

# The bridge of san luis rey essay

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The ' Bridge of San Luis Rey' is the second novel of Thornton Wilder, published in November 1927 and awarded with a Pulitzer Prize in May 1928. Written at an early age – Thornton Wilder was 29 at the time, teaching at a private school for boys in New Jersey – the novel has been widely acknowledged as one greeted with overwhelming feelings on behalf of its readers, since it approaches in a very innovative way issues troubling the human nature. Do Fate and Destiny predefine people's lives? What is the extent to which humans are responsible for their experiences? Are some people condemned in an everlasting quest of true love? The thematic core of the novel is the collapse of a bridge – which had been built by Incas – on a summer day in Peru in 1714 and the resulting death of five people, who were on the bridge at that specific time. A monk named Juniper decides to inquire into those five people's lives, in an effort to deal with an arising, incessant question: Was there an invisible bridge of metaphysical nature connecting those people, so that they all shared a common way of having their lives ended? ' Why did this happen to those five?' is the question in the introduction of the novel addressed to the readers. So the plot involves the exploration and description of those people's lives. A drunken Marquesa, her protégé Pepita, a Harlequin named Uncle Pio, Esteban, one of two twins sharing a private language and Don Jaime, the son of Camilla, consist the puzzle of life's mysterious powers. As the writer himself put it in one of his letters ' The business of literature is not to answer questions but to state them fairly'. The aim of this essay is to provide the following specific questions, deriving from the novel itself, with illuminating answers. Answers which will contribute to our best reception of such a masterpiece.

1. Describe the attitude Marquesa has toward her daughter that causes Dona Clara to resent her.

Dona Clara is characterized as ' cold and intellectual' compared to the character of her mother Marquesa, who treats her with extremely annoying oppressive love. It is this love by a woman seeming so weak in front of her eyes, which leads Clara to developing resentful feelings for her mum and a strong wish to find her way out of this compulsive relationship.

2. Describe two ways in which Marquesa outwardly expresses her obsessive love for her daughter after her daughter has left for Spain.

Marquesa de Montemayor, represents the woman devoting all her existence to the daughter she gives birth to, as a means to heal the wounds of her soul caused by an unhappy childhood and unfortunate marriage. Her daughter's living is an unhappy surprise demanding for immediate actions. She starts writing her letters, something she never stopped doing, and she takes Pepita, a girl raised at the Convent of Santa Maria Rosa de la Rosas, as her companion.

3. A) What does Camila do in the theater to dishonor the Marquesa? B) Give one of the three reasons which motivate the Viceroy to make Camila apologize to the Marquesa.

A) Camila driven by her internal need to make her role draw the audience's attention, decided to improvise couplets instead of singing her usual songs. Her couplets were alluded to Marquesa's appearance, avarice, drunkenness and even her daughter's flight from her. She led the audience to laughter and murmuring, which turned into a triumph when Marquesa left the performance, following Pepita's advice who realized the dishonoring nature

of Camilla's behavior. B) Viceroy had three reasons for insisting on Camilla apologizing to Marquesa. One of them was that Camilla had crossed the line since she dishonored a lady of aristocracy, thus showing extreme liberty in her behavior. Any kind of insult to the aristocracy was an insult to Himself.

4. A) Briefly describe the kind of charitable work the Abbess does. B) Briefly describe one social cause the Abbess cares most about before she changes.

A) Abbess, Madre Maria del Pilar, is the woman responsible for the proper administration of Santa Maria de Las Rosas Convent. Running the Convent leads her to turning the place into the shelter for any unprotected human soul, deprived of love and the means for survival. She takes over the bringing up of orphans like Pepita, Esteban and Manuel, so that their personalities flourish into fulfilled people, ready to offer to the society. B) She incarnates a future social role which was out of the borders of the wilder imagination at that time and place. Abbess performs social work, aiming at improving the quality of life in Peru, emphasizing on the weakest social groups, orphan children and women. Her constant dream and obsessive thought is a society which ensures the dignity of women, having dealt successfully with social problems, such as poverty or lack of security or education. Women's liberty and dignity are her main cause, leaving no place inside her for the expression of any weaknesses or other feelings.

5. A) What position is Pepita being trained for by the Abbess. B) Why did the Abbess choose Pepita?

A) Pepita is being trained for the position of Abbess' successor by Abbess herself. It was the intimate coming of old age along with a great worry conquering her mind and soul. Abbess had to find a woman able to overtake

her role when she would not be able to serve it, due to her forthcoming old age, or even any sudden misfortune. B) Abbess had just completed her quick visit in the hospital, convent and orphanage looking for a person who could inspire her in believing she had found the proper one for taking the responsibility of keeping on the value of her work. In the courtyard she came face to face with a twelve year old girl who convinced her at once. The girl was directing the others at the trough telling them the less possible miracles in the life of Saint Rose of Lima. So that girl, Pepita, had leading skills and that's why she was chosen by Abbess within fractions of seconds.

