

THE **Classic Theatre**
SAN ANTONIO



Bless Me, Ultima

Study Guide

This Study Guide was written by Renelle Chorilette Wilson and edited by Kacey Roye. It contains selected excerpts from public domain.

Show Runs February 16th – March 11th, 2018

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MISSION: The Classic Theatre creates excellent theatre that is relevant, diverse, entertaining, and transformative.

VISION: We seek to achieve our mission by creating connections and conversations through compelling classic works.

Classic Theatre Staff

Kelly Roush	Executive & Artistic Director
Kacey Roye	Director of Education
Florence Bunten	Box Office Manager
Rita Duggan, Zach Lewis, Eva Laporte	House Managers

About *Bless Me, Ultima*

"What I've wanted to do is compose the Chicano worldview — the synthesis that shows our true mestizo identity — and clarify it for my community and myself. Writing for me is a way of knowledge, and what I find illuminates my life."

-Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya

Although *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) was Anaya's first published novel and the one that gained him international acclaim as a writer, it was not his first novel. His previously written novels did not see print. During the mid-1960s, he wrote prodigiously, expressing his life and his experiences through poetry, short stories, and novels. For Anaya, writing became an expression of freedom. Seeing his people around him "in chains," he revolted against that world. Breaking those chains was important; his characters would not be enslaved. He realized that if he could write about his experiences and his family, using the town where he grew up as a setting, he could focus on these early years and create a sense of being liberated. *Bless Me, Ultima* was begun as a story about Antonio, but it was Ultima who made the story click. Through Ultima, Anaya explored the subconscious world, that world below the surface of experience that contains his culture's collective images, symbols, and dreams. In this subconscious world, Anaya examines the cultural forces that shaped the lives of Nuevo Méjicanos and Nuevo Méjicanas in the 1930s and 1940s. Through Ultima and the subconscious world, Anaya exposes the dark side of brujería and raises questions about good, evil, and truth.

-Martinez, Ruben O.

"I made strength from everything that had happened to me," writes Rudolfo Anaya in his 1972 novel *Bless Me, Última*, "so that in the end even the final tragedy could not defeat me. And that is what Última tried to teach me, that the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart."

It is this same strength that underlies Anaya's classic work of Chicano literature, making it such a compelling and transformative piece.

Its genesis did not come easily. Anaya, who grew up in Santa Rosa, New Mexico with a vaquero (rancher) father and a mother raised among farmers, began writing the book in 1963 when he was a high school English teacher. Though now considered the frontrunner of its genre, *Bless Me, Última's* publication proved a challenge because of the novel's free commingling of the English and Spanish languages, as well as traditional Catholic and native healer ("curandera") lore. Seamlessly, Anaya weaves together the sacred and the profane to masterful effect.

And yet, the powerful story took years to write and still longer to find a publisher.

Nor has its legacy gone unchallenged: In 2010, Arizona passed House Bill 2281, banning literature "designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group," effectively banning ethnic studies altogether. Among the books challenged? *Bless Me, Última*. Last August, of course, a federal judge declared House Bill 2281 "racially discriminatory," and Anaya's work is safe. For now.

The battle that has raged for years about the text in the Tucson Unified School District is a striking analogue for *Última*'s story: *Bless Me, Última*, much like *Última* herself, has been martyred, misappropriated, and misunderstood over the years, a victim of its own Otherness. *Última* – much like her eponymous story – does not fit neatly into any one category. Her inclusive worldview disquiets all those who would trade in exclusivity. She represents, as she reminds Tony, "all that is good and strong and beautiful," drawing from multiple sources but the same wellspring.

Ultimately, *Última* does not discriminate. Whatever the geographical region, faith tradition, or ethnic background from which you hail, this stage adaptation of *Bless Me, Última* will challenge and change you, as it has challenged and changed us. In the play, we see the triumph of the human spirit – of all that is good and strong and beautiful – over all that threatens to assail it.

"It is because good is always stronger than evil. Always remember that, Antonio. The smallest bit of good can stand against all the powers of evil in the world and it will emerge triumphant."

