

# Mythic Visions of the Borderland: Rodolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*

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## Abstract

The paper draws the contours of borderland literature in the Southwestern US/Mexico context and focuses on one of its best practitioners, Rudolfo Anaya, referring to one of his most renowned works, *Bless Me Ultima*. The study concentrates on one of the most typical features of Anaya's fiction, his extensive use of myth. This vital aspect of the writer's narrative strategy is linked to the process of the development of the protagonist Antonio who progresses from childhood to maturity with the assistance of the *curandera* (folk-healer) Ultima who functions as his mentor and spiritual leader. During his apprenticeship Antonio appropriates her worldview based on the reconciliation of dualities. Equipped with this new cognitive strategy the boy manages to solve the conflicts which baffle his mind and to overcome the trials he faces on the road to manhood: the clashes in his family, the problems related to his religious identity, the confrontation with the variable faces of death, the conflicts he experiences with his peers, the vision of the golden carp, the disquieting questions generated by his dream experiences. The final resolution of these tensions signals the birth of what Anaya formulates as the "New World Person", the person with a new *mestizo* consciousness who has the ability to wed the conflicting elements of his ancestral culture.

**Key Words :** Border, Myth, Mestizo, La Llorona, Curandera.

## Özet

Makale, sınır edebiyatı kavramının (Güneybatı ABD/Meksika bağlamında) genel hatlarını çizdikten sonra bu edebiyatın en başarılı temsilcilerinden biri olan Rudolfo Anaya'nın *Bless Me, Ultima* (*Kutsa Beni, Ultima*) başlıklı romanı üzerine yoğunlaşmaktadır. Çalışmanın odak noktasını Anaya'nın en belirgin anlatım öğelerinden biri olan mit kullanımı oluşturmaktadır. Mit kullanımı makalede ana kahraman Antonio'nun gelişimi ile ilişkilendirilmekte: Antonio çocuktan olgunluğa doğru ilerlerken kendisine bir *curandera* (bitki,

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kök, ot v.b. doğal malzemeler kullanarak tedavi eden kişi) akıl hocalığı ve yol göstericiliği yapmakta. Antonio kendisine rehberlik eden bu yaşlı kadının her şeyden önce zıtlıkların eritilmesine dayalı dünya görüşünü benimser. Bu yeni bilişsel yöntemle donanan kahraman, yetişkinliğe giden yolda karşısına çıkan tüm sorunları alt üst etmesini becerir. Aile içindeki çatışmalar, dini duyguları ile ilgili ikilemler, Katolik inancı ile çelişen "altın sazan" inancı, ölümün farklı yüzleri ile karşılaşmanın getirdiği çelişkili düşünceler, yaşatları ile yaşadığı çatışmalar bir bir çözülür ve Rodolfo Anaya'nın "Yeni Dünya Bireyi" olarak adlandırdığı yeni bir kişi doğar. Bu yeni bireyin temel özelliği, atalarından edindiği mirasın çelişen öğelerini uzlaştırma yetisine, yani *mestizo* bilincine sahip olmasıdır.

**Anahtar kelimeler :** Sınır, Mit, Mestizo, La Lorona, Curandera.

### **Mythic Visions of the Borderland: Rodolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima***

We can't dictate what people become, but what we can hope is to liberate people by having them become their most true selves, their authentic selves, to find their deepest potential. Then you will recognize the models of colonialism that are set over you, and you'll know how to react and how to accomplish your goals in life.

(Anaya in Jussawalla, 1998, 134)

### **Introduction**

As a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo signed between Mexican and American authorities in 1848 almost half of Mexico's national territory was ceded to the United States. The Treaty caused severe socio-political, cultural and demographic problems culminating in the issue of illegal migration which has ever since preserved its urgency. The efforts of the border officials to control the flow of immigrants led to its militarization, to the erection of protective walls along "critical" sections of the border and the emergence of endless disputes related to the relevance of these precautions to the principles underlying American society. The Treaty resulted thus in the formation of a specific "border area" with specific socio-political and cultural characteristics, a liminal space which was defined in Gloria Anzaldúa's renowned *Borderlands/La Frontera* as the home of the "prohibited and forbidden":

...Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." (1999, 25)

This area has become the site also of a specific literature produced by figures such as Rudolfo Anaya, Tomas Rivera, Arturo Islas, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Cherrie Moraga, who turn the boundary, “this thin edge of barbwire”, into their home, as Gloria Anzaldua, the “border woman,” formulates the no-man’s land between the two countries. “Not comfortable, but home....1,950 mile-long open wound...This is my home/ this thin edge of/ barbwire,” the writer adds to express the difficulty of inhabiting this liminal space (1999, 24-25). Many Chicano writers have based their works on the multifaceted problems of the borderland - the central issue of migration, the life in the barrio, the conflict with Anglo culture, the search for a genuine Chicano identity – to describe the difficulties of coping with life in this indeterminate space.

