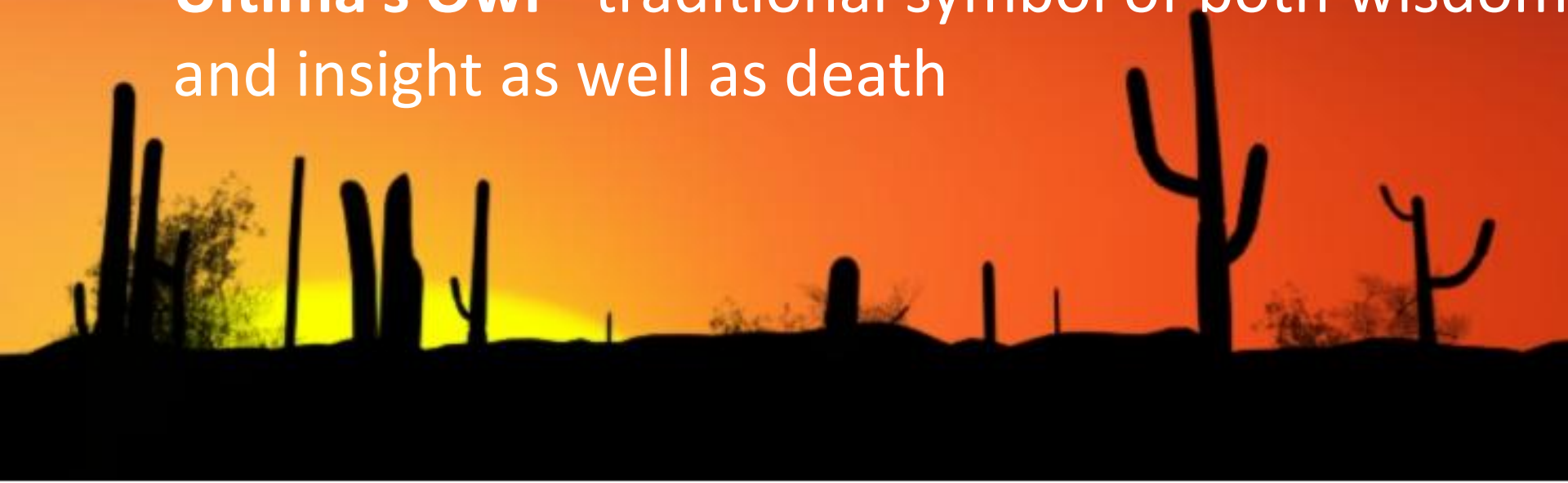


Symbolism

SYMBOLS IN BLESS ME, ULTIMA

The Golden Carp - A pagan river deity, can only be seen by a true believer, symbolizes dichotomy between Catholic religion and folk magic / wisdom

Ultima's Owl - traditional symbol of both wisdom and insight as well as death



Symbolism

The Virgin of Guadalupe - another symbol of dichotomy, represents forgiveness and mercy, links the Catholic Church, a kind of rule-ordered and culturally divorced entity that emphasizes guilt and sin, and Ultima's earth mysticism representing a liberating and indigenous spirituality that emphasizes self-discovery and moral integrity

