

The Bridge of San Luis Rey Study Guide

The Bridge of San Luis Rey by Thornton Wilder

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Plot Summary

The Bridge of San Luis Rey, by Thornton Wilder, was published in 1927 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1928. It has been included in the American Modern Library's list of the best 20th century novels and in TIME magazine's list of 100 Best English-Language Novels from 1923 to 2005. It is postulated Wilder's work was a forerunner of the genre in which a disaster draws together the lives of otherwise unrelated persons. The story takes place in the 18th century, where a Franciscan priest, Brother Juniper, witnessed the fall of a bridge over a mountain pass in Peru and the consequent death of five people who were on this bridge when it fell. He wished to determine scientifically why those particular individuals were chosen for such a fate, and he devoted the following six years to the compilation of a book of his studies of their lives. His pursuit of this question, for which he could find no answer, led to his own execution. The strength of the book lies not only in the fundamental issues posed, but also in the beauty of Thornton Wilder's expressive writing.

Wilder is reported to have based his plot on a play by Prosper Mérimée involving a courtesan in South America. He is also thought to have instilled into it discussions with his parents who held fundamentalist Protestant views on the nature of God. Rather than put forward his own views, he poses questions. The book opens with a blunt statement describing a fictitious incident that occurred in 1714 in the mountainous region of Peru when a bridge made of primitive materials collapsed, causing the death of five travelers. Having previously been considered totally reliable, the failure of this bridge of San Luis Rey severely shocked the people of the capital city, Lima. The author then goes back in time to relate the personal histories of these victims and what later became of their surviving relatives and associates.

The accident was witnessed by a Franciscan priest, Brother Juniper, who needed real-life material to support his hypothesis that theology could be a hard science and the will of God could be explained statistically. The incident provided for him both experimental subjects who died, and "controls" who did not. He determined to investigate their lives and their value to society. An enormous book of information was put together, which described in detail the history of the lives of the five casualties and their relationship with those who were close to them. The five named people who died in the bridge collapse were Doña María, an extremely wealthy woman; Pepita, her servant; Uncle Pio, the spurned manager of an actress; Jaime, the actress's only son; and Esteban, who was returning from Cuzco to work in Lima.

Persons important in this story who did not die were the actress, Micaela Villegas, and María del Pilar, Abbess of a convent and orphanage. Esteban, an orphan, was a loved protégé of the Abbess, as was Pepita, also an orphan, who was given to the care of Doña María. Much of the plot is related through the extensive letters Doña María had written to her unloving daughter Clara; these letters subsequently found their way into the literature of Spain.



Over the years following the accident, Brother Juniper acquired a massive amount of information on his deceased subjects and the surviving “controls” but could not find support for his anticipated conclusion that worthy persons fared better than the unworthy. An explanation of the deaths in terms of personal value was not found; however, the love between the various people in the story, the refusal of love, and the loss of a loved one are revealed in his search. The employer of Brother Juniper, the church, accused him of heresy, burned him at the stake, and burned his heretical book, though a copy was found in the ancient University of San Marcos in Lima.

In the years that followed the collapse of the Bridge of San Luis Rey, the survivors regretted their hardness of heart. The actress went to work for the Abbess in her convent, Clara the unloving daughter of the Marquesa went to the Abbess for confession, and the Abbess herself realized the impropriety of her pride in the expectations she had of achievements in her work.

The final paragraph of the book expresses the thoughts of the Abbess, who accepted that all mortals have a life-span; it employs the bridge of San Luis Rey as a symbol of the survival of love that surpasses death.



Part 1

Summary

Although the bulk of the story takes place in Lima, the coastal and capital city of Peru, the opening scene is in the high Andes, on the route to Cuzco, the former capital of the ancient civilization of the Incas. A suspension footbridge, constructed of organic materials called osier, inexplicably gave way. The bodies of those who fell into the gorge below were so severely damaged that identification was difficult before the interment service in the Cathedral of Lima.

That it would collapse, a bridge in which the whole population including the Viceroy and the Archbishop had total confidence, was a severe shock to everyone. A Franciscan priest, Brother Juniper, was close to the bridge and witnessed to the accident. This was to him a serendipitous occasion, for he had long worked to bring the study of theology into the realm of the exact sciences, a realm where proof of theory requires “control” studies to compare subjects affected by the issue under examination with subjects who are not involved. He viewed this collapse of the bridge as an Act of God, the issues of human error and probability were thereby eliminated, and he was provided with the equivalent of a scientist’s laboratory.

Having made this decision, which followed on his other efforts to put numbers to events such as the success—or otherwise—of praying for rain, Brother Juniper spent six years inquiring into the lives of the victims of the bridge collapse. He took his questions from door to door and filled scores of notebooks with the answers he assembled in his effort to measure the worthiness of his subjects and test the postulate that there was divine purpose behind the deaths.

From his studies, Brother Juniper assembled material for an enormous book. Although his work was condemned by the Inquisition and was publicly burned, a secret copy was found. In this were the thousands of little facts that justified to Brother Juniper his conclusions why God had selected that day and those people.

At the conclusion of the introductory Part One, the author asks rhetorically—and in the first person—whether he could have missed the essence of meaning in Brother Juniper’s assembled reports. The author poses the fundamental questions: are we of no more consequence in this world than flies, or are all our actions and beliefs known to and controlled by God?

Analysis

The author uses his introductory Part One to pose questions that concern himself. Is there purpose in our lives? Or are we as individuals no more significant than a fly? Are we watched over by God? These questions sound like a conversation Thornton might have held with his Calvinist father, Amos Wilder, and are fundamental in theology.



The narrative is launched by an abrupt statement that in 1714 a completely trusted structure unexpectedly gave way and five people perished. The emphasis is on the unquestioning trust the people had in this structure, not on the victims as persons, only some of whom are named at the end of this Part.

