

**Old Spells, Magic Herbs and Frightening Creatures:  
The *Curandera* in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*<sup>1</sup>**

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**1. The figure of the *curandera* and its social and folkloric relevance**

In the Southwest of the United States, and in Central and Southern Americas, a *curandera* is someone who practices traditional, alternative medicine by resorting to herborism, the knowledge of the curative power of certain plants. As Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, author of the classic biography *We Fed Them Cactus* (1954), explains, most Native American women and *Chicanas* from the regions of the *Llano* and *Ceja* would fit into this category:

The women had to be versed in the curative powers of plants and in midwifery, for there were no doctors within a radius of two hundred miles or more. The knowledge of plant medicine is an inheritance from the Moors and brought to New Mexico by the first Spanish colonizers. From childhood we are taught the names of herbs, weeds and plants that have curative potency (Baca, 1998: 59).

*Curanderismo* or the art of *curanderas* was, then, essential for the survival of the community, and each village included, among its members, at least one or two women specialized in healing. There are three main types of *curanderas*: the *médicas*, who used home-produced remedies made from curative plants; the *arbolarias*, who were in charge of collecting those specific herbs; and, finally, the *sabadoras*, who were chiropractors or bone-setters (Vigil, 1998: 62). However, strictly speaking, the term *curandera* designates a woman who practices medicine, not only by using herbs, but also by resorting to magic formulae and witchcraft. These magic women certainly have an ethnographic significance, and are also relevant to feminist studies and to medicine in general. The interest in these typical figures is recent: it was only in the fifties, with the advent of the *Chicano* movement, that meticulous attention was devoted to

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the supernatural in the Southwest. Until then, researchers focused mainly upon the Native American cultures of the Northern and Central states, undervaluing the folkloric richness of other regions.

Far from being seen as superstition, magic is perceived as a cultural element, which characterizes the sociological profile of a specific ethnic group. The materials or artefacts used to heal, the magic formulae or techniques, the combination between Catholicism and Native beliefs, and the overwhelming importance of the harmony connecting the individual and the surrounding nature are now exhaustively examined (Hufford, 1986: 306-307). These studies reveal that, in the Southwest, there are processes of perceiving and interpreting reality that do not coincide with those of the modern Western world. For example, the clear divisions we establish between physical and psychiatric illnesses derive from our analytical and binary tendencies, which do not observe the human body and the psyche as a unity. By contrast, according to *curanderismo*, all diseases result from a psychosomatic unbalance and, therefore, require a holistic treatment. Folklorist Angel Vigil notes:

The curandera treated the social, psychological and physical health of the sick and infirm. By combining the knowledge of the herbal, natural treatments with the attention given to the patient's psychological health, the curandera affected a physical and mental healing which contributed to both an individual's and a community's health. (Vigil, 1998: 62)

## **2. Ultima, the curandera**

In the novels of Mexican-American writer Rudolfo Anaya, there are several *curanderas* who possess the ability of healing both physical and psychiatric diseases: Ultima, a character from *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Ismelda, from *Tortuga* (1979), Lucinda Córdova, from *Albuquerque* (1992), and Lorenza Villa, a recurring presence in *Zia Summer* (1995), *Río Grande Fall* (1996), *Shaman Winter* (1999) and *Jemez Spring* (2005). According to traditional medicine, these illnesses are grouped into three main types, all of which are easily identifiable. The first is the *mal ojo* or evil eye: induced by a witch when she stares at her victim rancorously, it causes headaches, nausea and fever. The second one, and perhaps the most common, is the *susto* or fright, which results from a traumatic experience, and presents a broad range of symptoms, including insomnia, weight loss, depression and anxiety. Finally, there is the powerful *mal puesto* or bewitchment, which translates into a series of personal or family misfortunes, like the death of a beloved relative or a serious accident. This disease requires a therapy based on black magic, usually carried out by an experienced and fearless healer.

Of all the *curanderas* created by Anaya, Ultima is the one that most perfectly embodies the traditional healer as imagined in the Mexican-American legends and folklore. This old woman is simultaneously the spiritual guide of Antonio Márez, a little boy who lived in the area of Santa Rosa, in New Mexico, during the forties, and a *bruja*, a witch who performs exorcisms and miraculous cures in the region. As Robert Franklin Gish succinctly states, Ultima is at once “*curandera* and *bruja*; spirit and person; human and animal; mortal and immortal; revered and feared” (Gish, 1996: 130).

