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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel. Using references to support ideas, explore the ideas *Bless Me, Ultima* suggests about the following:

Innocence and Knowledge

Antonio wonders about the nature of innocence, and how knowledge affects it. He recognizes that knowledge is a form of power:

I wondered if the knowledge I sought would destroy me. But it couldn't,
it was God's knowledge—

Did we ask too much when we asked to share His knowledge? (p. 191)

Is it better to be innocent or to have knowledge, if comprehension of death, misery, revenge, and anger leads to pain? Is ignorance bliss, or is it misery?

Nature

Antonio is powerfully affected by the natural landscape. His emotions are linked to the sky and the weather, a poetic technique known as pathetic fallacy. What do certain symbols in nature (the river, the juniper tree, and the farm) suggest about our relation to the natural world? Does nature seem like a cruel, benevolent, or indifferent force? How does respect or irreverence for nature contribute to human feelings, and how does this emerge in the story?

Language and Identity

Why does Antonio believe that words are magic? What roles do curses, vows, confessions, and prayers play in the lives of these characters, and in our ability to cope with suffering? How does language provide comic relief, as in the Christmas play? What does the novel's use of Spanish help us to understand about the characters, and Antonio's identity among them?



Homework

Finish reading the novel, Chapters *Veintiuno* and *Veintidós* (pp. 236–262). Where does the end of the novel leave Antonio? What has he learned? How has he grown older or wiser through the course of these events?