The bridge of San Luis Rey is named after a saint, the only French king who was canonized, and the author must have had a reason to make that critical choice. He was familiar with France, but to choose this saint to personify his symbol suggests an intent to use it as a theological emblem of rupture of confidence. The description of the travelers pitched into the gorge beneath the bridge draws to mind medieval pictures of sinners tumbling into hell. The bridge may also be seen as symbolic of the union of a former life with the new, Cuzco of the Incas with Lima of the Spanish, or of a link between a more pure life in the mountains with an oppressive, less desirable lifestyle in the city on the coast.

A well-intentioned but puzzled priest, Brother Juniper is created as the background figure who assembles the in-depth histories of the characters on whom the narrative will be based. He is a philosopher whose intention is to explore whether we live and die according to a plan, known as "predestination," or whether mere chance makes those decisions. Then the author appears to have disposed of the priest by getting him burned for heresy, although the material for the book to follow remains conveniently available to be discovered as a copy in the university in Lima. From that point, Wilder as author switches from the third person to the first, leaving the impression that the further telling of the story is from his reading of the discovered copy. But, he says, although Brother Juniper amassed a great deal of material and had reached conclusions about God's choice of action, he never got to understand the people he was writing about, and the author himself isn't even sure that he does, either.

Wilder has employed the technique of taking a real person and molding a fictional story around him. Brother Junípero Serra, a Franciscan priest and philosopher, was very active in California in the 18th century. He traveled and wrote extensively, and though he suffered problems with the authorities, he is today commemorated by statues and street names in California and has been beatified by his Church.

Vocabulary

Precipitated, hallucination, usury, flitting, plumage, traversed, gesticulating, theology, averts, savants, skepticism, presumptuous, scurrying, declaimed, apportioned, diligence.

Part 2

Summary

María, daughter of a cloth merchant in Lima, was an ugly and stuttering child who suffered the sarcasms of her mother and lived in solitude to the extent she was able. The wealth of her family must nevertheless have made her desirable as a wife, and although she avoided marriage, at the age of 26 she was wed to a haughty and impecunious aristocrat.

María's loneliness and solitude were relieved with the birth of a daughter, Clara, whom she idolized, but the expressions of affection were not reciprocated. Clara's failure to respond to her mother's oppressive overtures of affection provoked constant ugly scenes with her mother. Whereas María had done all she could to avoid marriage, Clara welcomed the opportunity that would get her away from her mother in Peru and give her the chance to live in Spain.

Following the departure of her only child, María was once again plunged into solitude, but now she showed signs of severe depression, imagining conversations with Clara, talking out loud to herself. Her appearance and behavior became a scandal, to the extent she was even denounced as a witch to the Inquisition and might have been burned at the stake were it not for the influence of Clara's husband at the court of Spain and that of her remaining friends in the court of the Viceroy in Lima.

While María deteriorated in Lima, her daughter Clara shone in Madrid. Four years after their separation, Clara gave her mother permission to visit her in Spain. The visit was an emotional disaster, and after María returned to Peru, she began to express through her letters the love she could not display in person. To find material for her letters, María forced herself to see and listen to all that went on in Lima, all with the intention of composing interesting letters for Clara. Whereas Clara hardly looked at them, her husband read and preserved them, and they became masterworks for posterity. It is from one of these letters that the author introduces the reader to three important characters: an actress called "the Perichole"; Uncle Pio, Perichole's manager; and Pepita, a young servant from an orphanage.

Accompanied by Pepita, María went to the theater, where her habitual state of confused disarray attracted the attention of the crowd and prompted ribald and brutal songs from the Perichole. The audience cruelly loved the entertainment at María's expense, but she herself failed to understand its significance. The scandal came to the attention of the Viceroy, who wished to support María because of her son-in-law's influence in the court at Madrid. He instructed the Perichole to humble herself as a penitent to María.

Consistent with her emotional deterioration, María had taken to drinking quantities of alcohol to the point of incapacity, but disciplined herself during the week before the ship left for Spain, when she accumulated gossip and wrote her letter to Clara. Having given



the letter to Pepita to take to the ship, she then had three weeks in which she could remain inebriated. It was in this state that she received the penitent Perichole, and a farcical conversation took place. The Perichole came to humiliate herself and beg forgiveness while the inebriated and uncomprehending María expressed her gratitude that a person of such distinction in the theater would pay her this attention.

Pepita's story is inextricably linked with that of Madre María del Pilar, the Abbess of a convent. Madre María was a progressive thinker ahead of her time, with charitable intentions and working plans. Although she thoroughly disapproved of the Marquesa María and her inebriated conduct, she knew she could find use for her money. So, on the only occasion that Marquesa María visited Abbess María—to ask for the use of one of her orphans—the Abbess put Pepita into her care.

Pepita, raised as an orphan in this convent, had despite her youth shown remarkable talents for management, and Madre María hoped Pepita might one day succeed her as Abbess. In the meantime, she believed Pepita would benefit by learning more of the world and thus let the Marquesa María take the girl as a servant-companion. Pepita did not find this position an easy or comfortable one, but because Pepita was loyal to Madre María she accepted her lot with good grace.

A letter from Clara in Spain advised María she was to become a grandmother. This set María off on a new round of concerns and visits to church and chapel, confused with doubts in the goodness of God and his intentions. She decided to visit a famous shrine high in the mountains, where she achieved some sense of inner tranquility.

Two days later, on their way back to Lima, the bridge collapsed. María and Pepita tumbled into the gorge below.

Analysis

Part Two is written as a straightforward narrative which concentrates on the life of one person, Doña María, who becomes the Marquesa de Montemayor. The narrator describes two opposing versions of her history, one derived from her own writing of beautiful letters that later gain fame in Spanish literature, the other from the Franciscan, whose version was less favorable. The author editorially implies that the only real understanding of her was his alone.