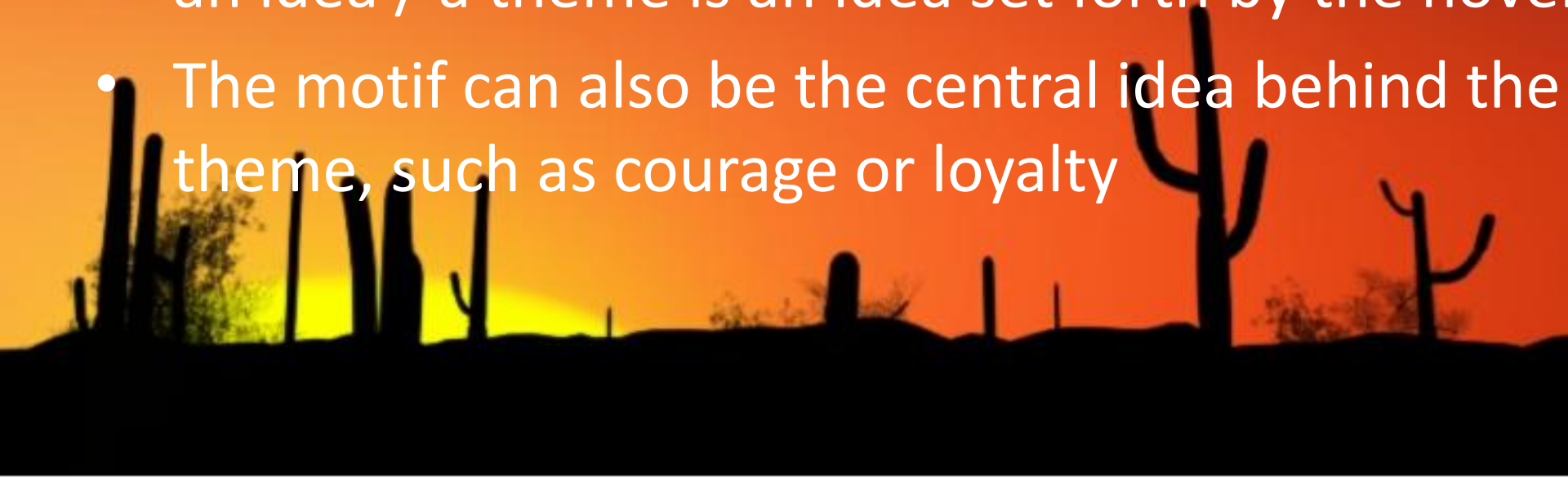


Motifs



DEFINITION

- Recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the novel's major themes
- A motif is a recurring element which symbolizes an idea / a theme is an idea set forth by the novel
- The motif can also be the central idea behind the theme, such as courage or loyalty



Motifs



MOTIFS IN BLESS ME, ULTIMA

Dreams - Antonio has 10 dreams during the novel. Each dream contains much symbolism and relates to different themes and archetype. Antonio's first dream is a dream of his own birth. The remaining nine dreams can be grouped as follows:



Motifs

- Dreams 2, 4 and 9 foreshadow loss Antonio must experience to attain adulthood
- Dreams 3, 5 and 7 reflect the fear of loss
- Dreams 6, 8 and 10 convey the acceptance of loss and rebirth of maturity Antonio must and will experience on the way to adulthood



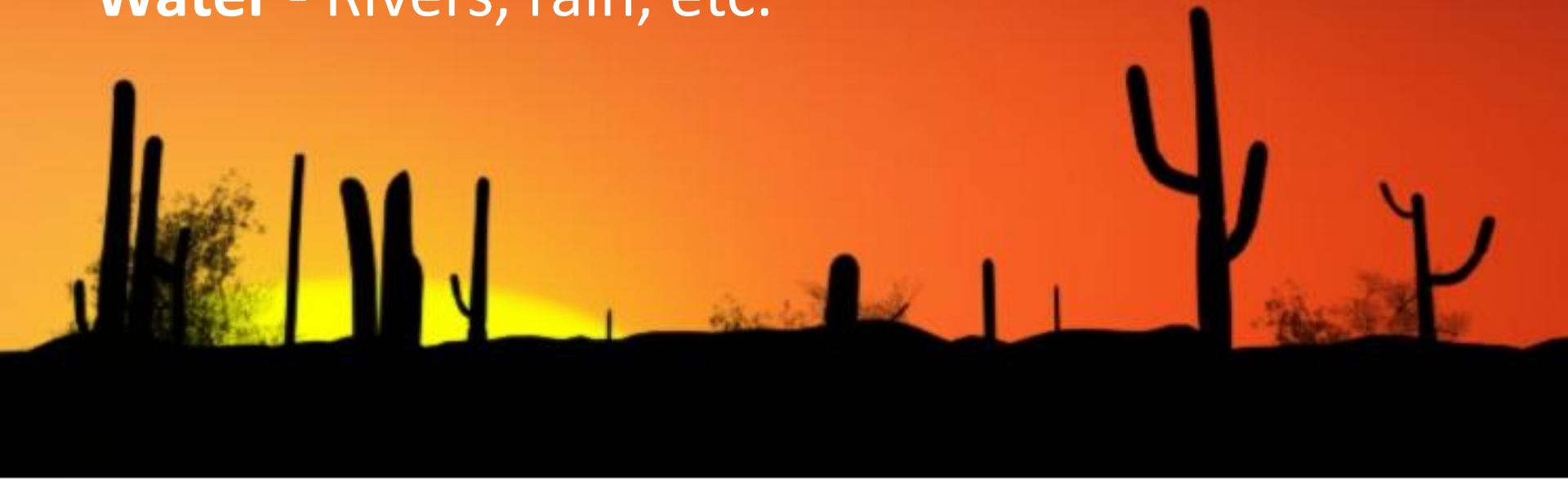
Motifs

Names - Luna, Marez, Ultima, etc.

