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# *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

by

**Thornton Wilder**

**1927**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide Edited by Diane Sauder

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is set in and around Lima, the capital of Peru, in the eighteenth century. It was a beautiful city, inspired by the Catholic religion and entertained by the theater. It was also peopled by eccentrics, like the intensely religious and superstitious Marquesa, the flirtatious Camila Perichole, the touchy Esteban, the snobbish Dona Clara, and the cunning Uncle Pio. The staunch Catholics, like the.....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Marquesa De Montemayor, usually called Dona Maria** - the intensely religious and superstitious mother of Dona Clara, whom she adores. She feels distressed that Dona Clara does not reciprocate her love. She is one of the victims of the accident at the bridge of San Luis Rey.

**Esteban and Manuel** - orphan twins brought up by the Abbess. Their identical looks baffle many people. They are deeply attached and understand each other's feelings. While working as copyists in the theatre, Manuel falls in love with Camila, causing feelings of guilt and tension between him and Esteban.

**Uncle Pio** - a shrewd and cunning man of the world and the guardian of Camila Perichole, whom he loves dearly. He has a pleasing personality, winning the favor of many people. He transforms Camila from.....

#### Minor Characters

**Pepita** - an orphan under the care of the Abbess. She is a lonely girl who helps Maria De Pilar in the activities of the convent. Later, she goes to live with the Marquesa but feels neglected even though she has been obedient and faithful to both the Marquesa and Abbess. She loses her life along with Dona Maria in the bridge accident.

**Dona Clara** - the proud and clever daughter of the Marquesa. She hates her mother for her possessiveness and sentimentalism. She marries a lord in Spain and leads a life of luxury. She is a connoisseur of..... (Many other characters listed).....

### CONFLICT

**Protagonists** - The protagonists are the Marquesa, Esteban, and Uncle Pio, all of whom try to find love and meaning during their life times. They are united when they are all killed .....

**Antagonists** - The antagonists are fate (in the breaking of the bridge) and the unresponsive.....

**Climax** - The climax occurs when the Bridge at San Luis Rey breaks, killing the .....

**Outcome** - The book ends as a tragedy for the protagonists. They die before they reach .....

### SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

On July 20, 1714, the famous bridge at San Luis Rey breaks, killing five people. A Franciscan missionary, Brother Juniper, witnesses the accident as he returns from a trip to convert some Peruvian Indians. He decides the accident is a providential act of God. To prove his point about the accident, he studies the lives of the five victims for a period of six years. At the end of his research, he publishes an enormous book, which is rejected by the people of Peru as being inaccurate. In protest, both Brother Juniper and his book are burned. Amazingly, a copy of the book, placed on the shelf of a university library, survives to tell the story of the five victims.

The Marquesa De Montemayor, known as Dona Maria, is one of the victims. She was a colorful personality whose letters to her daughter were published and studied by students throughout Peru. Although Dona Maria was the daughter of a rich merchant who showered her with luxuries, she suffered from a lack of.....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Theme**

The major theme of the novel is the importance of love. The five people who lose their lives with the fall of the Bridge of San Luis Rey have all sought love during their life times; but all of them feel .....

### **Minor Theme**

The minor theme is that fate plays a great part in life. Five people, trying to make a new life for themselves and find happiness, are walking on the San Luis Bridge at the same time, when it breaks and .....

## **MOOD**

The mood of the novel is largely somber, tragic, and ironic. The Marquesa, Esteban, and Uncle Pio struggle to feel loved throughout the novel. Just as they try to put some.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

Thornton Wilder was born on April 19, 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin. His father held an important post in the government and often took his family with him to the East. Thornton, therefore, spent some of his childhood in Hong Kong. Most of his early education, however, was in public schools in Berkeley, California. In 1910, his father was sent to China, and Thornton attended the Inland Mission School at Cheffo. When he was sixteen, he wrote his first play, entitled *The Russian Princess*.

Thornton returned to the United States to pursue his college education, attending Oberlin College and graduating from Yale University. In 1920, he entered the American Academy in Rome, studying there.....

## **LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

*The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which earned Wilder a Pulitzer Prize, is his best-known novel. Thornton based the novel on a factual incident, the breaking of the San Luis Rey Bridge, which occurred at noon on Friday, July 20, 1714, in Lima, Peru, and killed five people. The characters in the book are all fictional although they correctly depict typical Peruvians of the time.

*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* paints a picture of eighteenth century Peru, which was.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES**

### **PART ONE**

#### **Summary**

The novel opens with the news of the fall of the famous Bridge of San Luis Rey in Lima, Peru, on July 20, 1714. Five people are killed in the accident, and a funeral service for them is held in the Cathedral at Lima. The bridge had been in a delicate condition for a long time, and horses and coaches were not allowed to travel over it. The news of the accident stirs memories in the minds of many Peruvians who had traveled over the bridge in the past.