Five characters of importance are introduced in this part. They are Doña María, the Marquesa; Madre María, the Abbess; Perichole, the actress; Clara, the daughter of Doña María; and Pepita, the orphaned companion-servant to Doña María. With the interplay between these persons, the narrator describes and explores multiple levels of affection, disaffection, love, and lovelessness.

Doña María as a child did not receive parental love, nor did she find love as a wife. Because of the lack of affection in her own life, Doña María's love for her daughter, Clara, was overwhelming. María recognized it was largely for ego satisfaction, and the cause of her daughter's unloving departure.



The narrator describes how Doña María, rejected by her daughter, resorted to letter writing as a substitute for contact with her, and how her letters have been preserved for posterity as works of literary art. By this device he is able to insert information into the account that would not have been made available to Brother Juniper nor have appeared in his tome.

Doña María sinks into depression and alcoholism in her loneliness. When visiting a mountain shrine, in a state of tranquility and introspection, she discovers the sadness experienced by Pepita, as well as the bravery with which the girl has faced it, and Doña María is brought to a state of shameful tenderness if not actual affection.

Clara could not tolerate her mother's demands for reciprocated affection and she left the country as soon as she could. The Perichole had a loveless relationship with the Viceroy, and she despised Doña María from a distance but admired her upon their meeting. Madre María, herself childless, had a deep fondness for Pepita but reluctantly put her in the charge of Doña María; Pepita reciprocated the Abbess's affection, and though she was deeply hurt when she was sent away, she loyally did as she was bid.

The narrator switches at the end of Part Two from recounting the story as told in the writings of the priest to describing Doña María's innermost thoughts and whispered reflections on her own self-indulgent pity, and how she resolved she would be stronger in the future. But a future was denied to both the Marquesa and Pepita when they fell with the bridge.

Vocabulary

Divesting, recriminations, supercilious, dialogues, eccentrics, cartographer, hydraulics, baroque, ignoble, diligently, obsequious, felicitous, scurrilous, dissimulating, regimen, maudlin, loquacious, stoic, amulet, stupefaction.



Part 3

Summary

Identical male twins, newborn babies of unknown parentage, were left in a receptacle for unwanted babies at the door of the Santa María Rosa de las Rosas Convent. They were probably of Spanish heritage, and were therefore given the names of Esteban and Manuel.

Although the Abbess, Madre María del Pilar, hated all men, she grew to love these boys whom she spoiled and kept around the convent longer than was proper. They were at first employed in general chores at the different churches to assist the sacristans, then later they assisted the priests in their parish duties, and later still became famous as scribes, handwriting documents in an era when there were no printing presses.

Always together, nearly always silent, habitually in the company of women, the twins developed their unique language to state only what was necessary to each other, and a form of telepathy developed between them. For a time they worked together outside the city on various laboring jobs, but they later returned to Lima and assumed the role of copyists for the theater, where they encountered the Perichole. Whereas Esteban was indifferent, Manuel became enraptured. The knowledge that she was the mistress of the Viceroy did not alter his emotions.

To Esteban's chagrin, these untoward feelings of Manuel's began to pull the brothers apart, and their separation increased when Camila Perichole sent for Manuel and asked him to write letters for her which Manuel was obliged to keep secret, even from his twin brother. Thus Esteban did not know the extent of the attachment until the night the Perichole came to their room to have an urgent letter penned, and whispered the words into Manuel's ear. Their perceived closeness was upsetting to Esteban, who found that for the first time in their lives another person had come between them. He said nothing, but his attitude alerted Manuel to Esteban's distress, and rather than hurt his brother Manuel refused the actress's further demands for letter writing.

Some time later Manuel sustained a leg wound which became infected, and a barber-surgeon recommended hourly application of cold wet cloths. Esteban became the faithful nurse, with Manuel the angry patient viciously protesting the pain Esteban's ministrations caused. Manuel became delirious, and between bouts of delirium Esteban asked if he wanted him to call the Perichole because in his fever Manuel kept shouting about her. Manuel refused the idea. Esteban tolerated the angry delirious recriminations of his brother and of the other residents of the house who protested the noise.

On the third day, Manuel received the sacrament of the last rites and died. Esteban left the building and refused to return to it, even when Madre María pleaded with him. He told her that he was Manuel and that it was Esteban who was dead. He did not participate in the dramatic death rites of the funeral and, half-crazed, disappeared. He



took odd jobs in different places, coming and going between countryside and Lima. One day he came to the Abbess, but when she approached him with every wish to help, he ran away. The Abbess felt herself a failure and in her prayers turned against God.

In her act of self-ordered penance, Madre María thought of Captain Alvarado, an experienced ship's captain, world traveler after the loss of his beloved daughter, and an adventurer for whom the twins had at times worked. At Madre María's request, Alvarado went to Cuzco to offer Esteban employment in his crew. Despite his surly response, Alvarado persisted. Esteban now went by his own name, and accepted the offer of work. While drinking heavily, Esteban admitted he had hoped to lose his life when he rescued a person from a burning building; in the morning he once again refused Captain Alvarado's offer. He went back to his room where his attempted suicide by hanging was prevented by Alvarado, who assured him that he would be surprised at the way time passes.

On their way back to Lima, Captain Alvarado descended into the gorge to look after his merchandise. Esteban fell with the bridge.

Analysis

Part Three introduces further characters and introduces further levels and characteristics of the nature of love.

At the convent where Madre María del Pilar was Abbess, there was an arrangement whereby it was possible to leave unwanted infants to the care of the orphanage that the convent ran. Why the Abbess hated men is not disclosed, nor whether hate was an appropriate measure of her feelings, but she became deeply fond of the infant twin boys abandoned on her doorstep.

The twins, Esteban and Manuel, are described as so attached to each other they barely needed speech to transmit their thoughts to each other. A picture of intense attachment, which neither would have termed love, is developed.

