

ANALYSIS

The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927)



Thornton Wilder

(1897-1975)

“Then comes Thornton Wilder with his *Cabala* (1926) and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927). Each of these is a collection of short stories so closely interrelated by recurring characters that it is felt to be a novel. Each one is a frame story.... In *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* we start from a document, a book by the Franciscan Brother Juniper of Lima.

With the falling of the old Inca bridge between Lima and Cuzco in 1714 five persons lost their lives. Brother Juniper is interested to know whether an inquiry into the private lives of these five persons may be made to prove statistically the providential character of God’s decrees. The author is not satisfied with Brother Juniper’s account of these people and undertakes to set forth what he knows—fully conscious, however, that even he may not have got at ‘the central passion of Dona Maria’s life; nor of Uncle Pio’s, not even of Esteban’s,’ that even he may have ‘missed the very spring within the spring.’

The five persons in question are the Marquesa de Montemayor and her servant Pepita; Uncle Pio, an impresario; Don Jaime, weakly son of a great actress, the Perichole; and Esteban, one of twin brothers, foundlings, brought up by a great-hearted abbess. Part Two is an account of the marquesa, especially her unparalleled devotion to her daughter in Spain. Part Three is named after Esteban, and gives an account of his extraordinary love for his brother, his tragic sorrow when his brother falls in love with the Perichole, and his decision to make a voyage with the great traveler Captain Alvarado. Part Four is named after Uncle Pio, but is quite as much concerned with the Perichole, whom he has trained as an actress and loved as a woman. The various characters keep reappearing throughout, including the viceroy and the abbess. Part Five is a sort of epilogue, bringing together the survivors—the viceroy, the captain, the abbess. We are also brought back to Brother Juniper and his ill-starred effort to justify the ways of God to man.

The dominant motif is Love—that unselfish devotion to another human being, or to humanity in general, which covers and obliterates a multitude of sins. Brother Juniper is an inspiration. The several stories are woven together, with infinite cunning and ingenuity, into a single pattern. The narrative is brilliantly done. It is done in the traditional, the classic, rather than the modernistic, manner. There is no whiff of Joyce, Woolf, or Dos Passos. And yet structurally it is of our time. This is no story built around one man, nor

founded upon intrigue or dramatic issue, taken in the direction of time. It is a composite picture, a pattern made up of many lives set side by side.”

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932-60) 477-78

“In 1927 Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* was read by everybody... After *The Cabala* (1925), with its apparent revelations of gossip and intrigue in modern Rome, he turned to Peru for his setting in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927). The time is 1714, the central incident the fall of a bridge on the road from Lima to Cuzco. The book pretends to be based on the researches of a contemporary Franciscan who passionately investigated the lives of the victims, to find out if the act of God had been what men could call just. About this perennial problem Wilder told his own stories of the five very different persons who died that day. The Franciscan is burned as a heretic, and Wilder comes, inevitably, to no satisfying conclusion. But his presentation of the ancient vexed argument excited an immense number of readers, his characters live with a gentle freshness, and his book established a little legend.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1940-68) 330

“In 1714 a bridge over a canyon near Lima, Peru, collapses, and five travelers are killed. Brother Juniper, a Franciscan, resolves to help place theology ‘among the exact sciences’ by proving the catastrophe to be an act of divine providence. He collects the results of his six years of investigation in a great book, which is pronounced heretical. He and his book are burned at the stake, but a copy survives, and from it come these stories of the five who fell with the bridge.... The Marquesa de Montemayor has devoted her life to her daughter Clara, a brilliant, selfish woman who goes to Spain after her marriage. The Marquesa’s wonderful letters are now her only way of showing her affection, but through her companion, the child Pepita, the Marquesa discovers she has not had true love for Clara and decides to reform. Two days later she and Pepita die on the bridge.... The twins Manuel and Esteban, who feel an intense fraternal bond, become scribes and lead a solitary life together.

