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Suffering Of Life Raised Theological Scepticism In “Bless Me Ultima” By Rudolfo A. Anaya

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to show that the novel of “*Bless Me, Ultima*” (1972) written by Rudolfo A. Anaya contains theological scepticism as the impact of life suffering that experienced by the children’s characters. Sufferings of life that happened to the children are: killing, illness, poverty, and injustice. The implication of scepticism is some conflicts. The method used in this research is Content Analysis and the technique of Hermeneutics. Content Analysis is used to explore the ideas expressed by the author in the forms of statements, questions, and dialogues of the characters or the narrator. This method is to uncover, to understand, and to grasp the message of literary works. The method of interpretation used in this research is the techniques of Hermeneutics (theory of interpretation). According to Ricoeur, hermeneutics is the best strategy to interpret the texts of philosophy and literature. The research design are the understanding and interpretation of the characters’ way of thinking. Coherence is to understand the meaning of the element structure, internal relations to integrate all the elements to get the deepest meaning. Analogy is the observation of meaning and values, and describe their results through analysis by using some concepts. The result of this research are sentences and phrases that shows suffering of life, scepticism towards faith, and the implication of being sceptical. The conclusion of the research: Harsh treatment faced by Florence as a result of his blasphemous character. Although Anaya clearly illustrates the views of lives, thoughts, feelings, and hopes of this children's character, but he makes Florence a tragic figure. He was drowning in the lake and died.

Keywords: suffering , scepticism , theology , hermeneutics , philosophy .

1. Introduction

Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya was born on October 30, 1937 in Pastura, New Mexico. *Bless Me, Ultima* is largely autobiographical, as Anaya drew on the religious and political issue that shaped his experience as a Hispanic American living in the Southwest during World War (1939-1945). His father was a vaquero (a sheep and cattle rancher) and his mother was a devout Catholic came from a farming family (<http://www.noveexplorer.com/category/bless-me-ultima/> pp. 1). Using his childhood as the subject matter for a novel, Anaya put together a world filled with ideas and activity. *Bless Me, Ultima*, then, is a work that examines the various forces that shape the life of Antonio, a young Mexican-American boy who is a main character in the novel (http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/bless-me-ultima/rudolfo pp. 1).

Bless me, Ultima is wonderful story based on the “Chicano” or Northern New Mexico native people culture, religion, and customs that tells us about a young Mexican boy, Antonio Marez, growing up in New Mexico during the mid 1940s. It begins when he is six years old, and Ultima, a curandera or healing women, comes to live with his family because she is getting too old to live by herself. This novel shows us how Tony faces a lot of difficulties and has to deal with curses, healings, dead people and mean friends. (<http://www.amazon.com/Bless-Me-Ultima-Rudolfo-Anaya/dp/04466> pp. 3).

Tony’s parents are opposites, his father being a Marez, people of Ilano (the desert land in New Mexico), and his mother being a Luna, farmers and people of the moon and the earth. His father wants Tony to grow up free to roam the land and become a vaquero, as he once was. His mother wants Tony to be a priest, a man of learning. Tony is torn between them regarding his future. The novel contains a rich panorama of visual imagery as it describes the New Mexico landscape of the 1940s, and it also shows realistic concepts about life and living of people. One important view of the novel is the power struggles that is a result of acculturation (Black, 2000: 146).

Throughout the story, Tony also faces confusion over religion and spirituality. Tony is confused over Catholicism. Though he does believe in God, he wants understanding from Him, answers to his questions. From a very young age, Tony witnesses death, deaths of Lupito, and death of a family friend, Narciso. Tony realizes the power of good over evil and understands that truth is more powerful than that which is prescribed by custom. Learning the importance of tolerance marks Tony’s growth, especially as he begins to realize that some religions may be better suited to some people than to others, as Florence is seemingly better suited to the faith of the golden carp than to Catholicism (<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/ultima/themes.html> pp. 2).

Theological scepticism faced by the characters in this novel is also shown by several other characters; they are friends of any with a variety of reasons, trends, and implications. Religious teachings which Tony knows so far not aligned with the realities of life which he witnesses. This condition makes him become sceptical in his spiritual beliefs, similarly faced by his friends. Skepticism in the theological issues covered in the discussion of the philosophy of religion.

