

# **THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY**

**Thornton Wilder**

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**A Critical Paper by**

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“On Friday noon, July 20, 1714”, the novel opens by telling us, “the finest bridge in all Peru broke...” We are also told in that first sentence that five pedestrians perished in that fateful event. Such structural failures and other accidents of course happen all the time. We are all of us familiar with such tragic losses of lives. But the novel is not so much about the bridge itself, but rather positions itself as an exploration of what if anything such accident, so-called “Acts of God” tell us about the workings of the cosmos in general, and more specifically about the justice of the Divine. This question is hardly new; it has received particular attention in the last two thousand years with the spreading of monotheism and the notion of a single, all-powerful deity who is both supposed to be totally in control and perfectly just. This area of theological examination is called “theodicy” and I can assure you that tons of ink have been expended by generations of highly educated theologians in a dogged pursuit of an answer. The novel before us itself proposes an answer based on a quote “scientific” unquote examination

In this novel, the question of theodicy rises in the mind of one Brother Juniper who happened to have been approaching the bridge and to have looked up just as the rope snapped and the travelers were hurled to their deaths in the gorge below. For a man of the cloth dedicated to converting the pagan Indians to Christianity, the need to explain divine love, mercy and justice in face of such an event must have been of particular urgency. “Why,” Brother Juniper asks himself, “do such accidents happen and why did this accident happen specifically to those five?” Brother Juniper makes the methodological judgment that if he were to examine the lives of those who were lost he might adduce the golden thread, as it were, that shared attribute of fate that brought the unfortunates together at precisely that place at precisely that time. The rest of the novel is in essence, a report of Brother Juniper’s researches and subsequent conclusions, including, maybe ironically, his own death, now by deliberate action of the Church.

Before moving on, let me step back for a moment to say something about the structure of the book. On the one hand, traveler’s tales are known in English

literature as far back as at least “The Canterbury Tales” of Chaucer. In this structure, apparently random travelers come together by chance and share their stories, or in other cases share an adventure or a fate. It is also a long-standing literary device to have the action occur in either a mystic location, or one that is at least distant enough in time and/or place to have a mystical aura. Think of many of Shakespeare’s plays. This literary device allows the author to explore issues without the constraints and logics of normal life. The focus is on the individual stories. So maybe one way of approaching this novel is to see it as a collection of some number of character-studies, surrounded by a narrative frame about a tragic bridge collapse to give unity to the whole.

A variation on this would be to consider the novel not as a series of random character portraits, but as an examination of a particular time and place. Here I am thinking of say the novels of Willa Cather’s about life in nineteenth century Territory on New Mexico or on a homestead in Nebraska. In the case of the novel before us, the setting is colonial Peru, a country still largely pagan but with a significant and growing Spanish Catholic presence. Maybe one goal of the author is to help us imagine what life was like for Spanish Catholics in the New World in the early eighteenth century, a time mind you, when the world of the colonizers themselves was moving away from traditional religion to the more modern and secular attitudes of the enlightened world. Read in this way, Father Juniper becomes a logical focus since he himself is a missionary dedicated to being a bridge between Christianity and the indigenous population on the one hand, and maybe he is as well a bridge between the old Catholicism and the new age of inquiry on the other. In the novel’s imagined world of colonial Peru, each of the victims, as well as other characters, occupies a certain niche in Spanish Colonial society, each of which sheds light on the larger context. One of the victims, for example, is the Marquesa of Montemayor (AKA Doña María) who is portrayed as intensely religious, even superstitious but is facing an intergenerational gap with her daughter who has moved to Spain and is living an aristocratic, although apparently not a pious, life. Another example would be the Abbess Madre María Pilar, under whose care the orphan Pepita and the twins Manuel and Esteban grew up. In Madre María we have a Catholic religious dealing with the social issues of the real world in colonial Lima. And there is also of course, the Archbishop of Lima, who both performs the memorial service for the victims but who also ultimately condemns Brother Juniper and his researches to the flames. We also are given insights into other characters who inhabit that world – the restless wanderer and explorer in the person of Captain Alvarado, for example, or the popular actress Camila Perichole who rises to fame but eventually loses her charm due to age and childbirth and finally disease. And let us not forget Uncle Pio, the “aged

harlequin” who is a man of letters, what we might today call a theatrical impresario, and the mentor of Camila. In short we have a somewhat representation slice of colonial society, with its adventurers, nobility, theater, religious personages and their various sufferings of orphanhood, widowhood, career transitions, and of course death. Some are still quite religious in the traditional sense: Brother Juniper, the archbishop, the Marquesa, and others have moved away: Camila the actress and later mistress to the Viceroy, the twins, Uncle Pio, and Captain Alvarado who seeks comfort not in the Church but in sailing the seas.

There is also a third way of reading this novel, not as just a format for reviewing certain life stories and not as an examination of Spanish colonial society in Peru during a transitional period in Western history, but as what it purports to, namely a theological consideration of theodicy. After all, what unites all five of the bridge victims is that each has just embarked on a change in life. The Marquesa resolves to reform herself and finally establish a loving relationship with her daughter, bringing with her long-suffering maid Pepita. Esteban is trying to deal with his own guilt feelings for the death of his beloved brother Manuel, and is going to follow Captain Alvarado’s therapy of travel. Ironically, Esteban attempts suicide and is rescued by the Captain. At the bridge the Captain takes the land route down into the gorge and is spared the collapse, while the erstwhile suicide Esteban chooses the bridge and so meets death anyway. Uncle Pio is struggling with his frustrated and unanswered love of Camila and has taken over the care of her sickly son Don Jaime. Both Pio and the boy die on the bridge as they journey to their new life. And maybe we should add to the victims a sixth, Brother Juniper himself, who made the passage from being a scientific researcher into an area of Church doctrine to being deemed a heretic.