### **Rudolfo Anaya as a Mythmaker**

Rudolfo Anaya acquires the title of a representative Mexican American writer with the publication of his first novel *Bless Me, Ultima* in 1972. His next two works *Heart of Aztlan* (1976) and *Tortuga* (1979) strengthen further the author’s status as a unique Chicano voice in American literature. The distinctiveness of Anaya’s style is a product of his orientation to typical Chicano experiences which are mediated through fresh narrative techniques such as the extensive use of myths, legends and archetypal patterns. His first three novels which came to be known as *The New Mexico Trilogy* were followed by a series of other memorable works such as *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984), *Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl* (1987) and *A Chicano in China* (1986). Each of them has augmented Anaya’s status of the unprecedented mythmaker of contemporary Chicano fiction.

The use of myth is not a new phenomenon either in the mainstream, or ethnic American literature. We have examples as divergent as John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, John Updike’s *The Centaur* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Each writer has his/her own methods of dealing with the mythic element as a thematic or stylistic feature of his/her works. John Barth, for example, goes back to the mythic tradition of ancient Greece because of his desperate need to transform the atmosphere of exhaustion he finds himself in. Alice Walker, on the other hand, uses a mythological frame for her novel because the pain of the African-Americans which has been accumulated for centuries “is too great to be faced and confronted in a realistic mode. Such experience demands another mode for which the mythic narrative is the most appropriate” (De Weever, 1991, 4).

As far as the use of myth in Anaya’s case is concerned, it is dictated most of all by his borderland consciousness. By integrating myths and legends into his narrative he aims to revive the collective unconscious of the Chicano people. Delving deep into the reservoir of common experience, the writer formulates a notion of shared origins and past which,

he believes, is a prerequisite for the construction of a communal identity. It can be stated, therefore, that Anaya uses myth first of all to augment the *mestizo* aspect in the lives of his characters expressed in the mixture of European (Spanish) and indigenous elements. Its exploitation results, furthermore, in a specific style reminiscent of nascent magical realism.

It is worth mentioning that the Chicano movement itself based its political program on the revival of the myth of Aztlán, the original home of the Aztecs. The manifesto of the Chicano movement, accepted at the First Chicano National Conference in Denver in 1969, is particularly titled *Plan de Aztlán*, a fact which demonstrates the paramount function of myth in the process of the creation of a common identity. From a geographical place designating the old homeland the term Aztlán turns into a symbol of “the spiritual union of the Chicanos, [it becomes] something that is carried within the heart” as part of their common cultural roots and sense of unity (Leal, 1989, 8).

### **Anaya's Conception of Myth**

Reference to Anaya's own notion of myth and its functions will be of great use for a more substantial analysis of *Bless Me, Ultima*, the focus of the present study. The interviews conducted with the writer at different stages of his career demonstrate his unswerving belief in what he defines as “collective memory”, a term, which stands, in Jung's terminology, for the collective unconscious:

I understand myself as belonging to what I call a community or a tribal group. I am a member of a tribe. I not only have a personal history and a personal memory, but that group also has a group memory. I find it very fascinating to tap into that group memory through myself and come up with the symbols, the resources, the values, dreams, relationships, and the way of looking at the world that are not only particular to me but are particular to my tribe. This is how I understand collective memory. (Anaya in Martinez, 1998, 125)

Anaya's unique voice is based, therefore, on his ability to combine his personal voice with that of his community, with the oral tradition of the *cuentos* (tales). They guarantee access to the common reservoir of the collective unconscious where he finds the archetypes for his fiction. Defining these archetypes as “primal symbols” Anaya claims they are “available to all of us throughout mankind's history on earth” (Anaya in Gonzalez, 1998, 84). Another source of primal symbols, he adds, is the author's own psyche:

