

THE WIDE ANGLE

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Seminar: Identities and Cultures

[Assignment: (from several options the writer chose to discuss the novel Bless Me Ultima) Isolate a question that you feel especially significant to the novel and frame a thesis--limited, precise, and controversial or "two-sided"--which expresses your belief about your chosen topic.]

(1) Sitting close to a television screen is an ineffective way of viewing a show. Granted, each horizontal line across the screen is a solid piece of light with definite changes of the color spectrum determining each line's individual pattern, but it does not make a picture. Unless the entire collection of these horizontal patterns is looked at as a whole from a distance, the perceived images could be misleading and senseless. Tony in Bless Me Ultima also discovered that viewing things as a whole was much more adequate than as separate pieces. Tony, though, was not trying to watch a picture on a screen. Instead, he was trying to find an adequate god or religion, something that would ultimately give his life peace and meaning. He found the individual gods and religions of others coherent in terms of prescribing ways of action and belief within their own boundaries but incoherent and inadequate in the world as a whole which reached beyond those limits. Tony needed a god that would hold fast in all areas of life. Ultima's subtle advice directed Tony to finding a fulfilling god and religion in the rubble of shattered truths.

(2) Tony believed at first that he had an adequate god and religion. God had been taught to him through the Roman Catholic Church. This was the religion in which his mother put her trust and found her worth. In turn, she brought up her son in the church's traditions. Tony followed the rules of the church. The Hail Mary, Sunday Mass, and religious doctrine all became natural habits and thinking patterns for Tony. Within Catholic walls, the answers, the beliefs, and the directions to human life were undisputed.

(3) But life did exist outside Catholic walls. The Catholic rules did not always make sense, answer questions, or provide comfort when applied to real life. Tony found. Tony had been taught Christ's death on the cross was to save people from their sins, that is, of course, if they were baptized, faithfully attended mass, had regular confession, were confirmed, and did not commit any sizable sins. The demands that this religion made and the exclusions it assumed were hardly comforting to Tony. Besides that, the figure of god himself was not comforting in Tony's opinion.

God was not always forgiving. He made laws to follow and if you broke them you were punished . . . God had power. He spoke and the thunder echoed through the skies. . . He created you. He could strike you dead. (42)

Tony, as all humans, needed a source of comfort in his life to allow him peace. He found the Virgin Mary figure, not the god figure, to be its source.

The Virgin always forgave . . . The Virgin was full of a quiet, peaceful love . . . "Hail Mary, full of grace-" . . . She was a woman. She could go to Him and ask Him to forgive you. Her voice was sweet and gentle and with the help of her Son they could persuade the powerful father to change His mind.(42) The religion he had learned from the Catholic church no longer provided the solid core to base his life around.

(4) Since Tony no longer looked for consolation in the god of the church, an alternative began to attract him. When Samuel told Tony the story of the carp, Tony took a genuine interest in what was being said. Though the story ignored all the things Tony had previously been taught, he could not resist wanting to know more about the great fish. The golden carp was a god that had compassion for his subjects; when the people were punished by being turned into fish, he too suffered and became a fish. The golden carp's physical appearance even provided a sense of comfort. His grand, golden body that glided through the clear water conjured up peaceful images to anyone who saw him. Tony considered making this religion his own.

(5) The more Tony considered it, however, the less the carp provided anything solid. Though the great golden carp promised to rule again, the domain would be in the water. The sin of the world would sink the land into the water. The life to look forward to was one of a carp! The only way to keep this from happening was for no one to sin against another. Those who know this secret had the insurmountable task of telling others.

I walked away from that haven which held the pond and the swimming waters of the golden carp feeling a great weight in my heart. I was saddened by what I had learned. I had seen beauty, but the beauty had burdened me with responsibility. (111)

The carp also failed to console Tony when he was faced with the death of his friend who did not know of the religion. The golden carp, the vulnerable, oversized gold fish in the river water, may have provided fleeting sensual comfort, but he lacked in providing any comfort for the future or for those who never had the opportunity to know of him.

(6) Tony's despair of finding an adequate god showed up in one of his dreams; ". . .is there no God in heaven to share my burden?" (233). Ultima sensed his confusion.