Given this cast of characters, I think it is fair to say that we see a culture in early eighteenth century Peru in which the native population is slowly crossing over into Catholicism while the Spanish Catholic population is undergoing its own complex transformations. Seen in that context, the collapse of the bridge, this tragic “act of God”, becomes a signal moment. It might explain why the aftermath was so fraught, even the Archbishop was called on to lead the memorial service for what was hardly a mass disaster. It also explains, maybe, why Brother Juniper both felt so compelled to find a scientific answer to why such theodicies happen, and then found that his scientific answer was to lead to his execution. It is worth pointing out that in the end Camila is working for the abbess, and Doña Clara finally becomes reconciled to her now dead mother. So at least for some of the survivors there is a kind of closure.

There is also the odd fact, mentioned briefly and never returned to, that the collapse became an occasion of national soul-searching. But even this becomes ambiguous. As Wilder tells us, “The servant girls returned the bracelets and they had stolen and usurers harangued their wives angrily in defense of usury”. Left unexplained, at least in my mind, is not only why this collapse had such a cultural impact, nor what that cultural impact means.

The story is clearly divided into two very uneven parts. In the first part, which tells of the lives of those on the bridge at its collapse, is really a series of tales of misery, frustrated ambitions, unrequited love and loss. In some cases, there seems to be a turn to better times, that is reconciliation (in the case of the Marquesa), renewed relationships (Uncle Pio and Camila), new companionship (Esteban and Captain Alvarado) and new hope (Jaime). All of these projected improvements of course end in death at the bottom of the gorge. This is the irony that provokes Brother Juniper’s researches. The other much shorter part of the novel tells of new relationships created. Camila turns to the Abbess of Santa María Rosa de la Rosas for help in her own tragic losses of her son and uncle. She ends up working as an aid in the abbey. Doña Clara also ultimately finds her way to the abbey and is moved by the good works the abbess does for the indigent, sick and blind. Maybe at the end, then, even out of this seemingly senseless tragedy some good does emerge. The story ends with the Abbesses’ poignant observation that, “There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

Beyond the bridge’s victims themselves, the real tragic hero of the novel, it seems to me, is Brother Juniper. Brother Junipero is a sympathetic person all the way around. He is a missionary to the native Indians, surely a difficult and self-sacrificing job (as compared, say, to the ease and corpulence of the Archbishop). He is sincerely troubled by the fatal accident he witnesses and devotes six years of research in trying scientifically to adduce some rational or meaning. It is true that in the end his efforts came to naught. It is also true that he paid a heavy price for his efforts— seeing his book destroyed and himself condemned to be burned at the stake. The one remaining copy of his work lay moldering and neglected in the library of the University of San Marco.

So at the end of the day, where do we stand? What have we learned? Certainly the horrible death of Brother Juniper is itself a kind of senseless “act of God”, although as carried out by the Church rather than carried out by an act of nature. We are left with the question that opens the novel, maybe in an even more poignant form. But there is no answer, or at least no satisfying answer. Maybe

that is the meaning of the Abbess's rather cryptic statement at the end: there is no answer, there is no sense, there is only love. Deal with it.

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### **QUESTIONS**

1. At the end of the novel, Wilder puts into the thoughts of the Abbess the following words, "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning." Is this a fair summary of the meaning of this novel? Is this what the accident and its aftermath really demonstrate?
2. "I shall spare you Brother Juniper's generalizations. They are always with us. He thought he saw in the same accident the wicked visited by destruction and the good called early to Heaven. He thought he saw pride and wealth confounded as an object lesson to the world, and he thought he saw humility crowned and rewarded for the edification of the city" (Part V). At the end Brother Juniper not only finds no answer, but is eventually executed for his investigations. Is the point then that there is no justice in the world, or just that we can not discern it? Was Brother Juniper executed for his answer, or for attempting to find an answer scientifically?
3. "The Archbishop knew that most of the priests of Peru were scoundrels. It required all his delicate Epicurean education to prevent his doing something about it; he had to repeat over to himself his favorite notions: that the injustice and unhappiness in the world is a constant; that the theory of progress is a delusion; that the poor, never having known happiness, are insensible to misfortune." (Part IV). Is the novel at some level designed to be a critique of the Church, and maybe of Christianity more broadly?
4. "The discrepancy between faith and the facts is greater than is generally assumed." (Part V). Another way of looking at the novel is to see it as an essay on the relationship between the scientific method on the one hand, and theological enquiry on the other. If so, is the point that the two modes of investigating the universe are incompatible, or that the scientific method shows theological enquiry to be vacuous?
5. The characters that are sketched in Brother Juniper's report could be seen to be overdrawn and so not descriptive of the actual complexities of human life. Do you

agree? Would Wilder's purpose have been better accomplished by studying the real victims of a real accident?