The archetypes reside in me, and in that process of writing and thinking the story and energizing myself and using the energy of the story, I begin to find those archetypes in me... and infuse them into the story. When I say we must

create myth, I think that what I mean is that we often look at mythology as if it happened in the distant past... What I'm saying is that... it's working in us even now... If part of the search is for the authentic self in us, then those archetypes and symbols are clear messages that begin to define the authentic self. (Anaya in Gonzalez, 1998, 85-86)

Anaya's interest in myth and archetypes is part of his general preoccupation with the image of the authentic Chicano individual whom he names the "New World Man", or the "New World Person":

We will find the definition of the New World Man by going back to our history, by going back into our collective memory...to our values. The New World Person, that is whom I want to be and that is what I am after. I will more closely understand that New World Man by understanding my indigenous history...Somewhere we have that sense of our original homeland, our original values, our communal values, and we have to understand them. I think one of the crucial questions we have to face is how Chicanos have been cut off from that understanding historically. The educational system has not given it to us and that is why we are a dispersed people. (Anaya in Martinez, 1998, 127)

Anaya's whole career as a writer demonstrates this persistent search for a "person of synthesis, a person who is able to draw... on Spanish roots and... Native indigenous roots and become a new person, become that Mestizo with a unique perspective" (Anaya in Jussawalla, 1998, 133). The beginning of this search for the mestizo with a unique perspective starts with the image of Antonio from *Bless Me, Ultima*: the process of the boy's maturation ends at the point when he manages to reconcile the conflicting aspects of his identity. So Antonio's education is accompanied by a growing sense of the multilayered colonial impacts his culture has been subjected to and a resulting tendency to strip himself of their paralyzing effects.

A comprehensive analysis of the trilogy discloses a more systematic approach to the use of mythic material. While in *Bless Me, Ultima* myth is "a way of knowing and making sense of the world" in *Heart of Aztlan* it grows into a "way of changing the world." In the last part of the trilogy, *Tortuga*, myth acquires the status of a spiritual power which heals the world (Lamadrid, 1998, 152). Since the focus of the present work is only the first part of the trilogy it will deal mainly with the function of myth as a cognitive instrument in the maturation of the central character.

### ***Bless Me, Ultima*: Myth as the Bases of a New Mestizo Identity**

*Bless Me, Ultima* is a bildungsroman which traces the development of a boy, Antonio Marez, who grows under the guidance of Ultima, an old curandera, "a woman who

knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick” (BMU, 5). Ultima accompanies Antonio in the central stages of his life and helps him solve the conflicts he faces to attain his integrity. Many of these conflicts are resolved by the hero on a subconscious level, in the realm of dream sequences (which are marked in the text in italics). By giving clues about future events the dream sequences function first of all as a vital narrative device but they are equally important for the presentation of the inner life of the central character. In this way they point either to his emotional and psychological tumult or signal its resolution.

In order to attain the status of the “New World Person” Antonio has to resolve the contradictions within his culture. He finds them in his family circle (in the conflict between the pastoral and agricultural modes of life represented by his paternal and maternal ancestors), he observes them in the religious beliefs of the townspeople (as they are based on Christian values and pre-Columbian pagan spirituality), they follow him in the classroom too when he has to guard his values against the encroachment of Anglo cultural norms. Reconciling “freedom” and “stability” as the bases of a new life philosophy, wedding Catholicism with indigenous beliefs, resolving the conflict between the material world and the spiritual bases of life Antonio attains the mestizo consciousness advocated by Anaya as the new model for Chicano identity.

### **The Family as a Site of Conflict**

Antonio’s initial trial starts with the reconciliation of the oppositions in his own family. The boy is torn apart between the pastoral background of his father and the agricultural roots of his mother. His father Gabriel is a *vaquero* (a cowboy), yet for him this word does not refer merely to a method of sustaining one’s life, it is “a calling as ancient as the coming of the Spaniard to Nuevo Mejico” (BMU, 2). Even the colonization of New Mexico cannot suppress the free-spirited life style of the *vaquero*: “Even after the big rancheros and the tejanos came and fenced the beautiful llano, he and those like him continued to work there... because only in that wide expanse of land and sky they could feel the freedom their spirits needed” (BMU, 2). The family takes its name from the sea (“Marez” has its roots in the Spanish word *mar*, i.s. sea) as the endless New Mexican plains share the vastness of the ocean and the *vaqueros* themselves partake of its unbridled energy. Antonio’s mother Maria Luna, on the other hand, is a daughter of a farmer. She is a member of a family who is tied to the earth and to the ancient traditions related to its regenerative power. While the Marezes are people of the sun, the Lunas are associated with the moon. Enrique Lamadrid links the opposition between the agricultural Luna family and the pastoral Marez family to the dialectical opposition governing the origin myths pinpointed by Claude Levi-Strauss. The conflicting family heritages have roots “that go as deep as the very foundation of human consciousness