Donna Provencher
M.A., English Literature and Drama
The Catholic University of America

Bless Me, Ultima Cast & Production Crew

Cast of Characters

Carlos Alvarado	Narrator
Andrew Treviño	Tony
Marisa Varela	Última
Luis García, Jr.	Gabriel
Anna de Luna	María
Ricardo Guzman	Prudencio
Julio Alberto Sepulveda Bella L. Villarreal Spencer Oldham Ivan Ortega Amanda Ireta-Goede Keli Rosa Cabunoc Alyx Irene González	Ensemble

Production Staff

Jose Ruben De Leon	Director
Cameron Beesley	Technical Director
Diane Malone	Costume Designer
Rick Malone	Sound Designer
Ric Slocum	Set Designer
Alfy Valdez	Props Master/Lighting Designer
Matt Shavers	Master Electrician

Synopsis

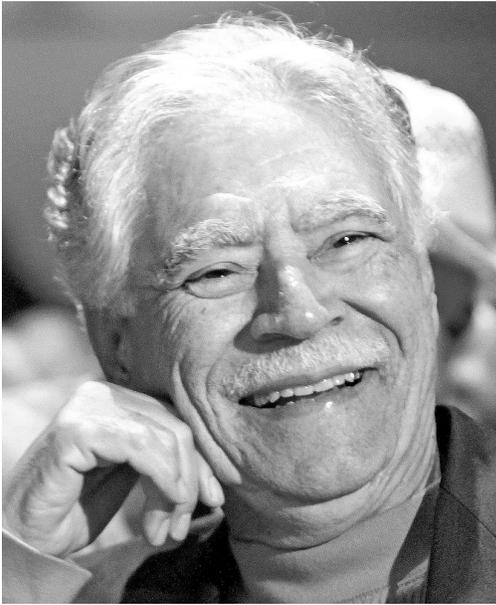
The story begins with Ultima, a curandera, or folk healer, going to live with the Márez family during the summer that Antonio is six years old. Antonio is preoccupied with and anxious about attending school and having to be separated from his mother. Related to these concerns is his engrossment with knowing his destiny. This concern is exacerbated by his mother's desire that he become a priest to a community of farmers, where her family lives. At the same time, Antonio is concerned about realizing the wandering desire that stems from his paternal lineage.

Antonio is nearly at the point of starting religious study for his first holy communion and is becoming concerned with good and evil in the world. Early in the story, he witnesses the killing of Lupito, a war veteran, and fears that his father may be punished by God for being with the men who killed Lupito. Antonio is deeply concerned about the fate of Lupito's soul.

As the play develops, Antonio's fears and concerns intensify and become woven together as he struggles to understand the events surrounding his life. He becomes preoccupied with questions about his destiny, life and death, and good and evil. Ultima conveys an indigenous viewpoint to him that provides guidance when he loses confidence in parental viewpoints and the teachings of the Church. Ultima tells him the stories and legends of his ancestors, and he comes to understand how the history of his people stirs his blood. Through her, Antonio learns the "old ways" and develops a new relationship with nature. This relationship opens him to the contemplation of the possibility of other gods.

Antonio learns there are powers in the world that differ from those honored by the Catholic faith. He helps Ultima perform a healing that saves the life of his Uncle Lucas, who had been bewitched by the Trementina sisters. Later, he witnesses another healing performed by Ultima and begins to understand the world differently; he learns to overcome his fears, especially his fear of change. In the end, Antonio understands himself and the world around him better, and he learns to accept life and the many challenges that it presents.

