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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

The novel embraces myths from New Mexican cultures. *Bless Me, Ultima* presents myths, magic, and miracles on many levels, drawn from Spanish and Catholic traditions, as well as from native peoples who lived in New Mexico long before the conquistadors and their priests arrived from Europe. The survival of these myths from various traditions testifies to New Mexico's multicultural heritage, borne out of long struggles among disparate peoples who fought for centuries over land, religion, and sovereignty.

At the end of World War II, America modernized rapidly and the *vaquero* culture began to disappear. Mass production drew rural people away from farming to jobs in the cities. The G.I. Bill offered promise of social and geographic mobility by providing college education and housing to returning soldiers. Yet post-war America was also full of threats. The Cold War intensified between the United States and the Soviet Union, as a nuclear arms race escalated international tensions. New Mexico served as a testing and development site for these weapons, shrouded in mystery and secrecy. Like much of the rest of America, New Mexicans struggled to retain cultural traditions while meeting the demands of post-World War II society.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the CD—What is a *curandera*, and what is her role in the pueblo communities of New Mexico? How does this approach to healing compare with your beliefs about illness and healing?

Distribute Handout One and Handout Three. Ask the students to discuss the history of New Mexico as one of both cultural conflict and cultural exchange. Where do the religious beliefs of Catholic explorers and Native Americans overlap? Where do they diverge?

Writing Exercise

Have students identify important myths in their own cultures, either local or national. Invite them to write an essay that recounts a myth in their own words, and then discuss what religious or cultural values the myth addresses. Why is this story useful or meaningful in their culture?

Homework

Read Chapters *Tres*, *Cuatro*, and *Cinco*. Why does Antonio's uncle say that there is hope for the young protagonist?