Then the more commonly recognized variety of love drives a wedge between the twins when Manuel becomes enamored of the Perichole. The narrator describes the struggle between fraternal love and sexual love, and the former wins out. Fraternal love is so strong that not only does Esteban devote himself to nursing his brother, Manuel's death causes Esteban so much grief that he attempts suicide. Although that is prevented, he dies shortly thereafter with the collapse of the bridge.

What does this Part contribute to the book as a whole? It introduces the less commonly discussed brotherly love and the mystical attachment experienced by identical twins. It opens up a grief the Abbess had suffered. The narrator says in one place she hated all men, and in another notes that she too once had a loss—whether they are connected is not known, but experience has left the Abbess with an understanding of emotional loss. Lastly, Part Three opens the question of grief for loss of a loved one that is so deep a



strong young man would attempt suicide. It alludes briefly to the distress of Captain Alvarado—the most stable person in the book—after the loss of his beloved daughter.

The author chose to have Esteban die from the bridge collapse but the Captain, his traveling companion, survived. Brother Juniper might have thought there was the hand of God shown in that. The Captain was worthy of preservation and was the scientific control for Esteban, who was not.

Vocabulary

Sombre, ecclesiastical, syntax, philologist, dissipated, remorselessly, possessed, quench, guttering, blandishments, courteous, akimbo, calumnies, matador, incantation, pander, guile, sacrament, rhetoric, lore, banal.



Part 4

Summary

In her letter to her daughter, Clara, María describes Uncle Pio as disreputable and moth-eaten but speaking the most delightful Spanish, which he learned on the stage.

In an editorial summation, Uncle Pio is described as the Perichole's maid, singing master, coiffeur, masseur, reader, errand boy, banker, and father figure. Since the actress could not read she had to memorize her part in two to three new plays a week, and few of the plays were repeated more than four times in a season.

Uncle Pio, in the modern sense, "discovered" Micaela Villegas, a 12-year-old girl singing awkwardly in cafés under the name Camila Perichole. During her teen years he taught her all he could. Initially they were always on the road; she performed where she could and they both accepted what manual labor could be found to support themselves. But Camila Perichole eventually found some success and became increasingly in demand. Uncle Pio, to keep her from becoming conceited, resorted to the cruelty of sarcasm and faint praise. Hurt by his less than full satisfaction she remained an industrious, if angry, pupil.

Camila became the mistress of the Viceroy—who furthered her education on courtly behavior, thereby enhancing her stage mannerisms—and birthed three children from him. An evening group developed, comprising the Viceroy, the Archbishop, Captain Alvarado and Uncle Pio, and was joined after performances by Camila, who would remain for the night at the palace.

As time passed, Camila tired of the Viceroy and developed furtive love affairs, but she also sought respectability and considered her acting to be a pastime. She left the stage at the age of thirty and in the ensuing five years gained weight, becoming prone to overdressing and wearing too much jewelry. She shed Uncle Pio, avoiding him to the extent she could. When he forced a visit, she told him she was no longer to be addressed as Camila, but as Doña Micaela. When he professed his love, Camila rejected his emotion as theatrical.

Camila caught smallpox and was disfigured. She retreated from society and went to live in near poverty on a little farm in the hills. Uncle Pio remained her loyal attendant even though she would not see him. He cared for the children, made himself useful on the farm, and provided some needed money. She occasionally admitted him to her veiled presence, but when by chance he saw her unveiled she drove him away. He returned, however, using a trick to get her to talk with him, and after recriminations Camilla consented to allowing her son Jaime to go with Uncle Pio for a year.

Both Uncle Pio and Jaime were on the bridge when it collapsed.



Analysis

Part Four details Uncle Pio and the further experiences of the Perichole. It serves to link continental Spain with its overseas empire, and gives a further picture of life in Peru. Noticeably in the book only the Spanish (now known as Ladinos) are mentioned, and the bulk of the population (now known as Indios) are effectively ignored.

Uncle Pio, as an older accomplished *roué*, manages the career of 12-year-old Micaela and makes of her the leading actress of Peru, known in that role as Camila the Perichole. Deep ties, of what he considers love, bind Uncle Pio to his protégée, and although she reciprocated as a child she fails to do so when her fame is ascendant in society. She does, however reluctantly, permit Uncle Pio to take her precious son Jaime (fathered by the Viceroy). Both men are killed when the bridge falls, leaving a devastated Micaela, whose fame is now fading.

If the essential feature of the book is the face of love in its varying forms, this section reveals the asexual love or adoration of a young teenager for an older man who is mentoring her, and the reciprocated love of the older man, which is maintained as the teenager becomes a mature woman. The mature woman, however, has shed her youthful adoration and resents what she interprets as demands for eternal gratitude. There is a sexual relationship between the actress and the Viceroy, not explained in detail but probably loveless; opportunistic on her part and motivated by a combination of lust and boredom on his. The actress does love her son—who she loses with the fall of the bridge—and her two daughters who are sent to Spain, depriving her of all emotional attachment.

According to his hypothesis, Brother Juniper might interpret the death of Uncle Pio as the just reward for his lifelong career of very doubtful probity. But the innocent child Jaime? He must have been put onto the bridge to show there is no justice in this world and the innocent suffer alongside the others.

Vocabulary

Coterie, lachrymose, austere, hacienda, diligence, calumny, omniscient, satirical, irksome, regimen, judiciously, penury, alabaster, monologue, brocade, repertory, duenna, bohemian, pagoda, rachitic, congeniality, stratagem.