6. A) What internal resolution of the Marquesa shows her change from passion to compassion? B) What external action by the Marquesa confirms her change from passion to compassion?

A) Marquesa changes due to Pepita's companionship. It is the letter Pepita writes to Abbess praising herself when she takes a glimpse of what real love is meant to be. All of a sudden her internal resolution is taking place. She has finally found real love in the behavior of Pepita, who has been standing by her side during all this time of keeping her companion. B) The external action through which Marquesa shows her change from passion to compassion is the letter she writes to her daughter. For the first time she writes a true, genuine letter full of her real love without any false decorative words. She now knows that true love shows and needs no disguise.

7. Pepita has a role in the change of someone else besides the Marquesa. A) Name the person. B) Explain how Pepita has a role in this person's change.

A) Pepita plays a significant role in Abbess' character without knowing it or ever learning it. It is Pepita's death which makes Abbess change. B) Pepita's

death makes Abbess realize that she ought to devote her life not to a future goal, the one of a society functioning in such a way that women's dignity is ensured, but to the present. Pepita died so young having experienced the magic of feeling and giving love without waiting for anything in return. So Abbess turns into a compassionate, fulfilled woman, no longer tortured by the agony of fulfilling her future dream but happy to be able to give and offer love in present.

8. A) Who is the woman Manuel loves in a passionate way? B) What does Manuel finally decide about this passion and why?

A) Manuel falls in love with Camilla Perichole, the most famous actress of Peru, whom she meets in the theatre where he works as a scribe along with his twin brother, Esteban. B) Manuel finally decides never see Camilla again after one night when his brother finds out their relationship. Being identical twins with Esteban and having developed a very close relationship, Manuel feels that falling in love with Camilla and caring for her may cause inconvenience or bad feelings of rejection to his brother.

9. A) Describe one of the two ways Esteban behaves with apparent generosity toward his brother out of self-love rather than real compassion. B) Explain why that way was really self-love rather than real compassion.

A) Esteban treats Manuel and his love towards the woman of his dreams, Camilla, with generosity since he tells him to keep on seeing her. Although Manuel expresses his wish to stop his relationship with her, Esteban tries to convince him otherwise. B) Esteban's attitude towards Manuel causes surprise since a natural reaction of his, would be to express possessiveness based on the strong bond developed between the twin brothers.

Nevertheless, Esteban proves to be acting carried away by his self-love rather than compassion. Self-love is what motivates him because the real cause of his attitude lies in his wish not to lose his brother's love. Fearing the new passionate feeling of love his brother has for a woman, he tries to gain indirect admiration by his brother, so that he makes his brother really attached to him and probably lead him to the opposite of what his advice is. This is a kind of subconscious psychological game which Esteban plays. If real compassion was what he really felt, then he would try to approach Manuel and Camilla differently and insist more on his advice. On the contrary he decides to go out at night while raining, after their first discussion on Camilla causing bad feelings to Manuel.

10. A) Whose death begins Esteban's painful change from passion to compassion? B) Describe one instance of Esteban's strange behavior after this person's death which indicates Esteban's suffering.

A) Manuel's death contributes to Esteban changing from passion to compassion as far as his feelings are concerned. B) Esteban's suffering becomes more than once evident in the plot of the novel. One intense instance is the exact moment of Manuel's death when he says that he himself is Manuel and not Esteban. Confusing his identity is deriving from his pain of loss.

11. A) Of what is Captain Alvarado a captain? B) Explain how the death of Captain Alvarado's daughter makes it appropriate that he be the one to help Esteban?

A) Literally speaking, Captain Alvarado is the captain of a ship merchandising in countries away from Peru, and traveling 'all over world' exploring

unknown - to people of Peru - geographical places. But metaphorically, the reader could see in Captain Alvarado a man who, thanks to his power and personality, turns into the captain trying to draw a new route for hurt Esteban, helping him to keep on living. B) Losing your child is one of the most devastating personal losses a person can experience in a lifetime. Therefore, Captain Alvarado is the right person to help Esteban cope with the loss of his beloved twin brother. They have both experienced the pain of losing a close family member who gave meaning to their living.

12. A) From what serious harm does Captain Alvarado save Esteban? B) What does Captain Alvarado encourage Esteban to do instead?

A) Esteban is saved by committing suicide the moment when Alvarado gets into the room and takes Esteban away from the hanging rope. Esteban's life is saved. B) Alvarado encourages Esteban to go and buy the present he had previously told him he wanted to buy for Abbess, Madre Maria del Pilar. 'How about that present for Madre Maria del Pilar?' Captain Alvarado asked him.