About the Playwright



Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya

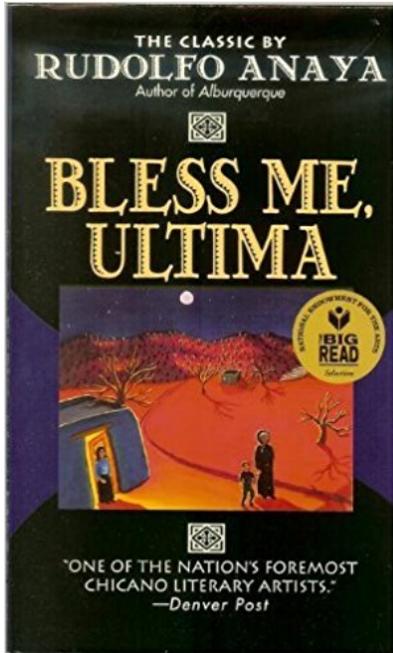
Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya was born on October 30, 1937, to Rafaelita and Martin Anaya in Pastura, New Mexico, a small village located on the western edge of the Llano Estacado (the Staked Plains). He was the eighth of ten children (three of them from previous marriages by his parents). Rudolfo was born into a generation of Mexican-American families that experienced the culmination of the displacement of an agro-pastoral, self-subsistence economy by a wage-labor market economy. His father tended to withdraw from this process, while his mother, a devout Catholic, encouraged Rudolfo to explore, adapt, and achieve in the enveloping social world of the Anglo American. Early in his life, his family moved from Pastura to Santa Rosa, where he spent his years as a boy. In 1952, Rudolfo's family moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Already a teenager,

Rudolfo found the city exciting and adapted quickly. Barrio life in the Barelitas section of the city swept him into the fold of the urban life of Chicano/as. In 1954, a swimming accident left Rudolfo temporarily paralyzed and gave him time and cause to consider many philosophical questions about life and human existence.

Rudolfo graduated from high school in 1956 and enrolled later that year at a local business school. Unfulfilled by the study of business, he enrolled at the University of New Mexico to study English. There, he discovered the importance of literature as a means for expressing ideas. During his student years, he was influenced not only by his teachers but also by the counterculture of the beatniks, especially by their anti-establishment poetry. In 1963, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English and began to teach at an elementary school in La Jolla, a neighborhood in southern Albuquerque. Anaya enjoyed teaching and went on to teach at secondary school levels. His interest in literature remained strong, however, and he eventually returned to the University of New Mexico for further study. In 1968, he received a Master of Arts degree in literature, and he returned later and earned another Master of Arts degree, this one in guidance and counseling. Between 1971 and 1973, he served as the Director of Counseling at the University of Albuquerque.

Did You Know?

Facts about *Bless Me, Ultima*



The original novel cover

→ *Bless Me, Ultima* was originally a novel! It has become the most widely read and critically acclaimed novel in the Chicano literary canon since its first publication in 1972.

→ *Bless Me, Ultima* is Anaya's best known work and was awarded the prestigious Premio Quinto Sol. In 2008, it was one of 12 classic American novels selected for The Big Read, a community-reading program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 2009, it was the selected novel of the United States Academic Decathlon.

→ *Bless Me, Ultima* is the first in a trilogy followed by the publication of *Heart of Aztlán* (1976) and *Tortuga* (1979). With the publication of his novel, *Albuquerque* (1992), Anaya was proclaimed a front-runner by Newsweek in "what is better called not the new multicultural writing, but the new American writing."

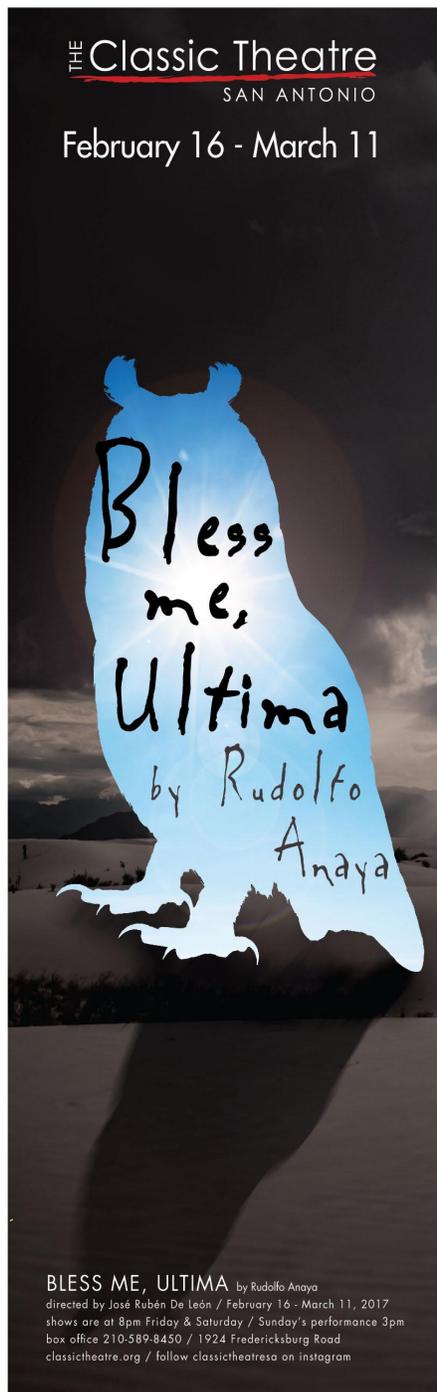
→ It took Anaya six years to create *Bless Me Ultima* and an additional two years to find a publisher.

