

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Bridge of San Luis Rey by Thornton Wilder

Book Information

Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey
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This Pulitzer Prize winner is the story of a monk's attempt to investigate and explain the meaning of the loss of five lives when the finest bridge in all of Peru collapses.

Award: Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Adventure, Misc./Other; Disasters, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Brother Juniper a Franciscan missionary who witnesses the bridge's collapse and investigates the lives of those who died

Camila Perichole, the Perichole an actress who rises to stardom and whose son is killed on the bridge

Captain Alvarado a sea captain with whom Esteban is traveling when the bridge collapses

Don Andres de Ribera the Viceroy of Peru with whom Camila has three illegitimate children

Dona Clara the daughter of Dona Maria who leaves Peru to live away from her mother in Spain

Dona Maria, the Marquesa de Montemayor an unhappy and lonely Peruvian whose relationship with her daughter is documented by her letters; she dies on the bridge

Esteban an orphan who grows despondent after his twin's untimely death; he dies on the bridge

Jaime Camila's sickly, illegitimate son, who dies with Uncle Pio as they are crossing the bridge for Lima

Madre Maria del Pilar the Abbess of the Convent, whose order runs an orphanage

Manuel Esteban's twin, who dies of a leg infection

Pepita a young orphan who often accompanies Dona Maria; she dies on the bridge

the Archbishop an admirer of Camila who meets regularly with her and other close friends

Uncle Pio a friend of beautiful women who is adept at a variety of things and who manages Camila to stardom; he dies on the bridge

Vocabulary

bohemian term used to describe an artist who leads an unconventional life

chicha a kind of native South American liquor made by fermenting maize, sugar cane, and other plants

duenna a governess or chaperone

osier a plant in the willow family that has tough, flexible branches used for weaving

savant a knowledgeable or scholarly person

Synopsis

The Bridge of San Luis Rey raises the interesting question of whether the events of people's lives occur randomly or happen according to a divine plan. Brother Juniper, a Franciscan missionary ministering to Peru's poor, has his life changed by virtue of witnessing the collapse of the famous mountain bridge of San Luis Rey while five individuals are attempting to cross it. He sees this tragedy as his best opportunity to prove that God intervenes in people's lives for their own good.

He sets out to learn the details of the lives of the victims, but this task takes years to complete, and it eventually leads to his own execution.

The story relates the thoughts and feelings, successes and failures of the five victims as uncovered by Brother Juniper. He also uncovers the ways in which their lives are connected.

Dona Maria, the Marquesa de Montemayor leads a privileged but lonely life. Her only daughter leaves her to live in Spain, so Dona Maria is forced to write her letters to try to win her daughter's love.

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Pepita, an orphan being groomed to succeed the Abbess who heads the orphanage where she lives, becomes the Marquesa's companion. They are both killed on the bridge.

Esteban also begins his life at the same orphanage. He tries many things in life and becomes despondent after the untimely death of his twin brother, Manuel. Esteban is traveling to the seashore to begin a new life as a sailor when he dies on the bridge.

Uncle Pio is a man of many talents and an acquaintance of the Marquesa. He finds his true calling when he becomes the tutor of a talented young performer named Camila Perichole. He guides her to stardom, but his life ends along with Camila's young son, Jaime, as they are traveling across the bridge to Lima where he had planned to educate Jaime for a year.

Ironically, Brother Juniper's quest to prove the accident was an "Act of God" backfires; his book on the subject is judged to be heretical, and he is burned to death. In the end, the question raised at the story's outset is not resolved, as the author leaves that determination up to the reader.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Dona Maria writes of the events and people of Lima to impress her daughter and to win her love and affection. While her letters do not seem to sway Dona Clara, what do they accomplish for Dona Maria?

According to the narrator, Dona Maria's letters take on a life of their own, bringing her some notoriety. For herself, though, the letters are only an expression of her own selfishness until she reads Pepita's letter. Pepita's refusal to send a letter that is not "brave" changes Dona Maria's life. Her last letter becomes her "first," since it is her one and only courageous letter.

Literary Analysis

In what way is the bridge a symbol for life?

Before the accident, the bridge represents all that is predictable in life. Thousands of travelers crossed it over the years without incident, which is comparable to the thousand of mundane and ordinary events in each person's life. But, on that fateful summer day in 1714, the unpredictable occurs. This is also comparable to those extraordinary happenings in each person's life. Thus the bridge can be thought of as a symbol for life itself.

Inferential Comprehension

The author documents the significance of Uncle Pio's influence on Camila Perichole's theatrical career. Uncle Pio demands perfection from her, and she often complains about his tactics. Was Uncle Pio's dissatisfaction with anything less than perfection from Camila a good or bad thing for her? How would she have fared without his help? Explain your answer.

While Camila reaches great stardom under Uncle Pio's tutelage, the rigors of his constant demands and criticism may have contributed to her decision to leave the theatre and to not return. It is possible she could have been famous without Uncle Pio, but not as likely.

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Constructing Meaning

In *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Camila Perichole rises to stardom as a celebrated actress and is idolized by many fans. What similarities does Camila share with theatrical or movie stars in today's society?

Like many of today's "stars," Camila is very beautiful and possesses a great deal of charisma. She, like many of her counterparts today, is coached to stardom by a manager who demands perfection from her. The stress of such demands eventually leads her to leave the stage behind, as has happened to many real stars.

may have collapsed. Then have the students choose one possibility and write an article for an imaginary newspaper that details the event and supports their theory.

Making Predictions *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* ends with the lives of the Abbess, Dona Clara, and Camila intersecting. Ask your students to write an afterword for the story in which they predict what these three women do with their lives following the deaths of their friends and loved ones.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors This story is set in a historical period when the Roman Catholic Church was very powerful and influential. There are many cases in which those who went against the church's teachings were punished for this heresy with death. Have your students research the major heresies which arose against the church around the time of the story and how the church dealt with them. Ask the students to write a short report on their findings.

Comparing and Contrasting The author, Thornton Wilder, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for this story. Ask your students to consider the uniqueness of the storyline. Have them compare the circumstances of this story to those surrounding other real disasters or catastrophes. Have them write a summary of a scenario they create around some other tragic event, such as the volcanic eruption of the Mount St. Helens or a recent flood or earthquake. They should include some fictitious characters and what brings them to the scene of the tragedy.

Extending Meaning Brother Juniper's life is changed irrevocably when he witnesses the collapse of the bridge of San Luis Rey. He decides to investigate the lives of the five victims to prove how God intervenes in people's lives. Ask the students to brainstorm as many different possibilities they can think of for why the bridge