Philosophy of religion as a distinct discipline within western philosophy traces its pedigree back to the philosophical critique of religious ideas which was a hallmark of the European Enlightenment, and which was exemplified by philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and David Hume. Philosophy of religion requires such an external standpoint from which the philosopher can critique and judge the beliefs located within specific religious traditions (Harrison, 2010: 48). Scepticism in religion has been a discussion of philosophers throughout the ages; this doctrine is often referred to, in this case, is Pyrrhonism. Philosophical scepticism is opposed to philosophical dogmatism, which maintains that a certain set of positive statements are authoritative, absolutely certain, and true. When applied to moral rules, this view is known as moral relativism, a type of philosophical scepticism that denies there are any absolute moral values. Moral relativism is the view that the morality of an act depends on what one believes about the morality of the act (<http://skepdic.com/skepticism.htm#5> pp. 1).

Most ancient sceptics do not seem to have believed that simply because one cannot be absolutely certain about anything, one should therefore suspend judgment on all things. Religion ought to be based on certainty. Its aim, its effects, its usages collapse as soon as this firm conviction of its truth is erased from the human mind (file:///D:/BLESS ME ULTIMA/ANAYA/SCEPTICISM/Hume on Religion - pp. 2). Theological scepticism is based on belief about the nature of supernatural claims and the nature of the human mind. A sceptic may be an atheist simply because he or she perceives little, if any, evidence for the belief in a god. Montaigne refers to varied moral authorities, one of them being custom and the other reason. Through philosophy, he seeks full accordance with the diversity of life (file:///D:/BLESS ME ULTIMA/ANAYA/SCEPTICISM/Hume on Religion - pp. 4).

Scepticism, according to Dr. Lorens Bagus (1996), is a philosophical method that is used by those who suspend judgment about something because of doubts or because they are waiting for better evidence. Sceptic means thoughtful, reflective, curious, listen, and examine carefully. A sceptic is a person whose attitude is critical, thus usually provocative; not easily accepts the statement without any convincing evidence. Pascal's scepticism stated the only way out from a legitimate sense of uncertainty is by degrading someone and then turning to the humility of faith (1019). Sceptics do not deny the reality of sense perception. One particular type of metaphysical scepticism is noteworthy: theological scepticism. A theological sceptic raises doubts regarding the possibility of knowledge about any gods. A

theological sceptic may be an atheist, a theist, or an agnostic. The theological sceptic maintains that we cannot know for certain whether any god exist. Such a view does not entail the notion that we should be atheists (<http://skepdic.com/skepticism.htm#5> pp. 3).

Philosophical scepticism is an overall approach that requires all information to be well supported by evidence. Sceptics may even doubt the reliability of their own senses. Religious scepticism, on the other hand, is “doubt concerning basic religious principles (such as immortality, providence, and revelation).” Scepticism (consideration or doubt), according to Lorens Bagus (Lorens Bagus, 1996: 1017), is a philosophical method that is used by those who suspend judgment about something because of doubts and/or because they are waiting for better evidence. Sceptic means thoughtful, reflective, curious, listen, and examine carefully. A sceptist is a person whose attitude is critical, thus usually destructive; not easily accepts the statement without any convincing evidence (Lorens Bagus, 1996: 1017). Modern religious scepticism typically places more emphasis on scientific and historical method or evidence. Religious scepticism is not the same as atheism or agnosticism, though these often do involve sceptical attitudes toward religious and philosophical theology.

2. Materials and Methods

The materials used in this research are primary and secondary resources. Primary resource is the novel entitled *Bless Me, Ultima* written by Rudolfo A. Anaya. Secondary resource is the reference that consists of some relevant book, journals, and source of website. Primary resource in the form of sentences and phrases quoted from the novel and narrated by child characters in the form of first person omniscient (“I” style) by Antonio (Tony) (Pickering 1981).

The method used in this research is content analysis and technique of hermeneutics. *Content analysis* is used to explore the ideas expressed by the author in the forms of statements, questions, and dialogues of the characters. The method of interpretation used in this research is the techniques of *Hermeneutics* (theory of interpretation).

Materials

Materials taken from the novel in the form of speech, thoughts, views, questions, etc. are narrated by especially Tony and some other child characters. Those materials contain the

reflection of the characters' sufferings of life, their sceptical attitudes towards faith, and the implication of being sceptical.

Methods

The method used in this research are the content analysis and the technique of hermeneutics. The method of content analysis is to uncover, understand, and grasp the message of literary works. A researcher is doing this by building a concept associated with the literature. Aspects that are outside the literary aesthetics, explored, internalized, and discussed in detail. Elements were highlighted in the content analysis include, among others, the problem of moral ethics, things didactic, psychological problems, and philosophical values. The procedures are relating to procurement data and determine the unit of analysis. Conclusion and analysis process include the understanding of the figurative language of a literary work. The paradigm of this study is a qualitative approach (Creswell,1994:21). The use of a qualitative study with the conceptual realm, to get the message that a comprehensive literature include: the validity of semantics, understanding the interpretative meaning inherent in context; while reliability is used for adjustment between the results of the review of the research literature that has been formulated (Endraswara,2008:162). The technique of hermeneutics is the process of interpretation. Language is a medium without borders, which brings something in it - not only understood culture through language, but also everything that is contained in the field of understanding (Sumaryono,1993:28).