Brother Juniper, a missionary to the Peruvian Indians, is a witness to the accident. Tired after a hard day's work trying to convert Indians, he halts to stretch his limbs and admire the scenery around him. He looks across to the San Luis Rey Bridge and sees it falling, with five human beings on it. A religious man, he thinks the accident is an act of God and wonders why these five creatures have been chosen to die on that particular

day. He decides he will study the lives of the five victims and write a book about his findings.

When his book is presented, after six years of research, the book is criticized for its inaccuracies, and he is charged as a heretic. Both the book and Brother Juniper are burned in the public square. A copy of the book, however, has been placed without detection on the shelves of the university library at San Martin.

### **Notes**

Part One of the novel serves as the introductory chapter, telling about the fall of the bridge and the five lives lost in the accident. Brother Juniper is an eyewitness of the accident. Using vivid sensory images, Wilder explains that Juniper's "glance fell upon the bridge, and at that moment a twanging noise filled the air, as when the string of some musical instrument snaps in a disused room, and he saw the bridge divide and fling five gesticulating ants into the valley below." It is significant to note that Wilder says that the five victims appeared no larger than ants in comparison to the vast immensity of nature that surrounded them. Juniper, however, is very affected by the deaths of these five unknown victims and decides to research their lives. As a result, the book will be told as a flashback, presenting the lives of deceased people.

Brother Juniper's character is interestingly sketched in this initial chapter. He is portrayed as a "little red-haired Franciscan from Northern Italy" who comes to Peru to convert the Indians. He is a dedicated missionary who walks miles in the heat to persuade the Indians to embrace his Christian faith and prove to them the providence of God. He has always been curious about earthly events and tried to link them to God's intervention. After witnessing the breaking of the bridge, he decides to trace the lives of the dead and prove the accident was an act of God, as proof of his theories to the obstinate Indians. The patient Juniper spends six years travelling around the country questioning people about the deceased; he gathers the information into an enormous book.

Wilder depicts how the accident has a great positive affect on many Peruvians, who feel blessed that they were not on the bridge. "Servant girls returned the bracelets which they had stolen from their mistresses, and usurers harangued their wives angrily in defense of usury." It is obvious that the consciences of the guilty citizens of Lima are stirred by the calamity. As a result, a large crowd gathers on the day of the funeral at the Cathedral of Lima.

## **PART TWO: The Marquesa De Montemayor and Pepita**

### **Summary**

This part of the novel is dedicated to a description of the Marquesa De Montemayor and Pepita, her young companion on the bridge. The Marquesa, known as Dona Maria, was the only daughter of a rich cloth merchant and his insensitive wife. She led a lonely childhood, for her wealthy parents paid her little attention and did not understand her sensibilities. Although she was lovely in appearance, she grew to be a shy young lady who was not interested in any of her many suitors.

At twenty-six, Dona Maria was married off to an arrogant nobleman, who did not give her the love, understanding, or companionship that she wanted and needed. Her life continued in solitude and loneliness until a beautiful baby daughter was born to her. Dona Maria showered the child, whom she named Clara, with constant attention, loving her with all her pent-up emotions and smothering her with possessiveness. As the child grew up, she became like her father and treated her mother with contempt. The more the Marquesa doted on Dona Clara, the more the girl ignored her mother, not wanting to spend time with her.

When Dona Clara was a mature, beautiful young lady, she chose to marry a Lord from Spain in order to escape from her mother. The Marquesa was devastated when her daughter departed for Spain. Having lost all interest in living, she neglected her health and appearance. Soon the people began to ridicule her. In contrast, Dona

Clara flourished in Spain, where she led an extravagant life filled with luxury. She became popular with the people because of her intelligence, wit, wisdom, and beauty. She also proved to be very generous, bestowing favors on servants, friends, artists, and scientists.

Dona Maria went to visit her daughter in Spain, but it resolved none of the problems between them. The Marquesa returned home in disappointment. She decided that she would try to reach Dona Clara through writing her letters. In them, she talked about her husband's poor health and pastimes; she also explained the scandalous happenings in the court. More importantly, the Marquesa constantly revealed her love and concern for her daughter. She suggested remedies for Dona Clara's health. Additionally, she sent a generous allowance and many gifts. Dona Clara was repulsed by the emotional nature of the letters; she warned her mother against writing about gossip and scandals. Dona Maria ignored the warning and continued writing the letters.

In one of her letters to Dona Clara, the Marquesa mentioned Camila, a great actress whom Uncle Pio had encouraged and supported in her career. Dona Maria went to see Camila act in the theater, taking Pepita with her. During the play, Camila ridiculed the emotional Marquesa. Pepita was embarrassed by the derision, but Dona Maria acted as though she had not noticed anything. After the play, the Viceroy sent Camila to the Marquesa to apologize for her rude behavior. Camila had gone to see Dona Maria with great apprehension, but the Marquesa treated the actress kindly. After Camila apologized, Dona Maria praised her talent and extended her a great deal of hospitality. Camila felt humbled by the experience and left with a heavy heart about her misbehavior.