She felt an obligation to direct him since she buried his afterbirth. Her actions, upon initial inspection, appeared only to confuse Tony. She never simply told Tony what he should believe, nor did she state what she herself believed. On the one hand, she was attuned to the religion of the church; she attended regular mass and wore a scapular around her neck for safety. On the other hand, she was also aware of the golden carp religion; the scapular that hung around her neck contained not a picture of the Virgin or St. Joseph but a mixture of herbs. She never spoke words in favor or in disparagement of either type of god to Tony. Despite her own vagueness, she did carry out her responsibility to him. Her approach was subtle. She used just a few pieces of advice, but those particular words gave Tony the guidance he needed in order to find the religion he was looking for. She told him, "I cannot tell you what to believe . . . As you grow into manhood you must find your own truths. . ." (112). She encouraged him in his search, implying that there really was something to be found, that his search was not in vain. In Tony's dreams she gave direction to his truth search. Tony describes his dream:

. . . 'The waters are one, Antonio.' I looked into her bright, clear eyes and understood her truth. 'You have been seeing only parts,' she finished, 'and not looking beyond into the great cycle that binds us all.' Then there was peace in my dreams and I could rest. (113)

(7) Ultima's words reshaped Tony's way of drawing conclusions. With Ultima's enlightenment he could reflect on her earlier actions or on any previous experience and notice links that he had not seen before. He viewed the world he was presently in in a more optimistic light, "Taking life's experiences and building strength from them, not weakness" (p. 248). Ultima's advice applied to his future as well as his past and present. The god, the central core of Tony's life that would give his life comfort and meaning, would have to be flexible enough to integrate further clarifications that emerged through new experiences and circumstances. Through inspection of the seemingly different parts and pieces Tony had been exposed to, a truth, a religion, a "great circle that bound all" began to show up. The attention that provided him with comfort in his life and others, the calling that gave him purpose in life, and the prophecies that promised him something beyond life on earth all melded into the truth, the truth Ultima directed him towards.

(8) Obviously, Tony needed a god who would be a single, qualified source of comfort since the lack of it caused him to refuse religions. Even though the Virgin could comfort Tony, Tony needed the comfort and mercy to come from the same figure that law and justice came from. Otherwise, the separation of the two functions would create two gods, neither of which could satisfy Tony's

needs. The steady, serene, unassuming presence of the golden carp provided a sense of acceptance and peace. But the carp had never been human. The carp never experienced the hurt, the inadequacies, the confusion that humans encounter daily. How could a god understand and share pain if he never experienced it? Tony needed a loving father figure, someone who contained all the love needed yet thoughtfully set guidelines for living based on his own experiences.

(9) Tony also needed a truth that would prescribe a way to live on earth with other people. Tony knew that the church preached to love one another as god loved him, but Tony was confused by this particular god's selection of whom he chose to love. Again the rules of religion only allowed certain loving acts--communion, confession, and absolution, the promise of heaven--to be administered to a selected group of individuals, a group that did not include his friend, Florence. The carp's law--to sin against no one--was impossible to keep, especially if man was sinful by nature. Tony's father saw understanding other people as the way to live on earth: "Understanding comes with life. As a man grows he sees life and death, he is happy and sad, he works, plays, meets people--sometimes it takes a lifetime to acquire understanding, because in the end understanding simply means having sympathy for people" (237). Like searching for truth itself, the recommended behavior was ever emerging as a clearer image yet was continually expanding to encompass the diversities of people. The actions of a comforting father figure who loved all his unique children equally personified the way to live with other humans.

(10) Tony wanted to understand the reasoning of the gods. He wondered why innocent people get killed. He wanted to know why evil went unpunished and why it existed at all. He never received the answers. By his wonderings, though, he came across a question that caused his desire to subside. He asked, "Did we ask too much when we asked to share His knowledge?" (184) His desire to understand the mysteries of a god reminded him of Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge. He came to the resolution that not everything could be or was meant to be understood within the limits of human reason.

(11) With that kind of ironic understanding or trust, faith entered the picture. As a child who has little control of events places trust in his or her parent for protection, so must Tony place his faith in something beyond his control. In keeping with the triune god and Ultima's owl, the Holy Ghost or the owl itself serves as a power which enables a person to possess such a faith.

(12) Tony found that faith had a more specific role within the general trust that a god was ultimately in control. Faith also believed that some sort of existence beyond time on earth had to be promised. The god that

damned for not doing enough rosaries, for missing mass, or for not passing through the proper rites of baptism or confirmation certainly was not a god of good promise. A god whose everlasting promise involved a transformation of people into fish hardly inspired desire to pass on into the next dimension. However, the image of a god using his own perfect son as a sacrifice for the sins of others so the kingdom of heaven was open to anyone, did encourage belief in life after death. Ultima reinforced the idea of the life beyond when she responded to Tony's proclamation of the owl's death, "Not dead, but winging its way to a new place, a new time--just as I am ready to fly--" (247).

(13) The process Tony went through to find an adequate god was ironic. The seemingly sound, established gods of all crumbled to pieces while the seemingly diverse and unrelated pieces actually connected and overlapped to reveal the truth. The god that Tony came up with was drawn from all of life's involvements. In turn, this god held up under all the diversities of human experiences. The truth that satisfied his needs for comfort and self-value could be personified as a father. This all-knowing father loved all his children, despite their shortcomings in an imperfect world, so much that he promised them a better world and hoped that they would imitate his love. That image no longer sounds like a god. Rather, it sounds like God.