Involuntarily, Ultima, as a representative of the occult in a devout Catholic community, is also a destabilising element. A witch to some, a saint to others, she arouses both feelings of antipathy and cautious respect. This ambivalent reaction also occurs in the family that welcomes her: María Luna, Antonio’s mother, considers Ultima a useful person to the community; by contrast, Gábriel Márez, the boy’s father, has some doubts, as the son perceptively registers:

I knew why he expressed concern for me and my sisters. It was because Ultima was a *curandera*, a woman who know the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle worker who could heal the sick. And I had heard that Ultima could lift the curses laid by *brujas*, that she could exorcise the evil the witches planted in people to make them sick. And because a *curandera* had this power she was misunderstood and often suspected of practising witchcraft herself. (Anaya, 1994: 4)

As we know, Catholic religion labelled all individuals whose power did not derive from their faith in God, but from natural and spiritual elements, as witches. In this narrative, there are several examples of characters that mistrust Ultima. Deborah, the fourth daughter of María Luna, naively asks “Is it true she is a witch?”; when the old woman heads towards the village church, someone whispers under his breath: “Hechiera, bruja”; a few chapters later, Tenorio, one of the villains of the novel, suspects that Ultima used powers belonging to the devil himself (Anaya, 1994: 8, 33, 93). However, when the saints or Virgin Mary do not respond to the prayers of the believers, and this witch performs true miracles, everyone describes her as a woman without sin (Anaya, 1994: 104).

In the next section, I shall analyze this *curandera*, according to two aspects; first, the relationship between Ultima and nature, the soil, fauna and flora, and secondly, the techniques she uses to heal.

### **3. Healing techniques: herborism and *nagualismo***

A characteristic shared by all *curanderas* is the capability of communicating with nature.

In *Bless Me, Ultima*, La Grande acts, frequently, as an intermediary between the elements and humans. When the old woman holds hands with Antonio, the boy experiences what can be described as an epiphany not from above but from the land:

She took my hand, and the silent magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun baked llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun's home. My bare feet felt the throbbing earth and my body trembled with excitement. Time stood still, and it shared with me all that had been, and all that was to come (Anaya, 1994: 1).

In this excerpt, as well as in other well-known sections, the land appears personified, saturated with energy and color, revealing itself to the child. Between Ultima and nature there is a perfect mutualism: on one side, the soil uses La Grande to display its energy, on the other side, the woman resorts to several herbs to prepare the remedies necessary to heal: juniper, used in the Southwest to cure nausea and spider bites; pine needles for cough and chest infections, and to restore energy; oregano for sore throats and bronchitis; rosemary to increase memory and sedate; *yerba del manso* for nervous disorders, colic in babies, burns, sores and even rheumatism (Baeza, 1997: 53-58).

Ultima, the *curandera*, teaches the young Antonio about the curative power of all of these plants and instructs him on how to collect them:

For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug she made me speak to the plant and tell it why I pulled it from its home in the earth. 'You that grow well here in the arroyo by the dampness of the river, we lift you to make good medicine,' Ultima intoned softly and I found myself repeating after her. Then, I would dig out the plant, taking care not to let the steel of the shovel touch the tender roots. (Anaya, 1994: 39)

The art of herborism is completed with another magic power: *nagualismo*, the ability to temporarily incarnate the body of a specific animal (Bauder, 1985: 46). This ancient myth, part of the Aztec folklore, is mentioned in the legend of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina, who sent forty of his *brujos* to the underworld, in the shape of jaguars, eagles, birds and other animals, to investigate the intentions of the *conquistadores* (Anaya, 1996: 122). As the narrator explains, the witches took many forms, and sometimes travelled as coyotes or owls (Anaya, 1994: 87). La Grande can transform herself into an owl, an appropriate choice, since they are old, small, and enigmatic. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, both the forces of light and of evil resort to *nagualismo*: the villains become coyotes; and the old woman uses her attentive owl to spy on them (Anaya, 1994: 87).

Ultima's magic is similar to that of the Nahua, a people that lived in the southern regions of the United States and in the North of Mexico for six hundred years. The little that is known about their theology comes from some translations of codices by León Portillo and López Austin, or from James Taggart, an anthropologist who lived among them (Bauder, 1972: 87). The Nahua believed the world was an arena where good and evil have fought since the beginning of time, using white or black magic. The main danger resided in the bad spirits, who tempted human beings, possessed them and could even steal their souls by means of witchery. These supposedly resided in isolated places, usually by a river or in a forest, where they celebrated their rituals (Bauder, 1972: 87).

Inadvertently, Lucas Luna, the youngest of María's brothers and Antonio's uncle, watches one of those rituals (a black mass) performed by the Trementina sisters, the local sorceresses (Anaya, 1994: 87). With his presence, Lucas profaned the sacred place and, as a punishment, was bewitched. When it became clear that neither the doctor in Las Vegas nor the village priest could cure Lucas, Ultima is called to intervene.