According to Prof. Dr. Abdul Hadi W.M., hermeneutical interpretation is a theory in understanding the meaning of the text, especially in literature. Modern Hermeneutics, as presented by Paul Ricoeur, stating that the language is a container of meanings, when someone reads a text, the intention to understand its contents is through interpretation. A researcher is able to reach the deepest meaning because a researcher has a complete knowledge of the culture, religion and history, not just knowledge of language, literature, and aesthetics.

According to Ricoeur, hermeneutics is the best strategy to interpret the texts of philosophy and literature. The study design was: the interpretation of deep understanding the characters' way of thinking. Coherence is to understand the meaning of the element structure, internal relations to integrate all the elements to get the deepest meaning, analogy is the observation of meaning and values, and describe their results through analysis by

using some theories, in this context. First, the text read very carefully by interpreting figurative language. Secondly, the text is interpreted to understand figurative language that contains the idea of the author in the form of the character of the figures highlighted. Lastly, understand the text in the form of figurative language to show the main idea and comprehensively to convey the author.

The procedure of the research is to explore the content of the novel in order to explore of the philosophical values of the literature (Endraswara, 2008: 163). Procedures related to the procurement of data, first, I read all the contents of the novel with caution as much as three times that I really understand the content of the deepest meaning intended by the author. Second, is to determine the unit of analysis, including: sampling, and data recording. I am focusing on the problems that I want to study, that is the sufferings of life that experienced by the child characters and their sceptical attitude towards faith. Third, I choose and sort out which figures including which type of skepticism. Finally, I specify a particular characters included in a particular type of skepticism based on the thoughts, ideas, and their behavior. To analyze the philosophical thoughts and views of the figures in the novel, I use the method of hermeneutics, which is called the hermeneutic circle (Prof. Dr. Abdul Hadi, 2014).

The general procedures in hermeneutics are: the text must be read with earnestness and using sympathetic imagination. A researcher who is using hermeneutical method must determine the signs of the symbolic with the aim of uncover the hidden inner meaning. The stages of hermeneutic circle areas follows. First, I read the text of the novel from beginning to the end, and to be clear I have read many times. Second, I have assumed, that the characters were experiencing sufferings of life that made them sceptical towards faith. According to the method of hermeneutics, literary researchers who use this method must have knowledge beyond the science of literature so that they have extensive knowledge to interpret literary works. Third, I let my horizon structure of understanding to be styled by the text and then projected into a new understanding, that sufferings of life raise theological scepticism. In accordance with the related theory, doubts about faith belong to theological scepticism.

3. Results

The results of this study are in the form of quotes containing the reflections of life sufferings and sceptical attitude towards faith.

3.1 Sufferings of Life

- 3.1.1 He had killed the sheriff and so he had died with a mortal sin on his soul. He would go to hell. Or would God forgive him and grant him Purgatory, the lonely, hopeless resting place of those who were neither saved nor damned (Anaya, 1972: 26).
- 3.1.2 Of course, the dreams that I had during my illness continued to preoccupy me. I could not understand why Narciso, who did good in trying to help Ultima, had lost his life; and why Tenorio, who was evil and had taken a life, was free and unpunished. It didn't seem fair. I thought a great deal about God and why he let such things happen. ... (Anaya, 1972: 130).
- 3.1.3 ... "I (Florence) say God has sinned against me because he took my father and mother from me when I most needed them, and he made my sisters whores – He had punished all of us without just cause, Tony," his look pierced me, "He took Narciso! And why? What harm did Narciso ever do –" (Anaya, 1972: 199).
- 3.1.4 Perhaps, I thought, God had not seen the murder take place, and that is why He had not punished Tenorio. Perhaps God was too busy in heaven to worry or care about us (Anaya, 1972: 130).
- 3.1.5 "I don't know," he kicked a rock. "My mother died when I was three, my old man drank himself to death, and," he paused and looked towards the church which already loomed ahead of us. His inquiring, angelic face smiled. "And my sisters are whores, working at Rosie's place –" (Anaya, 1972: 188).
- 3.1.6 "So I asked myself," he continued, "how can God let this happen to a kid. I never asked to be born. But he gives me birth, a soul, and puts me here to punish me. Why? What did I ever do to Him to deserve this, huh?" (Anaya, 1972: 188).
- 3.1.7 ... I wondered if Andrew had known one of Florence's sisters when he went to Rosie's. That the pity I had for him made me feel close to Florence (Anaya, 1972: 188).
- 3.1.8 " – last year Maxie got polio, Florence was going on, "and my cousin got dragged by that damned horse and got his skull busted. They found him two weeks later, along the river, half eaten away by the crows and buzzards. And his mom went crazy. Is that right?" (Anaya, 1972: 199).