The Marquesa began to spend her free time in the company of Pepita, a girl she had brought from the orphanage. They went out for walks, to church, and to the theatre. Pepita tolerated the eccentricity and moods of the Marquesa. Then a short letter arrived from Dona Clara, informing her mother about her pregnancy. The Marquesa was concerned for her daughter's well-being and offered regular prayers and followed old superstitions. "She practiced a degrading system of taboos for her child's protection. She refused to allow a knot in the house. The maids were forbidden to tie up their hair, and she concealed upon her person ridiculous symbols of a happy delivery. On the stairs the even steps were marked with red chalk, and a maid who accidentally stepped upon an even step was driven from the house with tears and screams." She then decided to undertake a pilgrimage to the shrine of Santa Maria De Cluxambuqua in order to offer her prayers for her daughter there. She took Pepita with her and stayed at an inn in the city, often visiting the church and praying. She also spent time with the sisters of the convent and waited for letters to arrive from her daughter. When Dona Clara wrote, she censured her mother for her concerns.

Feeling lonely at the inn, Pepita thought about the Abbess. She began to write her a letter, telling her about her loneliness and need for love; however, in a hurry to prepare supper for the Marquesa, she left the letter unfinished. On her return, Dona Maria saw the unfinished letter and read it. Pepita's words revealed that she truly loved the Marquesa. Realizing that someone cared for her, Dona Maria decided to begin her life afresh. Having made this resolution, she wrote a memorable letter to her daughter, telling her of her new feelings. A few days later, Dona Maria and Pepita set out on their return trip to Lima. As they walked over the Bridge at San Luis Rey, it broke, and they fell to their deaths, two of Juniper's "five ants."

After her death, the Marquesa's letters to Dona Clara were collected and published. They became known as masterpieces of literature, often studied in educational institutions.

## Notes

The longest chapter in the book, the second section traces the life of the Marquesa de Montemayor and her relationship with her daughter, Dona Clara. Wilder develops her strong, unique, and complex personality

through description, narration, dialogue, and letter writing. The variety of tools used to describe Dona Maria breaks the monotony and builds interest in this emotional and eccentric woman.

When she was a child, the Marquesa's parents provided her with the luxuries of life, but not with love or understanding. As a result, she grew into adulthood craving affection. At twenty-six she married to a ruined nobleman, who also failed to give her love or understanding. Lonely and miserable, she lived a quiet life of isolation. Then she delivered a daughter on whom she placed all of her hopes. She showered the.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

***The Marquesa De Montemayor (also known as Dona Maria)*** - The Marquesa is a kind, generous, religious, and eccentric woman. She may walk out of the theatre in the middle of a play, escape out of the back door of the church during a service, mutter dialogues to no one, and dress like a clown, but her heart is large. She showers love and attention on her daughter, forgives Camila for her rudeness, and helps those who are less fortunate than she. Towards the end of the novel, she rescues Pepita from the orphanage and even promises to give her love.

As one of the protagonists of the novel, Dona Maria has many important roles. First, she introduces many of the key characters, including Dona Clara, Camila, Uncle Pio, the Abbess, and Pepita. She is also the first to establish the theme of the importance of love. Having never received love from her .....

***Uncle Pio*** - Uncle Pio, one of the protagonists of the novel, is an interesting character and a bundle of contradictions. He has a pleasing personality, a generous nature, a keen wit, and a persuasive tongue, but he is also crafty and cunning. His life has not been easy, for he was forced to leave home and.....(Many other characters listed).....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Although the plot of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is relatively simple to understand, its presentation is fairly complex, for it is not told in chronological order or unified in a normal manner. In fact, the entire story is told as a series of flashbacks that span many years. The novel really begins with the climax of the plot. In the first chapter, there is an introduction to tell about the fall of the bridge of San Luis Rey and the impact that the accident has on the citizens of Peru, especially on Brother Juniper. As an eyewitness to the deaths of the five people on the bridge, Juniper decides that the accident is a providential act of God. To prove his point to his disciples, he decides to research the lives of the five victims and find why they have been punished. He spends six years interviewing their friends and relatives and collects all the information into a large book. The main things he learns about the victims are presented in chapters 2-4 of the book. Each of these .....

### THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The never-ending importance of love is the central theme of the novel. It is largely developed by the depiction of characters who suffer from a lack of love. The Marquesa showers her daughter with love, but is rejected by her. Esteban cares for Manuel through the pain of his infection, even though Manuel blames his twin for destroying his love for Camila. Uncle Pio is deserted by Camila, who becomes the mistress of the Viceroy. All of these characters suffer greatly during the book because they feel unloved. Ironically, the Marquesa, Uncle Pio, and Esteban are all crossing the bridge at the same time, and each of them .....

### OTHER ELEMENTS

#### IRONY

Throughout the novel, Wilder effectively uses irony to develop his plot, project his themes, and depict his

characters. It is ironic that Brother Juniper spends six years of his life writing a book about the .....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS - ESSAY TOPICS**

1. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is not one story but different stories linked together. Explain the ways in which Wilder unifies them.
2. Why is Brother Juniper important to the novel? What happens to him at the end?.....

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