Blood - Violence to determine identity and a source of power

Conflict - Good versus evil, family, religion versus mysticism, etc.

Water - Rivers, rain, etc.



Archetypes



DEFINITION

- A universally recognized recurrent symbol
- CARL JUNG used the term "archetype" to refer to the universal images and beliefs that pass through all cultures rooted in the collective unconscious
- Arise in dreams for the most part, but arise in characters in literature



Archetypes

ARCHETYPES IN BLESS ME, ULTIMA

The Great Mother / Earth Mother - Intuitive, life-affirming, protector and nurturer, both Ultima and the Virgin of Guadalupe satisfy this archetype

The Terrible Mother - Life-threatening, scary, emasculating, corresponds to La Llorona the legendary mother who killed her children and threatens others yet is a figure with both positive and negative aspects

Archetypes

Female Temptresses - Make men stray from the righteous path, prostitutes in the novel

The Shadow - A dark figure symbolizing evil, embodied by Tenorio, his daughters, but also exists within all characters to different degrees

The Benevolent Guide - An older person who assists the hero in his initiation journey, Ultima



Archetypes

The Boy Hero - This is Antonio in most way and he must complete the universal rite of passage including separation, initiation and return. As a boy hero, Antonio experiences trials and tribulations that allow him to emerge a more psychologically ready adult and separate from old ways or expectations



THEMES

THEMES IN BLESS ME, ULTIMA

- Moral independence cannot be easily defined yet also remains very important
- Culture can greatly influence identity
- Conflict finds a solution in balance, harmony and oneness
- Synthesis works best to resolve opposites or dichotomies or differences
- Only through experience is innocence lost and maturity gained

Anticipation Guide

- Fill out the anticipation guide. We will discuss in 10 minutes.

Guided Imagery

- **Directions to Students:** In preparation for reading Bless Me, Ultima, we are going to do an imaginative exercise.
- I want you to sit comfortably in your chairs. We are going to listen to the music and I am going to guide you through specific thoughts.
- You can close your eyes while I am talking, or you may sit and doodle quietly on your paper if that makes you most comfortable. I want you to follow along in your mind and imagine the things I am describing.
- After I finish describing these ideas to you, you will have a chance to write about your thoughts or how you felt. There is no right or wrong answers, so be free to go anywhere with your thoughts.

Chapter One Questions

1. How does Tony's father feel about the family moving to Guadalupe?
2. What is Tony's first reaction when he meets Ultima?
3. How does Tony regard the owl that Ultima brings with her?
4. What connotations are attached to the owl?
5. How does the family regard the responsibility of taking care of the older generation?
6. What happens in Tony's dream?
7. What is his mother's reaction when Tony relates his dream to her?
8. Compare Tony's two meetings with Ultima--one on page 1 and the second on page 10. How are they similar? How are they different?

Chapter Two Questions

1. How does Ultima guide Tony's spiritual growth?
2. In what ways is Ultima a believer in animism?
3. Why do they say the war has made Lupito the way he is?
4. What does Lupito feel in this chapter?
5. Analyze the images used to describe Lupito as he is being chased.
6. What does Tony feel after witnessing the death of a man for the first time?
7. Why does he recite the Act of Contrition as he runs?
8. How does the river affect Tony?
9. Why is it significant that he hears the owl as he is running?
10. What is Tony's father's dream?
11. What does Tony dream in this chapter?
12. Why does Tony say, "Bless me" on page 20?
13. In this chapter, how does Tony feel about becoming a priest?

Bless Me, Ultima

Chapters 3-4 Discussion Guide



Summary

1. Who are the three giants in Antonio's dream?
2. Why do Antonio's parents fight on Sunday?
3. Why does Ultima believe that Gabriel will be forgiven for his role in killing Lupito?
4. Why does Antonio believe that Rosie is evil?
5. Why does Bones call Antonio a smart kid?
6. What is Ultima teaching Antonio about?
7. What statue does Antonio's mother have?

Analysis

1. Ultima reminds María that all boys grow to be men. What does she mean by this? How do Antonio's parents differ in their understanding of the significance of this idea?
2. What is significant about Antonio's dream, and why does it require help from Ultima before he can sleep? What does this tell the reader about his development/illustrate about his growing conflict?