3.1.9 I went to church with my mother and Ultima. ... And when the dying Christ cried, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” the piercing words seemed to drive through to my heart and make me feel alone and lost in a dying universe (Anaya, 1972: 197).

3.2 Sceptical Attitudes

3.2.1 ”Did God Listen? Would he hear? Had he seen my father on the bridge? (Anaya, 1972:21).

3.2.2. But God didn’t forgive anyone. Perhaps, like the dream said, the waters of the river had washed his soul away, and perhaps as the water seeped into the earth Lupito’s soul would water the orchards of my uncles, and the bright red apples would ... (Anaya, 1972: 26).

3.2.3 Perhaps, I thought, God had not seen the murder take place, and that is why He had not punished Tenorio. Perhaps God was too busy in heaven to worry or care about us (Anaya, 1972: 130).

3.2.4 I went alone to church and kneeled and prayed very hard. I asked God to answer my questions, but the only sound was always the whistling of the wind filling empty space (Anaya, 1972: 130).

3.2.5 “Maybe it’s like the priest said,” I finally stammered, “maybe God puts obstacles in front of **us** so that **we** will have to overcome them. And if **we** overcome all the hard and bad things, then **we** will be good Catholics, and earn the right to be with Him in heaven –“ (Anaya, 1972: 188).

3.2.6 Perhaps I didn’t either, but my mind was seeking answer to Florence’s questions. “Maybe God comes in cycles, like the weather,” I answered. “Maybe there are times when God is with us, and times when he is not. Maybe it is like that now. God is hidden. He will be gone for many years, maybe centuries –“talked rapidly, excited about the possibilities my mind seemed to be reaching (Anaya, 1972: 215).

3.2.7 So again the power of the priest has failed, I thought. Why can’t the power of God work against the evils that beset the family of Tellez? Why is it allowed to continue?(Anaya, 1972: 215).

3.2.8 Florence shook his head. “I thought about that,” he said, “but the way I figured it, if God is really as smart as the priest says, then he wouldn’t have

needed any of that testing us to see if we're good Catholics. Look, how do you test a three-year-old kid who doesn't know anything (Anaya, 1972: 188).

- 3.2.9 God is supposed to know everything, all right, then why didn't he make us so that we would always be kind to each other? He could of made it so that it was always summer, and there's always apples in the trees, and the water at the Blue Lake is always clean and warm for swimming – instead He made it so that some of us get polio when we go swimming and we're crippled for life! Is that right?" (Anaya, 1972: 188).

3.3 Results of Scepticism

- 3.3.1 "No they don't," Florence defended the Protestants, "Red's a Protestant, do you think he'll go to hell?" "You will go to hell too, Florence!" Horse shouted, "you don't believe in God!" (Anaya, 1972: 185).
- 3.3.2 "Then that would be hell," he nodded. "I think if there is a hell it's just a place where you're left all alone, with nobody around you. Man, when you're alone you don't have to burn, just being by yourself for all of time would be the worst punishment the Old Man could give you –" (Anaya, 1972: 185).
- 3.3.3 "We shouldn't listen to him," Agnes had the courage to interrupt Florence, "we'll have to confess what we heard and the priest will be mad." (Anaya, 1972: 199).
- 3.3.4 "Give him a penance! Make him ask for forgiveness for those terrible things he said about God! Agnes insisted. They were gathering behind me now, I could feel their presence and their hot, bitter breath. They wanted me to be their leader; they wanted me to punish Florence (Anaya, 1972: 204).
- 3.3.5 "Make him penance hard," Rita leered. "Make him kneel and we'll all beat him," Ernie suggested. "Yeah, beat him!" Bones said wildly. "Stone him!" "Beat him!" "Kill him!" (Anaya, 1972: 204).
- 3.3.6 They circled around me and advanced on Florence, their eyes flashing with the thought of the punishment they would impose on the non-believer. It was then that the fear left me, and I knew what I had to do. I spun around and held out my hands to stop them (Anaya, 1972: 204).
- 3.3.7 "No," I shouted, "there will be no punishment, there will be no penance! His sins are forgiven!" I turned and made the sign of the cross. "Go in peace, my son," I said to Florence. "No," they shouted, "don't let him go free!" "Make

him do penance! That's the law!" "Punish him for not believing in God!" (Anaya, 1972: 204).

