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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



A symbol is a visible object or action that suggests additional meanings. Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in *Bless Me, Ultima*: the river, Ultima's owl, and the Golden Carp.

Ultima's Owl

In many cuentos I had heard the owl was one of the disguises a bruja took, and so it struck a chord of fear in the heart to hear them hooting at night. But not Ultima's owl. (p. 13)

Antonio dreams about Ultima's owl the first night of its arrival. The owl cries its warning before Lupito's death in Chapter *Dos*, it comforts Antonio on his first day of school in Chapter *Seis*, and it cries out to Antonio in Chapter *Diez*. In your students' reading last night, the owl blinded Tenorio in one eye (Chapter *Doce*). After the novel's violent climax, Antonio discovers the secret of the owl's power.

The River

This mysterious river often figures in Antonio's dreams. It also functions as the venue for a number of events in the story: Lupito falls in the river after his death, Florence drowns in the river, and Antonio sees the Golden Carp swimming in it. How does this element of nature symbolize Antonio's fears?

The Golden Carp

I could not believe its size. It was bigger than me! And bright orange! The sunlight glistened off his golden scales. (p. 113)

Anaya creates his own myth in the legend of the Golden Carp. Antonio believes the story but cannot reconcile it with his Catholicism, confessing, "The roots of everything I had ever believed in seemed shaken" (p. 81). After he sees the carp's beauty with his own eyes in Chapter *Once*, he wonders if a new religion can blend both the Golden Carp and Catholicism.



Homework

Read Chapter *Catorce* (pp. 143–176). Despite the differences among the three symbols discussed in this lesson, how does Anaya use them in crucial moments of the plot to probe Antonio's anxieties, doubts, and fears, and therefore develop his character?