



The Bridge of San Luis Rey

By Thornton Wilder
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Plot Summary

Set in colonial Peru in the early 18th century, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* interweaves the stories of five people who die when an ancient rope bridge breaks and sends them plunging into a gulf. The book opens with an account of how a Franciscan monk named Brother Juniper witnessed the accident and spent his subsequent years amassing evidence to explain why God singled out these five for premature death. Wilder then narrates their life stories leading up to the moment they crossed the bridge. The Marquesa de Montemayor is a rich, ugly, elderly aristocratic woman who lives only for the well-being of her child, a haughty beauty named Clara who has recently married and moved to Spain. The Marquesa devotes herself to writing long, beautifully meditated letters to Clara and performing elaborate superstitious rituals on her behalf. She finally finds peace from her unrequited maternal love two days before she and her servant girl Pepita cross the bridge. Esteban is an identical twin orphan who loves his brother Manuel with an all-consuming, single-minded, wordless ferocity and is deeply wounded when Manuel falls in love with the beautiful, vain actress Camila Perichole, and then is devastated when Manuel dies soon after. On the brink of suicide, Esteban agrees to embark on a long voyage with

a sea captain he respects, but on the way to Lima he happens to cross the bridge at the precise wrong moment.

The final narrative tells of the adventures of Uncle Pio, a wise and wily old man who has dedicated the better part of his life to guiding the stupendous acting career of Camila Perichole. Uncle Pio looks on with amusement and dismay as Perichole becomes the toast of Lima, enters into a profitable love affair with the Viceroy of Peru, and finally renounces her stage career for the life of a great lady. When Camila contracts small pox and loses her looks, she shuts herself away in the country with her sickly young son Don Jaime. Pio convinces her to let him take Don Jaime to Lima so that he can educate the boy as a gentleman. Pio and Don Jaime die with the others on the doomed bridge. In the last chapter the novel returns to Brother Juniper, who finally completes his vast tome about the five victims of the bridge collapse: for his efforts he is condemned as a heretic and burned, along with his book, on Lima's central square.

Topics for Discussion

1. Wilder is often labeled an optimist, and some feel that this quality makes his work seem shallow and a touch sentimental. As one critic put it, "People talk of outgrowing Wilder." Do you consider Wilder essentially an optimist or a pessimist? In framing your discussion, consider the accidental deaths in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.
2. Several critics have pointed out that the characters in Wilder's plays are types -- the mother, the young girl, the embodiment of evil -- rather than realistic human figures. What about the characters in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* -- the Marquesa, the Perichole, Manuel and Esteban, Uncle Pio: are they types too?
3. For his efforts to seek meaning in the accident, Brother Juniper is burned as a heretic. Discuss the role of religion in the book and Wilder's attitude toward religion. Consider not only Brother Juniper's fate but also the thoughts and deeds of the Abbess Madre Maria del Pilar and the apparent religious conversion of Camila Perichole.
4. In a sense, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* can be read as a novel about meaning -- how we assign and perceive meaning, how accidents and coincidences take on meaning in our daily lives. What conclusions does Wilder want us to draw about the human endeavor to find meaning in the world?
5. Wilder once declared "I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods." Discuss *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in the light of this remark. What particular "forgotten goods" has he rediscovered?
6. The critic Edmund Wilson wrote that "Wilder occupies a unique position, between the Great Books and Parisian sophistication one way, and the entertainment industry the other way, and in our culture this region, though central, is a dark and almost uninhabited no man's land." Do you agree? Which aspects of his works do you find most sophisticated? Which most purely entertaining? As the entertainment industry comes to dominate our culture more and more, how has Wilder's position shifted? Does he seem more marginal today -- or more relevant and accessible and pleasurable?

About the Author: Thornton Wilder was born in 1897. His plays include *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and *The Matchmaker*, and his novels include *The Eighth Day* and *Theophilus North*. He was awarded the first of three Pulitzer Prizes for *The Bridges of San Luis Rey*. He died in 1975.