3.3.8 "No! No!" I shouted, but the raining blows continued. The blows of the knuckles coming down again and again on my breastbone were unbearable, but Horse knew no pity, and there was no pity on the faces of the others (Anaya, 1972: 204).

3.3.9 "God!" I cried, "God!" But the jarring blows continued to fall. I jerked my head side to side and tried to kick or bite, but I could not get loose. Finally I bit my lips so I wouldn't cry, but my eyes filled with tears anyway. They were laughing and pointing down at the red welt that raised on my chest where the Horse was pounding (Anaya, 1972: 205).

3.3.10 "Hurry! Hurry! " Abel cried... . "No, something happened – "What?" I asked. "Florence is down there!" Bones cried. "Florence hasn't come up! He hasn't come up! Abel sobbed and tugged at my arm. "He drowned, he drowned," Bones whimpered. We looked and saw the body come up through the water, ... The long blonde hair swirled softly, like golden seawood ... (Anaya, 1972: 228-229).

3.3.11 When Florence was buried I did not go to the funeral. The bells of the church kept me ringing and calling, but I did not go. The church had not given him communion with God and so he was doomed to his dream-wanderings, like Narciso and Lupito. I felt that there was nothing the church or I could give him now (Anaya, 1972: 234).

4. Discussion

The suffering of life experienced and witnessed by these children's figures included: killing, illness, poverty, and injustice. The murder of a sheriff brought sadness to Tony and raised the question of what punishment the killer deserved (3.1.1). Sorrow wrestled with Tony's feelings when Narciso was killed. Why did good people have to be killed? (3.1.2). Sorrow also came from injustice; good people were killed, otherwise bad people liked Tenorio could escape punishment (3.1.2) and (3.1.4). The pain of life was also felt by Florence because both of his parents died when he still needed them; so that his sisters must become entertainers at Rosie's place (3.1.3) and (3.1.5). Sorrow surrounded Florence's feelings because he did not understand what mistakes he was doing then had to live like this. (3.1.6).

Tony felt very sad about the life of Florence that full of suffering, especially when he found out that his brother, Andrew often visited Rosie's place (3.1.7). Florence told Tony the sadness experienced by his friend, Maxie who was exposed to Polio disease so that his mother was in shock (3.1.8). Sorrow continued to overwhelm the feelings of those characters. Even when Tony visited the church a sad feeling appeared to witness the suffering of Jesus (3.1.9).

Sceptical attitude arose because the children characters did not understand why suffering often afflicted the innocent; while the guilty person could be free from punishment. Children became skeptical because they were puzzled as to why painful events continued to occur as if there was no help from the all-powerful (3.2.1), (3.2.2), and (3.2.3). Tony even went to church alone to beg for the improvement of this sad condition. But he thought his prayers were not sounding. He amused himself perhaps omnipotent being busy (3.2.4); or the omnipotent is testing humans to make people become more patient and pious (3.2.5) and (3.2.6). Tony grew doubtful when he found out that a priest was incapable of healing a patient. Instead the patient was cured by the help of a doctor (3.2.7). Florence's attitude was more serious than Tony's. He wondered why the Almighty should test man in this way. Why did the omnipotent not spread happiness to humans (3.2.8) and (3.2.9).

The result of skepticism was presented by Florence. He became a contrary attitude with his friends. He was considered a sinner and must be punished even he must be killed (3.3.1), (3.3.2), (3.3.3), (3.3.4), and (3.3.5). Even Tony was affected by the anger of his friends. He was attacked for defending Florence, who doubted the existence of omnipotent (3.3.6), (3.3.7), (3.3.8), and (3.3.9). The atmosphere was calm for a moment. Suddenly the children were startled by the news that Florence was drowning in the lake and died (3.3.10) and (3.3.11).

5. Conclusion

Anaya displays children's characters that may be basically as a representation of adult thoughts in real life. If we may be honest, we sometimes have questions as the children think. Since we do not want to be labeled as unbelievers we only keep such doubts in our minds. Perhaps Anaya also did not want to be branded as unbeliever and sided with the almighty blasphemer, the character of Florence was being made as a tragic figure. Maybe Anaya also wants to say that coercive conduct might happen to anybody for the sake of

defending religion. As readers who appreciate this story, we may feel very empathetic to Florence. His life is apprehensive and he tries to express his feelings on the injustices and sufferings of life to his best friend, Tony; but unfortunately he experiences tragedy. He was drowning in the lake and died.

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