Chapter Five Questions

1. What are Tony's uncles like?
2. What do Tony's uncles feel about his future?
3. Why do cultures often have stories about people in forests dancing with the Devil?
4. Why does the family stop at the grandfather's house first?
5. Describe the harvest that the family works to gather.
6. Why do the bells toll?
7. What is the feeling at the end of this chapter as Tony drifts off to sleep?

Chapter Six Questions

1. How does Tony feel about starting school?
2. How is Tony's mother reacting to Tony's first day of school?
3. How does Tony's father regard his work on the highway?
4. Describe Gabriel's feeling toward the llano on page 51.
5. What blessing do you think Ultima is giving Tony on page 51?
6. In what ways could Ultima's blessing be like a whirlwind?
7. Tony says, "I looked at the three of them standing there, and I felt that I was seeing them for the last time: Ultima in her wisdom, my mother in her dream, and my father in his rebellion." Comment.
8. Why do the other children make fun of Tony in class and at lunch?
9. How is Tony feeling at the very end of this chapter?
10. Why does the author compare the area to a "land of milk and honey"?
11. Why do the boys believe that drawing letters in the sand is magic?
12. Why are blessings important?

Chapter Seven/Eight Questions

CHAPTER 7

1. Why are the three sons meeting in San Diego?
2. How has the war affected the brothers?
3. How do Tony's parents disagree in this chapter?

CHAPTER 8

1. How does Tony's mother react to having her sons back from the war?
2. How are the brothers affected by the season of the year?
3. In particular, how is Leon faring after his return, and what does Tony think about it?
4. Compare and contrast Tony to his brothers.

Chapter Nine/Ten Questions

CHAPTER 9

1. How does the dream in this chapter affect Tony?
2. Why does Andrew remain at home?
3. Why does Tony feel like celebrating?
4. Why is it bad luck to catch and eat a carp?
5. How is Tony feeling about his religious training, now that he has encountered the Golden Carp?

CHAPTER 10

1. What has caused Uncle Lucas' illness?
2. What risk is Ultima taking in deciding to cure Lucas?
3. Why do the Tenorio sisters feel the way they do?
4. Why is Tony's presence important when Ultima exorcises the curse?
5. What role does Tony play in Lucas' recovery?
6. How does the experience affect him?
7. How do the people of El Puerto regard Ultima after she heals Lucas?
8. Why do the witches take the form of the coyote?
9. Why does the curse involve a hairball?

Chapter 11 Questions

1. What do Cico and Tony agree to do?
2. What feeling is conveyed by the description of Narciso's garden, and what Biblical reference resembles it ?
3. Why do only a few people know about the Golden Carp?
4. Why does Tony become sick?
5. What does the black bass represent?
6. What is Cico's opinion about human nature and people's behavior toward each other?
7. In Tony's dream, what forces are struggling with each other?
8. Compare and contrast the story of la llorona with Cico's story about the mermaid.
9. In what ways is this chapter similar to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible?
10. In this, Tony begins to doubt some of the beliefs he has been taught. His experience with Ultima as she cures Tony's uncle has affected him deeply. Think of a time when you or someone you know has experienced doubts. This can be about any aspect of life--school, job, family, graduation, past, present, or future. Describe this experience and say what effects it had.

Chapter 12/13 Questions

CHAPTER 12

1. Why do Tenorio and his men try to hurt Ultima?
2. Why does Ultima's owl attack only Tenorio?
3. Compare Tony's feelings toward Ultima to his feelings toward his mother.
4. Why does Ultima give Tony her scapular, and why does she tell him not to tell others?
5. Why can't a witch pass by the sign of the cross?
6. How does Ultima feel as the mob threatens her?
7. Why does Ultima keep the three dolls?

CHAPTER 13

1. How does the experience with Tenorio affect each person in the Márez home?
2. What doubts is Tony having now?
3. Why does Ultima appear in the casket in Tony's dream?
4. How do people know that the dead Trementina daughter was a witch?

Chapter 14/15 Questions

- CHAPTER 14

1. What kind of person is Narciso?
2. Why does Tony decide to give Narciso confession?
3. If Tony is supposed to be so faithful to his religion, why does he seem to believe so strongly in the Golden Carp?
4. How does Ultima feel about Tony's getting involved in this conflict?
5. What is the tone of the scene at the Christmas play?