Part 5

Summary

Brother Juniper had long been convinced that proof was needed to support his concept of faith. An outbreak of pestilence gave him an opportunity to gain a statistical analysis to support his theory. He chose 15 victims and, as controls, 15 survivors of the illness. On a scale of 1 to 10 he rated each person for their goodness, for their piety and for their usefulness to the community. He found there were no indispensable persons; all were necessary to the economy of their community. He made a statistical analysis, but was confounded when his results showed that those who had died were five times more worthy than those who were spared. He concluded the discrepancy between faith and fact was greater than was generally assumed.

Brother Juniper pursued his studies after the collapse of the bridge and found so much trivia he could not analyze that he decided to write down everything he was told in case it might later be found to be of importance. The Marquesa was among the subjects, and it was his experience that there was less to be learned from those who had been closest to the subject of inquiry, and those who knew most ventured least.

At the conclusion of his inquiries, his book was pronounced a heresy, and Brother Juniper—along with the book—was burned at the stake.

Following the collapse of the bridge, a service was held in the great Cathedral of Lima. The Viceroy was unsure whether he should play the father for his and Camila's son, the little rachitic Don Jaime, and he badly needed to smoke.

Abbess Madre María sat among her girls in the Cathedral and knew there would be no Pepita to take over her work.

Although Camila Perichole, now Doña Micaela Villegas, set out from her farm to attend the service in the Cathedral, her thoughts that she would be overwhelmed by the force of the service and the crowds halted her at the little chapel where the bridge once stood. There she reflected on her own heartless behavior to Uncle Pio and her son Jaime, and with pain in her heart she returned to her farm and did not attend the service.

Two years later it was brought to Camila's attention that the Abbess María had in the same accident sustained a loss of two people she loved. Doubting that the Abbess could believe that she, Camila, was capable of love, she nevertheless went to her. To her surprise she was warmly and sympathetically greeted, and the Abbess recognized that whereas she herself had lost two orphan children she loved, Camila had lost a child to whom she had given birth. Camila opened her heart to the Abbess, as if in confession.

On another occasion, the Abbess María was informed the Condesa d'Abuirre was at the convent and wished to see her. Hoping this was a benefactress for her care of the blind,



the Abbess welcomed the tall and beautiful Clara who explained she was the daughter of the Marquesa María de Montemayor, and feared she would on that account be unwelcome. Clara confessed to the Abbess how unkind she had been to her mother, and in return she was told of how Pepita and Esteban were lost in the fall of the bridge, and of Camila's visit. After leading Clara through the portion of the convent where she gave asylum to the aged, the infirm, and the blind, Abbess María left Clara in the company of one of her helpers, who had been an actress.

Madre María talked throughout the night to comfort the dying but as she talked, her thoughts were personal. She thought of Esteban and Pepita, of Uncle Pio, of Clara's mother, and how few now remembered them save those who had loved them.

Analysis

Wilder was more of a playwright than a novelist, and Part Five is like the final act of a play—all the loose ends are wrapped up in what playwrights term a "resolution," but a moral question remains.

Brother Juniper, who was absent after Part One, now returns in Part Five. The narrator describes other unsuccessful efforts he made to prove his thesis of moral order in the universe. The execution of the priest is described briefly, and he seems to have been the only person satisfied with his fate.

The forms of love have run their course and now there is only aftermath, acceptance of fate or remorse. Madre María is the prominent figure. Micaela, formerly Camila the Perichole, confesses the hardness of her heart, as does the Marquesa's daughter Clara. Madre María recognizes in herself her own inadequacies and lowers her expectations.

Vocabulary

Anecdote, pestilence, propagandist, epitaph, allusions, edification, avarice, congenial, connoisseur, indolence, ritual, lurked, languorous, rueful.



Characters

Juniper, Brother

A Franciscan priest who has opened many churches for the indigenous Indian population, but who has a philosophic concept he wishes to investigate—namely, there needs to be a sound mathematical basis for theological beliefs. He is described as scurrying from parish to parish, his robe tucked about his knees for haste. He witnesses the collapse of the Bridge of San Luis Rey and determines this is his opportunity to test his theories. He spends the next several years acquiring information on those who died, their associates, and relations. All of it is compiled into a huge book. Brother Juniper and his book are burned together as a punishment for heresy; however, a copy of the book is later found in the local university.

María, Doña (aka Marquesa de Montemayor)

The daughter of a cloth merchant, María suffers an unhappy childhood, partly because she is ugly and has a stutter, but partly due to a sarcastic mother who forces her to wear too much jewelry. María puts off marriage as long as she can but at the age of 26 is married to an impecunious and offensive aristocrat, and becomes the Marquesa de Montemayor. Her marriage is loveless, but she is delighted with the birth of her daughter, Clara. Unhappily her excessive demands for reciprocation of her love drive Clara out of the country. María seeks comfort in her writing—which eventually leaves its mark on Spanish literature—and in the bottle, which causes her disgrace in Lima. When Clara has a daughter María goes to a mountain religious retreat to meditate. There she reflects on her ways, decides she will do better in the future, but dies with the collapse of the bridge of San Luis Rey. The account of her letter writing is based on the true history of Mme. de Sévigné.

María del Pilar, Madre

The Abbess of the Convent of Santa María Rosa de las Rosas is a most industrious woman with ambitions, not for herself but for the extension of the charitable activities conducted through her convent (which apart from its religious function is also an orphanage, a hospital, and an asylum for the aged and others in need). She has suffered an undefined loss at one time in her life and hates men. She becomes emotionally attached to the male orphan twins Esteban and Manuel, who were left at the Convent, and also to another orphan, Pilar, whom she hopes might take over her work in later years. After the death of Pilar she becomes resigned to the mere accomplishments of the daily tasks and forgoes the ambitions of extending her convent's functions.