as it moves from the... hunting and gathering (paleolithic) into agricultural (neolithic) economies” (1998, 156-157).

The initial conflict Antonio faces in his immediate surroundings is introduced *and* resolved through the first dream he reports. In this scene the two families struggle over the fate of the newly born Antonio.

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 harvests so the small room smelled of fresh green chile and corn...

Then the silence was shattered with the thunder of hoofbeats; 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 rubbed the stain of earth from the baby's forehead because man was not to be tied to the earth but free upon it...

He is a Marez, the vaqueros shouted. His forefathers were conquistadores, men as restless as the seas they sailed and as free as the land they conquered. He is his father's blood. (BMU, 6)

The clash between the two families is stopped by the old woman who delivers the baby, namely the curandera Ultima, who enters the narrative in character immediately after the dream to point to the affinity between the two figures. Thus both the image of the curandera and Antonio (as her future apprentice who will internalize her power) acquire the roles of mediators even in the opening pages of the novel. A subsequent dream scene in which Antonio's parents are again engaged in a symbolic struggle to gain control over his identity offers a more explicit resolution of the clash. His mother tries to convince him he was baptized in “the waters of the moon” while his father claims he was baptized in “the waters of the sea”. The dispute is again settled by Ultima's intervention: “The waters are one, Antonio... You have been seeing only parts... and not looking beyond into the great cycle that binds us all” (BMU, 125-126).

Ultima, who functions as the boy's mentor, is a representative of mythic cognition which is inimical to binary thinking. Antonio is impressed by this asset of the old woman the moment he encounters her. As she takes his hand he feels the power of a whirlwind sweep around him: “I felt the song of the mockingbirds... mingle with the pulse of the earth. The four directions of the llano met in me... The granules of sand at my feet and the sun and sky above me seemed to dissolve into one strange, complete being” (BMU, 12-13). This “strange, complete being” is a modern version of the ancient

deity Quetzalcoatl, one of the central gods in the mythology of Meso-America. Anaya repeatedly stresses his fascination with this figure because of its potential to wed tensions. He views Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, as the power “of the blending or the merging of dichotomies” (Anaya in Johnson and Apodaca, 1998, 41). The nascent image of the modern Quetzalcoatl which is hinted in the above quotation (as the strange being who unites the sand in his feet with the sky above his head) will develop in the novel to turn later into the image of Clemente Chavez from Anaya’s second work, *Heart of Aztlan*. The implicit reference to the deity serves another function too: It enhances Ultima’s ability to wed tensions. As a curandera she is a person who occupies an intermediary position. “Consistent with her name, Ultima is at once comforting and courageous, surrogate mother and father; she is a curandera and bruja; spirit and person, human and animal; mortal and immortal, revered and feared” (Gish, 1996, 126). The most precious gift Antonio receives from the old woman is exactly this notion of unity-in-duality she stands for and advocates through her practice as a curandera. “Anaya explains the power of the curandera as the power of the human heart, but in fact demonstrates that it is derived from the knowledge of mythic thought process, the awareness and resolution of contradictions within the culture” (Lamadrid, 1998, 159). The “middle ground” occupied by Ultima, and respectively by Antonio, Lamadrid observes, is evident also in special and geographical terms:

Ultima has lived in the plain and in the valley, in Las Pasturas as well as El Puerto de la Luna, gaining the respect of the people in both places. Antonio’s family lives in Guadalupe in compromise location at midpoint between Las Pasturas and El Puerto. Through the father’s insistence, the house is built at the edge of the valley where the plain begins. Antonio mediates between father and mother, trying to please the latter by scrapping a garden out of the rocky hillside... 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.” This positioning made it impossible to take sides in the territorial groupings of his peers. (1998, 159)