13. A) Describe Don Jaime's appearance. B) Explain how Don Jaime conducts himself despite suffering from convulsions.

Don Jaime, a seven year old boy, had inherited his mother's, Camilla's, forehead and eyes along with his father's liability to convulsions. He was a rachitic boy, feeling ashamed of any occurrence of his compulsions in front of public. He was usually dressed in garnet velvet, since garnet is the kind of material which empowers the physical tolerance and offers a feeling of energy. B) He would usually follow Camilla from a distance, trying to keep himself away from the ladies who would try to detain him in conversation. He



would deliberately try to be on his own, reminding others, whenever they saw him, of a person from ‘an old ballad’ who had not found his place yet.

14. What shift in Camila’s behavior toward uncle Pio initiates his change from passion to compassion?

The moment Camilla comes to meet Uncle Pio in the French gardens, she greets him the way she always used to. Uncle Pio feels nice to see her and experiencing her true joy for meeting him. He feels that he shouldn’t lose his trust in her. But the main reason why he changes his passion to compassion, is what he witnesses in their dialogue. He sees a woman feeling inconvenient, fearful of going back to what she had spent all her youth – theater – trying desperately to convince herself that she is happy. But it is evident to Uncle Pio’s eyes that Camilla isn’t happy. On the contrary, she seems totally absorbed in a non-liberate way of approaching life and stuck within the golden prison of her new social class.

15. After Camila leaves society because of her disfigurement, what are two ways in which Uncle Pio shows his compassion?

Uncle Pio despite the rumors heard concerning Camilla’s attitude towards her friends, he manages to visit her in her farm and let himself in, while lending her at the same time in a very discreet way some money. After having been thrown out of her house after one of Camilla’s outbursts, he decides to disguise in a young girl and stands weeping under her window. He persuades Camilla to approach him and when she reveals his true identity, he begs her to allow him to take Don Jaime with him and teach him all he knows, aiming at helping him improve his present and future life.

16. A) Why are Don Jaime and Uncle Pio together when they die in the Bridge

accident? B) What does Camila realize about herself, Don Jaime, and uncle Pio after the bridge accident?

A) Camilla decides to talk to Don Jaime when she is faced with Uncle Pio's request to take over the upbringing of her son. So, Don Jaime agrees and he sets out with Uncle Pio to leave his life under Pio's advice and guidance. The Bridge was in their route and they crossed it, waiting to get some rest on the other side. B) The bridge accident is treated by Camilla as the third in row sign she gets from the skies, after her small-pox and her son's illness. For a year she resorts in her self-despair because she realizes that the persons who loved her, had been failed by her. The chance to show them her love had been lost forever.

17. Uncle Pio's death has a role in a character's change from passion to compassion. A) Name that character. B) Explain Uncle Pio's role in the change.

A) Uncle Pio's death affects greatly Camilla, who realizes that he had really loved her and cared for her own prosperity. B) Uncle Pio had found the courage to show his devotion to Camilla. Perfection is an ideal sought on behalf of Uncle Pio during Camilla's being mentored by him. He realized that this devotion was misunderstood by Camilla, who turned away from him. But Camilla's belief in managing to feel happy through the riches of her entering an upper social class proved false. And when Camilla had started realizing it, Uncle Pio was once more there, near her, ready to help her, to listen to her and take over her son's upbringing so that he could offer him a better life.

18. A) Name the character whom the Abbess helps to complete the change from passion to compassion. B) Briefly indicate how the Abbess helps this

character.

A) Abbess helps indirectly both Camilla and Dona Clara to complete their change from passion to compassion, since she accepts both of them in her Convent and helps them to become part of her team. But it is Camilla who is helped more, since she is the one who still suffers and has not resolved her grief for the death of her beloved ones. She characterizes herself ‘ a sinner’ and addresses with despair to Abbess for her help. B) Abbess manages to help her by taking her to the garden of the Convent. She indirectly gives Camilla a vivid example of how easy it really is to change. Abbess describes the case of Sister Juana. She knew nothing on gardening and yet she is now the one responsible for this magical garden. She has found peace with herself through her devotion to offering and sharing with others. So, Camilla finds the strength to let all her grief go out and be transformed to the need for offering, to the feeling of compassion.

19. Identify the two events that cause Dona Clara to change regarding her mother and come to her mother’s defense when Dona Clara visits the Abbess.

The two events causing Dona Clara to change are her pregnancy and giving birth to her beautiful daughter as well as the change in style and content of the letter she receives from her mother, when Marquesa experiences her change from passion to compassion.

20. After Camila has changed from passion to compassion, what does she decide to do with the rest of her life?

Camilla joins Abbess and decides to devote her life to the social work performed by Abbess and the Convent. She has come to realize that the only

way to find peace with herself and manage to treat the pain for her son's and Pio's loss is to offer and share love through social work, helping those in need, in the name of charitable and beneficial work.