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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The first chapter of *Bless Me, Ultima* sets up the friction between Antonio's mother's priorities in life and his father's priorities. We expect that the novel will require Antonio to choose between these two ways of life. The first chapter introduces Ultima to the family and her influence on Antonio's life.

Ultima's magic and her natural healing stand as an antagonist to Antonio's faith in the church and the sovereign power of priests. Narciso models a certain kind of heroism for Antonio, although he is not respected because of his drinking. When Tenorio asserts himself as Ultima's enemy, his vow of revenge establishes a new antagonist for Antonio, who fervently defends Ultima's magic.



Discussion Activities

What does Antonio learn from his brothers and the boys at school about how to become a man? Why might they be incomplete models for him?

Distribute Handout Two. Have the class discuss the use of Spanish in the novel as it reveals important information about certain characters, and the ability of Antonio's character to communicate with these different voices. Why is Antonio so intimidated by English at school? How does language shape identity in this book?



Writing Exercise

Early in the novel, Ultima tells Antonio: "The ways of men are strange, and hard to learn" (p. 25). Ask students to choose one of the characters from the novel and write a paragraph about the character that illustrates what Ultima might mean. How are the ways of men "strange," and why are they hard to learn?

Describe someone in your life who has influenced your beliefs. How do the ideas of this person work with, or conflict with, the influences of other people in your life? How do you reconcile any conflicts among these influences?



Homework

Read Chapter *Diez* (pp. 83–105). What do you think of Ultima's cure?