Perichole, Camila (aka Doña Micaela)

Micaela Villegas is 12 years old and singing for a living in café-bars when Uncle Pio encounters her. Her personal history prior to that time is not recorded. Under Uncle Pio's tutelage she becomes the premier actress of Lima, and uses the name Camila the Perichole. But before reaching that pinnacle she has many years of hard physical labor and professional development. She becomes the mistress of the Viceroy of Peru and has three children with him: a son named Jaime and two daughters. She also has short-term affairs with matadors and actors. She quits the stage at 30 and in the following years puts on weight and takes to overdressing. Micaela spurns Uncle Pio, complaining that his love was fit only for the stage. When she later catches smallpox, she considers herself so disfigured she withdraws altogether, hiding behind a veil in her farm. Reluctantly, she permits Uncle Pio to take Jaime for a year's education, but both of them perish in the accident. She did not go to the funeral in Lima. After a few years she presents herself at the convent, breaks down in admitting her heartless transgressions to the Abbess, and appears to continue there as a lay worker.

Uncle Pio

Illegitimate offspring of a good Castilian family, Uncle Pio (whose true name is never disclosed) leaves his father's estate when he is 10 and makes his own way in the world thereafter. He is an unscrupulous trickster and dissipated speculator who has a knack for making friends despite an unprepossessing appearance, a wisp of beard, and sad eyes. His love for the stage leads to a profound knowledge of Spanish literature. His name is awarded by the young ladies he helped. Due to an incident in a brothel, he finds it expedient to leave Spain and go to Peru. In his continued travels he encounters Micaela, and over the years he assists her to gain fame and fortune as Lima's leading actress. Micaela, known onstage as the Perichole, eventually spurns Uncle Pio. After the actress catches smallpox and goes into seclusion, however, she accedes to his request to take her son Jaime; soon thereafter, Uncle Pio and Jaime fall into the gorge.

Esteban and Manuel

Infant male twins are left at the front of the convent of Santa María Rosa de las Rosas. Although silent in their mannerisms—suitable to living in a convent of nuns—they grow to be attractive young men, and the Abbess of the convent is fond of them. They are employed in church-related duties and then move on to other laboring type work, but with some education they are employed as scribes at a time when there is no printing press but many documents. The twins are devoted to each other and never separate. Among their copying work are theater scripts, and they meet the Perichole. Esteban is indifferent to her, but Manuel becomes enamored, causing a rift between the brothers for the first time ever. Manuel decides his love for Esteban was more important than his love for the Perichole, and so he refuses further contact with her. Manuel sustains a wound, which becomes septic, and he dies despite Esteban's care. Esteban is distraught to the point of going nearly out of his mind. He is willing to die and attempts



suicide, though Captain Alvarado deters him from this. Esteban is on his way to Lima to take ship when he falls into the gorge.

Pepita

Also an orphan at the Convent, Pepita's background is not described, but at the age of 12 she comes to the attention of the Abbess, who notices how she takes charge and directs the work in the laundry. She is allocated thereafter as a test of her loyalty and competence to the most disliked jobs in the convent and always performs well. Progressively she is given increasing responsibilities and shows herself capable of management to the point the Abbess begins to think Pepita might one day be her replacement. When the Marquesa de Montemayor comes to the convent looking for an orphan girl to be her companion-servant, Pepita is sent with her to gain experience of the world. She accompanies the Marquesa into a mountain retreat and starts writing a letter to the Abbess saying how hard she finds her life and how sad she is to no longer be with the Abbess. When the Marquesa reads this letter and asks about it, Pepita attacks herself for not being brave and tears the letter up. This has a salutary effect on the Marquesa, but they both die falling from the bridge the next day.

Alvarado, Captain

Captain Alvarado is first described in relation to the Marquesa, who recounts in one of her letters that he sails only along the coast in order to not be too far away from his young daughter. Why the daughter dies is not revealed, but after her death he goes deep sea and takes letters from the Marquesa to her daughter in Spain. The twins Esteban and Manuel work at times for him as stevedores, so when Esteban goes to Cuzco after the death of Manuel, the Abbess asks the Captain to go to Cuzco to help him. Alvarado offers Esteban employment, which he accepts. On the way from Cuzco to Lima the Captain descends into the gorge to look after his affairs, but Esteban falls with the bridge.

Jaime, Don

The beautiful son of Micaela, fathered by the Viceroy, is described at the age of seven as having a rachitic little body, his mother's eyes, and his father's tendency to convulsions. He has a comfortable if undemonstrative relationship with his mother. When Micaela retires in solitude to her farm, Uncle Pio pursues her there and helps to bring up her children. He tells Micaela that Jaime is not getting an education and asks that she would let him take charge of her son for a year to take him away from the servants, in whose company he is learning nothing, and to teach him Castilian. Micaela rather reluctantly agrees. Uncle Pio and Jaime perish together in their fall from the bridge.



Clara, Doña,

The only child of the Marquesa, Clara is unable to reciprocate her mother's stifling love and chooses instead to belittle and criticize her. At the first opportunity, she leaves Peru for Spain where she marries and becomes the Condesa d'Abuirre. Clara continues to reject her mother's overtures of love and displays no interest in her letters, though fortunately for posterity and the literature of Spain, her husband preserves them. Long after the death of her mother, Clara goes to the Abbess and confesses how hard hearted she had been.



Objects/Places

Bridge of San Luis Rey

The opening paragraph describes the incident involving the bridge, which plays a critical actual and symbolic role throughout the book. It is thought to be based on a bridge over the Apurímac River, on the Inca road. Created in 1350, it was in use in 1864 when a woodcut picture was made, but became dilapidated in 1890, although it had not fallen. Wilder declined to say whether he had seen this picture.

Osier

A term usually applied to the willow. Bridges of this material are still made from ropes created out of plaited or intertwined vines, such as liana.

Horses

This animal was brought to the Americas by the Spanish. The Aztecs had no use for the wheel on their mountain passes, and used llamas as beasts of slight burden.

Coaches

Of use in the city for princes of state or church, though one cannot imagine a coach on a footpath in the Andes, as there were no mountain roads.