Ultima’s intermediary position is stressed also by the symbolic power of the totemic animal she is identified with, the owl, which “as a bird associated with the god of the netherworld in Aztec mythology and with Ultima in the novel – operates as an interesting fusion of contraries, both tutelary spirit and messenger of death” (Cazemajou, 1988, 65). Her status as a *curandera* itself points to her ambivalence. The duality implicit in this term is introduced by Antonio’s initial evaluation of the old woman: “Ultima was a curandera... a miracle worker who could heal the sick. And I had heard that Ultima could lift the curses laid by brujas... And because a curandera had this power she was misunderstood and often suspected of practicing witchcraft herself” (BMU, 4). The events recounted throughout the novel verify the dual aspect of the image of the curandera turning her

into a synthesis of the two main female archetypes governing Chicano consciousness, namely that of the Virgin of Guadalupe and that of La Llorona. From that point of view Ultima herself is an embodiment of the life philosophy she wants to transfer to Antonio. Her constant presence teaches him to search for a middle ground for the solution of his major adolescence problems, just like it did in the case of the family tension.

### **Resolution of Religious Dilemmas**

Antonio's confrontation with death in the second chapter of the novel marks another significant stage of his development. Lupito, a deranged war victim who has not managed to overcome the traumatic effect of war experience, kills unintentionally the town sheriff Chavez. Antonio, hidden in the bushes along the river bank, observes how the townspeople capture and kill Lupito as a sign of revenge. Thus the boy becomes a witness of a scene which makes him question the issues of God, justice, right, wrong, innocence and guilt. Antonio's skepticism increases as a group of peers introduce him to a form a pagan religiosity which clashes with the training he gets at home as preparation for his First Communion ceremony. The only Indian resident of the town discloses to him the secret of the "golden carp". According to the legend the golden carp was once a god who demanded to be transformed into a carp to guard his people. His people had been themselves transformed into fish by the gods as a punishment for a transgression.

It is mainly on the grounds of the myth about the golden carp that Anaya acquires the title of a mythmaker after the publication of his first novel, a status he has successfully reaffirmed with his subsequent works too. Viewing the image from a broader socio-political and historical perspective the writer himself defines it as a "metaphor of being a fish in the stream of migration – which... blends perfectly into the golden carp and the fish people" (in Jussawalla, 1998, 132). Besides revealing his tendency to be truthful to the Chicano experience Anaya's impulse to create his own mythology justifies his incessant belief in the dynamic nature of myth. He is deeply convinced that "those same archetypals that were discovered by the ancient people are in us today. And it is the creation of myth and that reference to that collective pool that we all carry inside of us that re-energizes us and makes us more authentic" (in Gonzales, 1998, 86).

The "new god" impersonated by the golden carp initially shatters the foundations of Antonio's strict Catholic upbringing. The boy's religious dilemma intensifies when the members of the Luna family ask Ultima to cure Lucas (Antonio's uncle) from an illness inflicted upon him by the curse of three women who are believed to be witches. "I had been thinking," the boy speculates after his uncle's recovery, "how the medicine of the doctors and of the priest had failed. In my mind I could not understand how the power of God could fail. But it had" (BMU, 111). The long expected First Communion

ceremony ends in a similar sentiment: "The God I so eagerly sought was not there, and the understanding I thought to gain was not there" (235).

Much of the tension created by Antonio's religious dilemma is resolved again in his dreams which "prepare [his] soul for rebirth" (Lattin, 1978, 55). In one of them God himself addresses the boy and instructs him about the impossibility of absolute justice: "You foolish boy, God roared, don't you see you are caught in your own trap! You would have a God who forgives all, but when it comes to your personal whims you seek punishment for your vengeance" (BMU, 181-182). In another dream episode a mystic voice informs him that "the germ of creation lies in violence" (257). These statements, which can be interpreted as projections of Antonio's own subconscious voice, mark his steady progress from childhood to maturity and signal the boy's acquaintance with the facts of life.

