

Andrea Masey

The Chicano Novel

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*Bless Me, Ultima* Essay

The conflict between religions and beliefs plays a big part in the development of Antonio as he goes into adolescences. The three conflicting beliefs for Antonio are the Catholicism, the Legend of the Golden Carp, and Ultima and her magic. Despite his age, Antonio is an extremely serious and analytical when it comes to these religious beliefs, more so the other children in the books. This aspect of Antonio, is what makes him a more mature, understanding and compassionate character.

To start with, Catholicism brings up a lot of unanswered questions for Antonio. As he try to find the answers, he seem to go grow more doubtful about the religion. The attempts to justify the religion however, stems from his mother, who is constantly pressuring him about becoming a priest when he is older just like his mother's ancestors who were led by the "first Luna priest (pg. 55)." As a result, Antonio feels that he needs to makes his mother happy and fulfill her wish by pursuing Catholicism.

Even Antonio's friends at one point had pressured him to pretend to play a priest. Although at this point of the story it was really forced upon him, he does play the role, but incorrectly and he is then bullied and picked on by his friends. The reason for Antonio's incorrect portraying the priest, was so he could take away all of friend's, Florence who is a non-believer, sins away without him having to conform to Catholicism. Afterwards, his other friends started to beat Antonio for letting Florence go. These friends had wanted Florence to have

extreme punishments for the things he said against God, thus shouting to have him beaten, stoned and even killed. These are such extreme reaction for such young children and to say it to their friend shows how narrow minded and controlled by the religion the other children are, but also shows how mature and compassionate Antonio is to forgive Florence.

However, Antonio started to open his mind to other possibilities outside of Catholicism early on in the novel when he sees the shooting and killing of Lupito. At this early point, Antonio begins to question Catholicism. He wonders if God would forgive Lupito for his sins and let his souls go to Purgatory, but then realizes that “God didn’t forgive anyone (pg. 30).” Right after this part, Antonio brings up an idea of Lupito’s soul being swept by the river and being absorbed into the earth or on the other hand residing with la Llorona. These two ideas stray far away from the beliefs of Catholicism, and allows the readers to see that Antonio is already starting realize that there could be other afterlife scenarios that’s not just Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory.

Another source of questioning for Antonio is Florence. Florence isn’t like Antonio’s other friends, he is not religious, but yet he goes to catechism just to be with his friend. As a non-believer of the Catholic teaching, Florence is able to see things in many different ways, and is thus able to bring up many questions that has Antonio thinking more critically about the religion. It was during a discussion with Florence that Antonio brings up the idea of different gods that could be ruling the lands in God’s absence. Although, Antonio is scared of the blasphemy that he committed, his statement shows that he is looking outside the box in order to make sense of the world. He is slowly breaking away for narrow road of Catholicism, escaping the pressure to be a priest, and becoming more understanding of the world.

One of the gods he mentions that could be ruling is the Golden Carp, which is a local legend and pagan god that Antonio is introduced to by a different friend, Cico. The idea of the

Golden Carp, allows Antonio to learn that there is more than just the rules of Catholicism. He is also able to get a new perspective from an alternate belief system. This new insight, give him new information to further analyze the ideas of Catholicism and allows Antonio to see the beauty in nature as the Golden Carp connects people and nature together.

However, the narrow minded teaching of Catholicism prevents the local people from being as compassionate and understand as Antonio. This is evident in the quote Cico makes; “The god the church is a jealous god, he cannot live in peace with the other gods. He would instruct his priests to kill the golden carp- (pg. 251).” This comment is made after Antonio wonders about telling the other boys about the Golden Carp, these are the same boys who had previously threaten Florence for not believing and have beaten Antonio for forgive Florence’s sins without punishment. Cico is correct though, it’s the narrow minded teaching and the fear of something different would make the other Catholics want to kill the pagan god and he makes Antonio see this point.

Although being fascinated, curious and understanding of this new belief, Antonio still believes in God, but he now understands that the ideas of all religions can hold some sort of life lesson. Being as analytical as he is, Antonio asks whether it is possible to believe in more than one god, because he doesn’t want to give up one for the other. He knows that he can learn many things from both belief systems, which could lead him in becoming more understanding of the different people and the land.

While Antonio does learn life and moral lessons from both Catholicism and the Golden Carp, it is the teaching and guidance he receive from Ultima, that sets him down a road of being understanding and compassionate to the world and people around him. From the beginning, Ultima was teaching Antonio that it was okay to be an independent person, always saying that he

will be a man of learning, which helped him to break away from his mother and the church's influence a bit and see the world in a new light.

A memorable scene about compassion is during the harvesting of a particular plant. Ultima teaches Antonio to state the reason to the plant as to why they were picking it and even be careful to gently remove the plant, roots and all, from the soil. By doing so, it doesn't allow for careless picking and killing of plant. It teaches that even the smallest and simplest life needs respect and deserves compassion. Through her guidance, Antonio states could feel his soul grow as Ultima taught him to beauty that nature offers (pg. 16).

Like with the Golden Carp, Antonio also turns to Ultima and her magic when all other means, like the Catholic Church, had failed. Ultima and her magic were there to save Antonio's uncle when he fell under a witches curse and to save a family from ghost that wreak havoc on their home, and he uses these to think more critically about the world. The experiences that he witnessed and helped with were tangible evidence for Antonio that there was more beyond the church and even the Golden Carp. Again, Antonio found another system of ideas and beliefs that provided life and moral lesson. Ultima, although no god, taught with understanding and compassion. She fought also against evils, such as the Trementina sisters and their father Tenorio, she protected Antonio and as well as made him think for himself.

Towards the end of the novel, as Ultima passes, Antonio says "Bless me, Ultima," instead of God or the Golden Carp, and she does in the "name of all that is good, strong and beautiful (pg. 276)." It is at this point, Antonio matures in adolescences by deciding to believe in Ultima and her teachings. However, if it wasn't for Antonio being able to analyze and think critically about the ideas and beliefs around him, he would not have been a mature, understanding and compassionate character.