→ A film version of the book was produced in 2013.

A still from the 2013 movie



Analysis of Major Themes



Coming of Age

Bless Me, Ultima chronicles Antonio's loss of innocence and his growth from boy to man. It just happens to Antonio much earlier in life than it does to most. But what's interesting here is not the fact that Antonio grows up, but how he grows up. It's definitely not in your typical fashion. Instead of dealing with first kisses and drivers ed, Antonio wrestles with philosophical questions that have plagued the oldest of men for ages. So while he comes of age here, it's clear he was already wise beyond his years.

Moral Independence

Ultima acts as Antonio's guide as he learns the importance of moral independence. Ultima teaches him that the most difficult questions about life can never be answered entirely by a single religion or cultural tradition. Antonio has questions about evil, forgiveness, truth, and the soul, questions he can answer only for himself. Antonio once believed that the Communion ritual would answer all his questions, but Ultima teaches him that he must think for himself and arrive at his own conclusions.

The Influence of Culture on Identity

Bless Me, Ultima explores the difficulty of reconciling conflicting cultural traditions. In the end, Anaya suggests that a person can draw from several cultural traditions to forge a more complex and adaptable identity. Antonio is so eager to find a single, definitive answer to the questions that haunt him because he has been influenced by many conflicting cultures. Anaya uses these conflicts to explore the influence of culture on identity. Many characters in the book are limited by their cultural prejudices and never learn to look beyond their own assumptions. Ultima teaches Antonio to avoid the limitations inherent in abiding by one culture, one religion, or one creed. Instead, Ultima encourages Antonio to embrace all of the cultural influences in his life to become a better person.

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Vocabulary

- **Exorcise:** expel through adjuration or prayers
- **Barrage:** the heavy fire of artillery to saturate an area
- **Catechism:** an elementary book summarizing the principles of a religion
- **Exuberant:** unrestrained, especially with regard to feeling
- **Fertility:** the property of producing vigorous and luxuriant growth
- **Conquistador:** an adventurer
- **Sacrament:** a formal religious ceremony conferring a specific grace
- **Limbo:** in Catholicism, the place of unbaptized or innocent souls
- **Interminable:** tiresomely long, seemingly without end
- **Jeer:** laugh at with contempt and derision
- **Purgatory:** a temporary state of the dead in Roman Catholic theology
- **Inquisitor:** a questioner who is excessively harsh
- **Knell:** the sound of a bell rung slowly to announce death
- **Rheumatism:** any painful disorder of the joints or muscles
- **Labyrinth:** complex system of paths in which it is easy to get lost
- **Slake:** satisfy; as thirst
- **Spendthrift:** person who spends money carelessly
- **Heresy:** a belief that rejects the unorthodox tenets of a religion
- **Genuflect:** bend the knees and bow before a religious superior or image
- **Emaciated:** very thin especially from disease or hunger or cold

Pre-Play Activities

Reality Television

In order to encourage students to think about the choices a playwright must make when creating a play with “the look and feel of real life,” ask students to develop a new reality T.V. show. Explain to students, however, that unlike the current television offerings, these reality shows must actually attempt to appear “real.” Like the realistic dramatists of the 19th and 20th centuries, students must discard lofty or overblown theatrics and storylines in exchange for the actual and the “everyday.” Their characters must be unable to arrive easily at answers to their predicaments. Students or teams must create a proposal for their show that answers the following questions: 1. On what everyday situation or dilemma will your show focus? 2. What everyday characters will your show include? 3. What physical or philosophical problems of daily living, either social, philosophical, or psychological, will your show examine?