The actress La Perichole employs Manuel to write her letters, but when an infatuation threatens to separate him from his brother, Manuel ends their connection. He dies soon afterward, and the despairing Esteban, prevented from suicide, signs for a voyage as seaman, but is killed on the bridge.... Through the teaching of the old rogue Uncle Pio, La Perichole is the most celebrated of actresses, and mistress of the viceroy, to whom she has borne three children. Socially ambitious, she leaves the stage, but her beauty is ravaged by smallpox, and heartbroken she retires to seclusion, devoid of interest except in her son Jaime. Uncle Pio persuades her to let the boy go with him for a year to begin his education, but Pio and Jamie die in the fall of the bridge.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* was not published in the expectation of any particular sales. How could a slim, exquisitely-wrought, intensely ‘literary’ work, which did not even tell a connected story, and which, besides all its other shortcomings, had the misfortune to have been conceived as a philosophical novel set in eighteenth-century Peru—how could such a book possibly have been expected to whip up its own steam to become a runaway best seller, pick up the Pulitzer Prize, get itself filmed twice, and even achieve the crowning distinction of being serialized in the Hearst newspapers? Yet all these things happened....

When the bridge falls, on July 20, 1714, Brother Juniper cannot avoid asking himself, ‘Why did this happen to those five?’ He devotes himself, accordingly, to the study of their lives, and what he learns makes up (though not as he formulated it), the series of narratives which constitute the body of the book. Though Wilder ‘spares’ the reader Brother Juniper’s generalizations, we are told that ‘He thought he saw in the same accident, the wicked visited by destruction and the good called early to Heaven.’ But the Church finds the book in which his conclusions are set forth heretical, and both he and it are burned in the marketplace.

This is one of the most unusual ideas around which any modern novel has been built, and in the cool, distant manner in which Wilder has chosen to treat it, it is a minor masterpiece. It is not a 'novel' really; we are not asked, nor given the time, to live our way into these people's lives; for the most part, we are merely told what happened to them, not shown. Yet they are as vividly presented as characters in a [novella] can be: the Marquesa de Montemayor (who has been suggested by Madame de Sevigne); the Perichole, who brings all the glamour of the theatre into the book with her; and Esteban, for whose grief, after his brother's death, we are even made to feel a little pity."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 405-06

"*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is a pattern novel in which the lives of the various characters are linked together by a single catastrophic incident. The central theme is that of love; several types are portrayed and analyzed. On a certain day of July, 1714 a precarious bridge across a gorge in Peru breaks, killing five persons who happen to be on it. These are the Marquesa de Montemayor; Pepita, her maid; Esteban, an Indian; Uncle Pio, coachman of a popular actress; and Jaime, son of the actress La Perichole.

Each of these persons loves another human being intensely and hopelessly; the types of love range from that of the Marquesa (drawn from the historical figure of Mme. De Sevigne) for her selfish daughter Clara to that of the primitive Esteban for his brother Manuel. The falling of the bridge occurs at the climax of each of these lives; it is, in fact, the only answer to the predicaments of the characters. The inhabitants of San Luis Rey attach no particular significance to the accident, but a scholarly monk, Brother Juniper, becomes interested in the incident and makes it his business to investigate the lives of the victims. His researches at last lead him to a profound respect for the omniscience and benevolence of the Providence which arranged so ingenious a solution to human problems.

This novel, which brought first fame to Wilder when it was published, is still his best-known work. Its chief literary affinities are with James and Proust, although the latter author probably had little direct influence on Wilder. The style of Mme. De Sevigne's letters is also frequently cited as an influence on the style of the novel."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 307-08

"'On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated the five travelers into the gulf below.' So begins Wilder's best-known novel, a brilliantly written fable that became a best seller, won the Pulitzer Prize, and was made into a movie. Brother Juniper, a Franciscan friar and Wilder's mouthpiece, witnesses the accident and wonders whether it really was an accident or a deliberate plan of the Almighty. His investigation of the victims' lives, to prove that their sudden deaths were justified, forms the core of the book. The five characters are the Marquesa de Montemayor (based on Mme. De Sevigne); the little girl Pepita, dominated by the Marquesa; Esteban, rival of his twin brother Manuel for the favors of the actress Camilla Perichole (heroine of the Offenbach opera); Uncle Pio, a lovable adventurer; and Camilla's young son Jaime."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)