### **Confrontation with Anglo Values**

A significant moment in the boy's development is his first day at school. Like in many other coming-of-age Chicano(a) narratives the first school day proves to be a deeply traumatic experience for Antonio. It marks the moment he has to move "from the security and from the sweet-smelling warmth of his mother's bosom and kitchen out into life and experience" (Rogers, 1998, 3). The senses of the boy immediately record the school as a place with "strange unfamiliar smells and sounds" (BMU, 60), separating thus the public sphere of the educational institution from the family circle with its familiar smells of tortillas, chile, beans and the familiar rhythm of the Spanish language. At school Antonio is subjected to "English, a foreign tongue" (60) he has no command of, it is this new language, though, which gains control over him still in his first day at school as his name "Antonio Marez" is immediately anglicized by the teacher and recorded as "Anthony Marez". The boy's sense of strangeness reaches its summit during lunch time when the palpable manifestation of his cultural identity, his food, turns him into a butt of derision:

At noon we opened our lunches to eat... My mother had packed a small jar of hot beans and some good, green chile wrapped in tortillas. When the other children saw my lunch they laughed and pointed again... They showed me their sandwiches which were made of bread. Again I did not feel well... I tried to eat. But I couldn't. A huge lump seemed to form in my throat and tears came to my eyes. I yearned for my mother, and at the same time I understood that she had sent me to this place where I was an outcast. (BMU, 62)

Antonio soon learns that the best mode of coping with this state of not belonging is forming a community with people of similar status: "But no; I was not alone... I saw

two other boys... We banded together and in our union found strength. We found a few others who were like us, different in language and custom, and a part of our loneliness was gone” (BMU, 62). This statement acquires a greater significance when we take into consideration the fact that *Bless Me, Ultima* is a product of a specific socio-cultural epoch in the history of Chicano experience. The book was published in 1972, i.e. in the period when the Chicano Movement had reached its summit after asserting its claim for social, political and cultural autonomy. From that point of view, by foregrounding the notion of unification as a means of affirming one’s ethnic and cultural identity, the novel discloses and validates the strategies exploited by Chicano activists.

Anaya inscribes his concern for the ethnic awareness of his hero into his relationship with Ultima too. As a curandera the old woman offers remedies for both physical and psychological ailments, but in the particular context of the novel she heals cultural wounds too, like the one Antonio gets in his first day at school. Along with information about plants and roots he acquires knowledge about his ancestral roots too: “Ultima told me the stories and legends of my ancestors. From her I learned the glory and the tragedy of the history of my people, and I came to understand how that history stirred in my blood” (BMU, 128). Antonio’s whole account of his experience from childhood to maturity reveals an earnest concern for the destiny of his people. His story is narrated on the background of a communal history which is built on the notions of dispossession, uprootedness and endless migration:

Always the talk turned to life on the llano. The first pioneers there were shepherders. Then they imported herds of cattle from Mexico and became vaqueros... They were the first cowboys in a wild and desolate land which they took from the Indians.

Then the railroad came. The barbed wire came. The songs, the corridos became sad, and the meeting of the people from Texas with forefathers was full of blood, murder, and tragedy. The people were uprooted. They looked around one day and found themselves closed in. The freedom of land and sky they had known was gone. Those people could not live without freedom and so they packed and moved west. They became migrants. (BMU, 130-131)

Despite these frequent references to communal history, Antonio’s personal development continues to occupy the focus of the work. As a typical Mexican American boy his childhood is marked with the wailing sound of La Llorona, the legendary woman who is looking for her lost children. As an inalienable aspect of Chicano folklore La Llorona permeates the life in the town of Guadalupe too. The story of the mermaid and the shepherd told by Cico resonates the familiar myth of the wailing woman who poses a threat to boys and men. Jane Rogers’s study on “The Function of the La Llorona Motif” demonstrates that it is an integral part of Antonio’s life as well. The legendary

woman “emerges in his experience with nature... La Llorona is the ambivalent presence of the river... La Llorona speaks in the owl’s cry and in the dove’s courou... but more significantly for Antonio, the La Llorona emerges in his relationship with his mother and the imagery of the women in the novel” (1998, 4).