Chairs

Otherwise known as sedan chairs. Usually a small cabin, secured to shafts, and carried by porters. A valid way to travel on the mountain paths.

Church

Little mud wayside shrines and chapels abound in Latin America. Sometimes placed in memoriam at an accident site, sometimes in areas of convenience to provide rest and relief to the spirits.

Peru

Country on the Pacific coast of South America. Peru is now the country immediately south of Ecuador. At the time in which the book is set, the Viceroyalty of Peru was one



of the richest areas of the Spanish overseas empire and comprised both of those countries and other contiguous territory.

Lima

The capital city, then and now, of Peru. Set on the Pacific Coast, hot and humid and in those days unhealthy, so refuge in the hills was desirable.

Cuzco

The capital city of the Inca empire, which flourished before the advent of the Spanish conquistadors; it is placed high in the Andes, and visitors now often suffer from ill-effects of altitude.

Cathedral

Fundamental to the Spanish conquests was the intention to convert the natives to Christianity. In the larger cities there is often found a large and ornate cathedral, which serves as the center of religious life.

University of San Marcos

The National University of San Marcos is the most important higher-education institution in Peru. Founded in 1551, it is the oldest officially established university in the Americas, and one of the oldest in the world.

Andes

The mountain chain that runs almost the length of South America, closer to the Pacific coast, and which was the basis of the elongated highly developed Inca empire.



Themes

Divine Intervention

There is an account of Brother Juniper's wish to bring the study of theology into line with scientific thought. Since Brother Juniper's puzzled mien decorates the original cover of the book, one might suppose this is taken to be the crux of the story.

His hypothesis was that God must have measurable purpose in the way he makes his decisions, that surely he would favor the worthy over the unworthy. Brother Juniper's research to date, however, had failed to support this hypothesis; in fact he had shown that the unworthy outdid the worthy five to one. Having been the only named witness to the collapse of the Bridge of San Luis Rey the priest was confident a study of the victims' lives would support his belief. He amassed a huge amount of material, but could not make any statistical sense of it, and was burned at the stake for his temerity. His book was burned with him.

Love and Rejection

Delving deeper, it can be concluded the book is really a study of love in its many forms, and all the hurts that love provokes. The related deaths of five people creates an opportunity to pursue several thinly linked back-stories, each of which shows a different expression of those emotions consolidated in the term "love." The bridge is in this sense a symbol to unite the characters in the book.

Doña María, who became the Marquesa de Montemayor, suffered from a lack of parental love as a child, and she was no better loved when she was married, but she was left (in an unexplained manner) as an exceedingly rich woman. She had a daughter, Clara, whom she smothered with unreciprocated loving attention. Not until her mother's death and her own maturity did Clara have second thoughts about her behavior and go to the Abbess to inquire about her mother and confess her own inadequacies.

Doña Micaela Villegas, aka Camila the Perichole, started her career singing in cafés as a child, and was "created" as the leading actress in Peru by Uncle Pio, but some of her social success was due to her own ability to make friends in high places. She bore three children to the Viceroy in a loveless relationship, and as she became older and more socially accepted she jeered at Uncle Pio's professions of love. Her only son, Jaime, was reluctantly put in Uncle Pio's care, and both of them perished when the bridge fell. Substantially later, Micaela broke down in confessing her hardness of heart to the Abbess, and although she is not named, it is suggested that Micaela continued as a lay worker in the convent.

For his part, Uncle Pio had been an unscrupulous adventurer in Spain, where he had enjoyed the kind of love that is bought. In Peru he discovered this 12-year-old child



singing in a café, and had in Pygmalion fashion devoted his life to creating from her the most accomplished actress in the prosperous stage-loving capital city of Peru. He became passionately attached to his protégée—probably a proprietorial asexual form of love, but deeply felt. Uncle Pio was severely wounded when he was brushed aside by his Camila, then brutally rejected as no longer of value to her, told he should not expect a lifetime of gratitude for what he had done.

Esteban and Manuel were identical twins abandoned at the door of the convent and raised by Madre María del Pilar, the Abbess and director of the convent. They were good looking and intelligent, and the Abbess unwisely allowed herself to become emotionally attached to them. When they outgrew the time they could decently remain in a convent of nuns, the twins remained inseparable and deeply attached to each other, always facing the world together. This attachment was broached when the Perichole hired Manuel as her confidential secretary, which caused much hurt to Esteban. When Manuel contracted a septic wound he was nursed by Esteban, who from the subsequent loss of his twin brother was driven by despair to attempt passive and then active suicide. Captain Alvarado saved Esteban from killing himself, and they planned to return together to Lima. The Captain had himself suffered a loss—his daughter, whom he loved deeply—which caused the conduct of his own life to change.

Pepita, also an orphan, was admired and loved by the Abbess María, whose hopes for the future management of her life's work, the convent, were invested in the young girl. Pepita in return loved the Abbess, was deeply respectful of her, and obeyed with humility her instruction to live with Micaela. She was, however, hurt by the enforced separation from the woman she loved and trusted as a child trusts her mother.

Remorse

Perhaps on the same level, perhaps a little deeper, is the issue of remorse, that “morning after” feeling expressed in the ditty, “If you have a mother, cherish her with care, for you’ll never know her value till you see her empty chair,” and judged by President Eisenhower to be the “most useless of human emotions.”

Clara regretted her indifference to her mother; Micaela regretted her indifference to Uncle Pio and her life in general; even the Abbess regretted her overambitious aspirations to “make a difference.” In this sense, the bridge is a symbol to unite love, the rejection of love, and remorse.

By contrast, Brother Juniper felt no remorse for his heresy and welcomed the flames that consumed him.