It is relevant to analyze the healing process, based upon the tradition of the Nahua, and faithfully recreated by Anaya. First of all, Ultima announces an initial warning, as it was usual among the *curanderas*: "You must understand that when anybody, *bruja* or *curandera*, priest or sinner, tampers with the fate of a man, that sometimes a chain of events is set into motion over which no one will have ultimate control" (Anaya, 1994: 85).

Secondly, the *curandera* moves on to the diagnosis phase: Lucas was bewitched because he had watched a forbidden black ritual. According to that specific disease, Ultima administers an urgent treatment, following both techniques from Western tradition and *indigismo*: she prepares a herbal medicine and transfers the sickness to Antonio, as his body is stronger, loading him with Lucas's suffering. To reinforce the treatment, Ultima also makes dolls with clay, and sticks needles on them, to punish the witches responsible the illness: the Trementina sisters. Finally, the patient is healed: Lucas vomits a ball of hair, the cause of the sickness and an unquestionable sign that he had been bewitched. He recovers quickly to the joy of his family, and the news spread throughout the region, consolidating Ultima's prestige as a *curandera*.

To narrate this episode, Anaya resorts to several suspense techniques, creating a ghostly atmosphere, similar to the one we find in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories. First, the author incorporates in the plot elements that suggest fear and wickedness: the black mass, the witches, a whirlwind that unexpectedly interrupts the quietness of summer and covers the area with dust. Secondly, the narrator characterizes the villains in minute detail: Tenorio, the father of the Trementina sisters, is a sinister man, while his daughters are represented as powerful witches, capable of embodying ferocious animals. Finally, the narrator strategically delays the outcome

of the treatment, which lasts for three days, keeping the reader in suspense (Olmos, 1999: 33). These strategies generate a supernatural atmosphere (encompassing *nagualismo*, witchcraft, premonitory dreams, and the eternal fight between good and evil), and are intrinsic to the magic realism subgenre.

Throughout the novel, Ultima proves she has the capability of healing both physical and psychiatric diseases, drawing her power from nature and the spirits. In this sense, La Grande corresponds to the image of the shaman, as it is known in small-scale societies. In an interview with Anaya, about the figures of the Virgin, *la Llorona* and *la curandera*, all of which possess magic powers and the capability to guide men, I asked him if he thought that women were better prepared than men to enter the world of spirituality. Anaya replied:

The healers in my novels and stories, truly, are mostly women. Perhaps I was influenced by the women healers I saw as a child, and by the women healers I know today. Or by my mother and the simplest remedies she used when I was a child. Then the mythic enters the picture. Something about the mythic woman makes her the repository of healing, as Ultima. Men seem to chase the material goods of the world; the woman is still in touch with an ancient knowledge. She is a natural healer. (Anaya, 1999)

Besides being an admirable example of magic realist fiction, *Bless Me, Ultima* is also a novel that transmits and preserves specific socio-cultural values, such as solidarity, friendship, family and honour, as well as ethnographic aspects, including traditions, festivities and folkways. Therefore, this book has been described by a large number of critics and essayists as the quintessential novel of the Chicano literary tradition, and has inspired many young writers.

It is precisely because *Bless Me, Ultima* deals with the rich and colourful experience of the Mexican-American people, in the region of Pasturas, during the forties, that it appeals to readers belonging to other cultures. Like me, they are eager to discover, page after page, the myths and legends of this area, and are enthralled by Anaya's semi-biographical story. And who could be a better guide than an author who, as a boy, breathed the desert air and grew up with sorceresses such as Ultima? As the novelist states:

I see my role as a teacher. I write also to teach the young. Writing has a purpose. The young need not only to experience their culture, they need to read it in books. They need images in which they see their identities. This has always been an important ingredient of Chicano contemporary literature (Anaya, 1999).

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### Abstract

The *curandera*, “the woman who heals”, is a recurring figure in the novels of the most celebrated Mexican American writer, Rudolfo Anaya. Ultima, Ismelda, Lucinda Córdova, and Lorenza Villa are characters inspired by the traditional *curandera*, who resorts to herbs and old spells to cure patients, both physically and mentally, since diseases are approached from a holistic perspective. In this paper I will concentrate solely on Ultima, the most memorable *curandera* in Anaya's fiction. First, I briefly analyze the folkloric and social value of this figure in the Southwestern communities. Secondly, I exemplify how Ultima: a) Involuntarily causes a clash between witchcraft and Catholicism; b) Resorts to her deep knowledge of curative plants and to the art of *nagualismo* (the capability of transforming herself into an animal); c) Performs a healing ritual according to the tradition. In order to do so, I resort to: the novel *Bless me Ultima*; the work of Mexican American folklorists; the opinion of several specialists in the fiction of Anaya; an excerpt from an unpublished interview the author granted me.