Identity and Culture Walkabout Survey

To activate prior knowledge and connections to the play’s themes, have students perform a survey. Using a survey question that generates thought, provide students with a nine block (3 X 3) handout ready for responses. On the left side of the blocks going down, create blanks for three “Informers.” On the top of the blocks going left to right, create blanks for “Detail #1,” “Detail #2,” and “Detail #3.” Students then walk around and ask three different “Informers” to answer the survey question, giving three facts each. Students record their Informers’ facts in the blocks. After returning to their seats, students summarize in writing what they have learned from their classmates. Sample questions to generate a walkabout survey for *A Doll’s House* include:

- How can one describe identity?
- How can culture affect identity?
- What does it mean to have independence?
- What is the definition of growth?
- Can society's perceptions have an effect on one's identity?
- Can parent's perceptions have an effect on one's identity?

Practical Activity

Theatrical Styles, MAGICAL REALISM V. REALISM

1. Split your students into two groups and give both groups a scenario.
2. Allocate both groups one of the theatrical styles of either Magical Realism, or Realism. Ask them to devise a short scene in that particular style to present to the rest of the class.
3. Share the scenes with the rest of the class. See if the rest of the class can point out the differences between the two different styles.

Post-Play Activities

Now that students have seen/read the entire play, they can return to the text for a deeper understanding of its significant themes. The following topics and questions can be used for whole class and small group discussion or as essay topics.

- How did Ultima feel about plants, the river, and other parts of nature? What does it reveal about Antonio that he was so attracted to this view of the world?
- How would you characterize Antonio's own religious beliefs in *Bless Me, Ultima*?
- How does Rudolfo Anaya show Antonio's loss of faith in *Bless Me, Ultima*?
- What are the most important lessons Antonio seems to learn throughout the story?
- How did Rudolfo Anaya use setting in *Bless Me, Ultima* to construct both a 'magical' sense of the world for the reader?
- How is identity shown?
- How is faith shown?

Theatre Etiquette

Going to a play is a special experience, one that you will remember for a long time. Everyone in the audience has been looking forward to seeing the performance. A production team puts in many long hours and a lot of hard work to mount a performance for an audience. If you keep in mind common courtesy for the performers as well as your fellow audience members, everyone's theatre experience will be optimized. What follows are a few reminders for attending the theatre.

1. Plan to arrive at the theatre thirty minutes before the performance begins.
2. Gum, food, drinks, or candy are never allowed in the theatre. You may, however, bring a water bottle.
3. Please go to the bathroom before seating for the performance or at intermission.
4. TURN OFF ALL CELL PHONES or anything else that can disturb the production, actors, and audience members during the performance. It is very impolite to have your phone on during the show.
5. Lights will dim just before a performance and then go dark. Acknowledge this by sitting quietly and calmly.
6. Do not talk or whisper during the performance. The actors on stage can hear you, which is why you can hear them so well. Laughter is of course permissible at appropriate times.
7. Keep body movements to a minimum. You can't get up and move around during the performance.

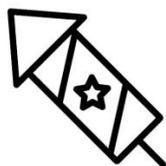


8. No taking of pictures or video recording is allowed.
9. Don't leave your seat until the cast has taken their curtain call at the end.
10. Show your appreciation by clapping. The actors love to hear applause. This shows how much you enjoyed the performance!

Free Student Programs at The Classic Theatre

STUDENT PERFORMANCES

THE Classic Theatre
SAN ANTONIO



YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU
BY GEORGE S. KAUFMAN & MOSS HART
DIRECTED BY MARK STRINGHAM

SEPTEMBER 14, 2017



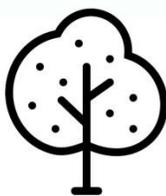
A DOLL'S HOUSE
BY HENRIK IBSEN
DIRECTED BY KELLY ROUSH

NOVEMBER 9, 2017



BLESS ME, ULTIMA
BY RUDOLPHO ANAYA
DIRECTED BY JOSE RUBEN DE LEON

FEBRUARY 22, 2018



THE CHERRY ORCHARD
BY ANTON CHEKHOV
DIRECTED BY ANDREW THORNTON

MAY 10, 2018

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