Style

Point of View

Wilder opens his book with his blunt reportorial style, which would be categorized as Remote Third Person; that is, description made from a distance in space and time. When he enters into Brother Juniper's head to tell the reader what the priest is thinking, this would either be considered Close Third Person, or taking the more remote attitude into consideration, Omniscient, a point of view technique in which the narrator knows everything that happens or is thought about. But then at the end of Part One the author uses first person pronouns (I and we), so here he has slipped into First Person point of view. If he only used "we" it might be considered Editorial Third Person, but the "I" moves it to First Person, and from that point forward the book reads as if it were told to the reader as a personal account of the narrator, who not only relates the occurrences but also offers his opinions and raises the questions that concern him. However, the First Person point of view restricts a narrator to what he could know himself and does not permit him to know what others are thinking, only what they can be seen to do. So that returns the point of view to a unique style of Omniscient expressed in the First Person.

Setting

The story is placed in Peru. It would help the reader to understand the nature of the Spanish overseas empire and the dominant role the Viceroyalty of Peru played in this, much greater than the present geographic extent of that country as it is now constituted.

The casual way in which the author talks of walking from Lima to Cuzco causes one to wonder if he was ever there. There is a high ridge of mountain, high enough to cause mountain sickness in the visitor, on which the ancient Andean capital of Cuzco is situated; even with the use of modern transportation, the journey from Lima to Cuzco remains formidable.

It would also help the reader to understand the dominant nature of the church in society, and the layers of hierarchy in the church from "prince to pauper," Archbishop to mendicant priest.

Language and Meaning

The language employed would these days be described as "literary" but is not pretentious. The words employed are appropriate to their function and are not Mark Twain's scorned "five dollar words." For a reader with a modest vocabulary, this is an "easy read" and a pleasurable one with the descriptions and visualizations employed.

Structure

The author avoided dividing his book into Chapters and instead divided it into five Parts. This device is suitable to the occasion, although more often employed in nonfiction.



Quotes

Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan. (Chapter 1)

Everyone was very helpful and misleading. (Chapter 1)

To the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer's day. (Chapter 1)

The very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God. (Chapter 1)

Blurred and streaked became her view of the serene Pacific and the enormous clouds of pearl that hang forever motionless above it. (Chapter 2)

Letter writing had to take the place of all the affection that could not be lived. (Chapter 2)

Hers were the letters that in an astonishing world have become the text-book of schoolboys and the ant-hill of the grammarians. (Chapter 2)

The knowledge that she would never be loved in return acted upon her ideas as a tide acts upon cliffs. (Chapter 15)

She saw that the people of this world moved about in an armour of egotism, drunk with self-gazing, athirst for compliments... (Chapter 2)

She loved her daughter not for her daughter's sake but for her own. (Chapter 2)

Nature is deaf. God is indifferent. Nothing in man's power can alter the course of law. (Chapter 2)

A llama, a lady with a long neck and sweet shallow eyes, burdened down by fur cape. (Chapter 2)

I can do no more. What will be, will be. (Chapter 2)

It was not my fault that I was so. It was circumstance. It was the way I was brought up. (Chapter 2)

Tomorrow I begin a new life. (Chapter 2)

Even in the most perfect love one person loves less profoundly than the other. (Chapter 3)

He sacrificed everything to it, if it can be said we ever sacrifice anything save what we know we can never attain. (Chapter 3)



For what human ill does not dawn seem to be an alleviation? (Chapter 3)

I am a mere scrubber of floors. (Chapter 3)

The line of the Andes and the streams of stars crowding forever across the sky.
(Chapter 3)

There are times when it requires a high courage to speak the banal. (Chapter 3)

Time keeps going by. You'll be surprised at the way time passes. (Chapter 3)

He sold rumors. (Chapter 4)

They loved one another deeply but without passion. (Chapter 4)

To punish himself he led an exemplary life in every other respect. (Chapter 4)

The injustice and unhappiness in the world is a constant. (Chapter 4)

Like all solitary persons, he had invested friendship with a divine glamour. (Chapter 4)

A beautiful procession of clouds, like a flock of sheep, was straying up from the sea,
slipping up the valley between the hills. (Chapter 4)

The cup of the envious overflowed. (Chapter 4)

It is cruel of you to keep urging gratitude, gratitude, gratitude. (Chapter 4)

He derived a sort of joy from the conviction that all was wrong in the world. (Chapter 5)

[H]e resolved to expose this conspiracy of the stone-cutters. (Chapter 5)

There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only
survival, the only meaning. (Chapter 5)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss whether there is a sense of authorial voice in the narration. Discuss whether it is a mere novel to be discarded when read, or whether it has a deeper purpose. Is it a polemic (controversial argument or assertion)?

Topic 2

Discuss whether there is direction and meaning in lives beyond the individual's own will. Are we no more than the flies the boys kill? What is meant by "this conspiracy of the stone-cutters"?

Topic 3

What is the significance of the bridge of San Luis Rey in this story? In what way does it serve as a symbol? Whose name does it bear? Why would the author have given it that name?

Topic 4

What is love? Discuss whether there are different forms of love. What forms does love take in this book? Can love be selfless? Discuss remorse.

Topic 5

Who is Brother Juniper? What is his role in the story? What does he wish to prove? What method does he plan to use? Discuss the validity of his hypothesis and method. Why, how and by whom was his life terminated? How did he face his own death? What did he leave to posterity?

Topic 6

Who is the Marquesa? What is her role in the story? What was her background? Discuss the validity of her statement, "It was the way I was brought up." Discuss the effect of her childhood experiences on her treatment of her own daughter. Why did she turn to letter writing? Where did she seek her material? How did the Marquesa feel about the Perichole? About Pepita?



Topic 7

Who is the Abbess? What is her role in the story? Discuss the importance of work. Discuss ambition. Had the Abbess known love?

Topic 8

Who is the Perichole? What is her role in the story? Is Pygmalion a legitimate analogy for Uncle Pio and Camila? How long should gratitude last? Had Camila experienced love?