### **The Escape from the Call of La Llorona**

Most apparent is her affinity with Antonio’s mother as her frequent calls of “Antonioooooo” remind him of the call of La Llorona in his dream. His mother sees him off to school with the same cry. In one of his dreams his mother and the Virgin of Guadalupe both assume the mournful aspect of La Llorona. (Rogers, 1998, 24-25) There is no doubt that Maria Luna is closer to the image of the Virgin but as she loses her sons she assumes the role of the woman grieving for her absent children. Maria Luna’s eldest son dies in war, the second goes to the city and Antonio is “lost” in the sense he gains an autonomous existence: For Antonio “his mother offers warmth, fragrance, security. But his own maturity demands that he deny it. To succumb would mean the death of his own manhood” (Rogers, 1998, 6). Antonio chooses the path of growth, the challenge of facing the facts of life. This is what Ultima prescribes for him too: “The sons must leave the sides of their mothers” (BMU, 56). It is the fate of mothers to weep after their lost children as motherhood is a term pregnant with the cry of La Llorona.

The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of the town where Antonio lives, is as pervasive as that of the wailing woman since she, too, is a vital part of Mexican heritage: “We all knew the story of how the Virgin had presented herself to the little Indian boy in Mexico and about the miracles she worked,” (BMU, 47) Antonio relates to stress the paramount role this figure plays in the life of the town of Guadalupe. Ultima partakes of her saintly aspects, she is a “flesh and blood incarnation of the Virgin... because of her own miracles of healing and deliverance” (Gish, 1996, 133). The events revolving around Tenorio Trementina and his daughters prove her to be a witch too:

Ultima is the androgynous reconciliation and synthesis of La Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe. She is dedicated to the forces of good, but not beyond suspicion a witch, albeit a good one... Ultima too, in an act associated with La Llorona’s murders, does not kill her own children like the wailing woman of legend; rather, she murders two of the Trememina sisters... In these ways, Anaya works out his new variations of an old motif... (Gish, 1996, 19).

Since Ultima functions as a surrogate mother Antonio has to free himself from her protective embrace too. It is his separation from the old curandera which marks the end of his childhood and heralds the beginning of a new stage in his life. Finally Antonio buries the dead owl, Ultima’s spirit, feeling a new energy surging in his soul, a power ignited

by the life sustaining message Ultima gives before her death: “[T]he tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart” (263). Having appropriated the wisdom of his mentor Ultima, the life experience of the elder members of his family and the people he confronts in his daily life, Antonio arrives at a life philosophy based on conciliation and compromise. He learns he does not have to be just Marez, or Luna, since he “can be both” just in the way he can “[t]ake the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp – and make something new” (BMU, 261). The person who utters these words is already the New World Man with a mestizo consciousness, the new inhabitant of the borderland who has the power to dissolve the tensions which baffle his mind.

### **Conclusion**

The new perspective Antonio gains at the end of the novel is the final outcome of the long train of experiences he overcomes on his way to maturity. Ultima, his tutor and spiritual leader, opens his eyes initially to his surroundings; when he becomes aware of the beauty of his land he learns to hunt for its projection in his heart too. The depth of the human heart – this is where myth resides too, according to Anaya. Thus the process of Antonio’s maturation inevitably involves the appropriation of Ultima’s mythical thought as a means of structuring the world and one’s own identity. Equipped with this new cognitive weapon the boy overcomes all the trials he faces on the road to manhood: the clashes in his family, the problems related to his religious identity, the confrontation with the variable faces of death, the conflicts among his peers, the vision of the golden carp, his numberless dream experiences...

Anaya’s excursion into the collective unconscious of his ancestors results in the revivification of familiar archetypes, legends and myths but the vital image of the golden carp demonstrates Anaya is “a creator rather than a collector” of myths, and as such he has the potential to “transform indigenous material into a rich synthesis of symbol and archetype” (Lamadrid, 1998, 151). Anaya’s interest does not reside in the myth itself but the world philosophy it articulates. “[M]y interest has been to look at the worldview of my community, and at the core of that worldview are essential values: how we relate to each other, to the family, to the earth... [A]ll world views, at the root, touch the mythology of mankind,” the writer states in an interview conducted by Paul Vassalo to stress this aspect of his fascination with myth (1998, 100). What Anaya aims at is to filter this worldview and make it part of his own reality. The world philosophy Anaya inculcates through Antonio’s story is the principle of unity in duality which operates the universe. It is especially valuable for the inhabitants of the borderland because it is their destiny to wed the conflicting principles on the opposing sides of the boundary. “If you leave them separated,” Anaya warns in an interview conducted by Johnson and Apodaca

“if you leave a polarity or dichotomy, then the world is going to destruction” (1998, 40).

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