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CHAPTER 15

1. Discuss your impression of Narciso and the way people treat him.
2. If you were Tony's mother and father, how would you feel if your sons returned with the story of the burned car and then left home again?
3. Gabriel matures as his sons grow up. Support this idea with details from book and commentary.

Chapter 16 Questions

- CHAPTER 16
 1. Describe Florence's life and values.
 2. How does Tony react to Tenorio in this chapter?

***Bless Me, Ultima* Chapters 17-18 Discussion Questions**

Diecisieste

1. What do most adults that Tony knows believe about, or blame upon, the atomic bomb -- which was developed and first tested in this area of New Mexico?
2. What contrasting views does Tony's father offer him on this subject?
3. Why does Anaya set the discussion of the bomb while Tony and his father are hauling piles of manure out of the animal pens and dumping it on the garden?
4. What metaphor does Tony's father use for a wise man? What values does it imply in Tony's father?
5. Tony and Florence are drawn to each other as friends. What similarities and differences do you see in the two boys?
6. What ideas about knowledge are emerging in the last few chapters?
7. What is your response to Father Byrne. Why?
8. The subject of hell comes up prominently in the chapter. Compare and contrast the two views expressed by Florence and Father Byrne.

Dieciocho

1. In what ways is the confession scene critical in terms of Tony's development? (Hints: What important realizations does he make; what traits does he demonstrate?)
2. What is your response to Florence, and the ideas and traits he demonstrates in the scene?
3. What ideas is Anaya conveying to us through the actions of the kids about human behavior and treatment of people who challenge established beliefs?
4. Why does Tony pardon Florence, and do you think he is right in doing so?
5. At this point, are either Ultima or the Church sufficient for Antonio?



“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.”

Diecinueve

1. Compare Tony's expectations of his First Holy Communion to what really happens. How would Tony compare this experience with seeing the Golden Carp?
2. Does Anaya intend for us, as readers, to sympathize with Tony's expectations of what a religious experience is like or to see those expectations as unrealistic?

Veinte

1. Tony practices his Catholicism faithfully, but is dissatisfied. Why?
2. What changes weigh on Tony as summer begins?
3. What is Tony's reaction when he finally beats the Vitamin Kid across the bridge? What's the significance of this brief scene?
4. Where does evil come from, according to Ultima?
5. How does Tony describe the llano on the way to Agua Negro, and what effect does the llano have on him?
6. Why does Tony's father find the idea of burning as a form of burial so appealing?
7. In his dream at the end of the chapter, how does Tony bring rest to his tortured brothers? Why might this be important?

Veintiuno

1. Describe the differences in Cico's and Antonio's thinking about God and gods.
2. Why does Tony want to tell Florence about the Golden Carp so badly?
3. What effect does Florence's death have on Tony? Given that Tony had nearly accepted the legitimacy of the Golden Carp, what might he be thinking about Florence's soul now?

Chapter 22

1. Why does Tony say the Act of Contrition for Florence when he knows that Florence didn't believe and it wouldn't do any good?
2. Why doesn't the Vitamin Kid race Tony at the end?
3. Why does the author make Florence die right before Tony and Cico get a chance to tell him about the Golden Carp?
4. What is Gabriel's answer to Tony's question about the existence of evil?
5. Why don't the townspeople turn against Tenorio if he is so evil?
6. How is Tony's flight through the woods to warn Ultima similar to Narciso's?
7. If Ultima is so powerful, why can't she save herself?
8. What advice does Ultima give Tony at the end?
9. Why is the owl's death important?
10. What tools has Ultima passed on to Tony to help him become a spiritual leader?
11. Think back to one or more people or experiences that have influenced you as you have grown up. Describe those people or experiences and say how they have affected you.

Fishbowl Discussion

1. What is the significance of the family's having left the Llano for Guadalupe? How does the move represent the conflict between Antonio's father and mother?
2. Discuss the horse as symbol, and how it relates to not only Antonio's father, but to all the male characters in the story.
3. How does Ultima reflect the values and realities of the community of which she is a part? How does she stand apart from them?
4. There are many Christian allusions in the novel, along with many references to native Mexican folklore and traditions. Where do these conflict with one another? Do they ever dovetail? What does this tell us about the relationship between Catholicism and folklore?
5. How does Antonio's experience of violence and death form his character?
6. How does the symbol of the Golden Carp echo Antonio's inner religious conflict?
7. What kind of man do you think Antonio will become after the story ends? Will he become a priest, a farmer, or neither? Why?