The Bridge of San Luis Rey

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THORNTON WILDER

Born in Wisconsin at the turn of the twentieth century, Thornton Wilder spent much of his childhood in China, where his father was an American diplomat. Returning to the United States, he shuttled between private schools in various states; he began college at Oberlin and eventually graduated from Yale University, after which he completed a master's in French Literature at Princeton University. Subsequently Wilder worked as a high school English teacher until the publication of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, his first novel, brought unexpected royalties, speaking engagements, and a Pulitzer Prize. Following this entrance onto the literary scene, Wilder became one of the most well-known and influential mid-century writers; his friends included Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, and Ernest Hemingway. Wilder served in the military briefly during World War I and extensively during World War II, earning medals for his leadership on the African front. Wilder never married, and most biographers have concluded that he was gay. He lived out his later years in Connecticut with his sister Isabella, and died in the house they shared in 1975.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel is set in eighteenth-century colonial Peru. Originally inhabited by the powerful Inca tribe, Peru was first colonized by Spanish Conquistadors under the leadership of Francisco Pizarro in 1532. For the next several centuries, a viceroy (or deputy of the Spanish king) ruled the country from Lima. The indigenous population was decimated by infectious diseases brought by the conquistadors; they were also enslaved, displaced, forcibly converted to Christianity, and murdered in large numbers by conquistadors and subsequent generations of Spanish settlers. Indigenous leaders mounted several rebellions during this period, but none were successful.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In its purposefully stark and sometimes unrealistic style, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* resembles other modernist literature of the post-WWI era, such as Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (notably, Wilder and Hemingway were friends and even considered living together while they were both abroad in Europe). While *The Bridge of San Luis* was Wilder's first literary success, his later and better-known plays, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, both depart from and reflect his first novel. Whereas Wilder set *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in a time and place remote to his own life, Wilder's plays delve into seemingly ordinary small-town American life; *Our Town* chronicles daily life in a fictional Connecticut town, while *The Skin of Our Teeth* portrays a middle-class New Jersey family. However, Wilder's novel and plays share some modern stylistic devices (both *San Luis Rey* and *Our Town* feature an omniscient narrator who directly addresses the reader or audience). Moreover, like the plays, *San Luis Rey* uses the social dynamics of a specific and unique place and time to pose questions that are universally relevant.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*
- **When Written:** 1920s
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1927
- **Literary Period:** Twentieth century
- **Genre:** Historical fiction
- **Setting:** Eighteenth-century colonial Lima
- **Climax:** Five main characters die when a bridge collapses.
- **Antagonist:** Random catastrophe
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Moneymaker. Thornton Wilder made a whopping $87,000 in royalties from the first edition of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*—about $1,000,000 today.

Real-Life Implications. At a memorial ceremony shortly after the September 11 attacks in New York City, British Prime Minister Tony Blair chose to read aloud the last paragraph of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

PLOT SUMMARY

On July 20, 1714, an important bridge outside Lima, Peru, collapses without warning, plunging five travelers to their instant deaths. This unprecedented evet becomes a communal touchstone for the Limean population, which can't fathom why such a catastrophe would occur. Especially interested is a friar named Brother Juniper, who witnesses the bridge collapse and afterwards becomes obsessed with proving that the disaster was a justified act of God. In order to do so, he investigates the lives of all the victims, recording even the most trivial facts in an enormous book, which he hopes will eventually help him understand why God allowed the bridge collapse to happen.

However, "for all his diligence" Brother Juniper is never able to understand the "central passions" that motivated each of his subjects. The novel's narrator muses that even though he believes himself better informed than Brother Juniper, he will also fall prey to the same problems.

One of the bridge collapse's victims is Doña María, the Marquesa de Montemayor. Doña María is born shy and unattractive daughter of a rich Limean merchant; she frequently quarrels with her mother and eventually marries a poor nobleman solely in order to leave home. When she gives birth to a daughter, Clara, Doña María channels all her energy and insecurities into loving her daughter, but Clara grows up to be repulsed and hostile to her mother, and eventually marries a Spanish count in order to get away from her. Left behind in Lima, the Marquesa becomes increasingly eccentric, talking to herself in the street and often failing to dress herself correctly. In an attempt to gain her daughter's love and admiration, Doña María writes her frequently; she turns out to be a gifted writer, and long after her death her dry and witty anecdotes eventually become an important and highly acclaimed record of her colonial milieu.

The only person who attends to Doña María is Pepita, a young girl who grew up in a Catholic orphanage nearby. She's the protégé of the Abbess Madre María, a formidable woman who oversees most of the city's charitable works. The Abbess wants Pepita, a kind and intelligent girl, to take over her work after her death, so she sends her to work for Doña María so that she can gain a better understanding of the world. Pepita doesn't like working for the strange old woman, and she has no idea that the Abbess is preparing her for a more important job; however, since she's a poor girl without any connections, she submits to her work without complaint.

Eventually, Clara informs her mother that she's pregnant. This information sends the Marquesa into a frenzy of worry for her daughter's health. She sends her numerous letters brimming with superstitious advice, and eventually decides to make a pilgrimage to a shrine outside the city. Bringing Pepita with her, she crosses over the famous bridge and meditates for a long time inside the church; at last, she's filled with a new sense of tranquility as she realizes that she can do nothing to influence the course of her daughter's pregnancy. As she and Pepita journey back to the city a day later, they both fall victim to the bridge's collapse.

The novel proceeds to another victim, a young man named Esteban. As a baby, he and his twin brother, Manuel, are delivered to the Abbess's orphanage and grow up under her firm but kind care. When they grow up, they work as scribes and errand runners throughout the city, remaining extremely close and living together; they even have their own language that they speak together. However, one day the brothers go to the theater, and Manuel instantly falls in love with the lead actress, Camila Perichole. He starts to lurk around the theater constantly and thinks of nothing but the Perichole; he's thrilled when she summons him to see her one day, but she only wants him to transcribe her letters to her secret lover, the Viceroy of Lima. From then on, he frequently writes letters for her. Meanwhile, Manuel's infatuation strains his relationship with Esteban, who feels betrayed that for the first time his brother has feelings that don't include him. Eventually, Manuel realizes that he has to choose between his passion for the actress and his relationship with his brother. He choses to remain loyal to Esteban and brusquely informs the Perichole that he doesn't want to write letters for her anymore.

Shortly after this, Manuel cuts himself on a piece of metal; the cut becomes infected, and despite Esteban's devoted care, he dies after three painful days. Esteban's grief almost drives him insane; he spends all his time roaming the city, and even the Abbess can't calm or comfort him. Wracking her brain to think of a solution, she sends for Captain Alvarado. The Captain is a noted Peruvian explorer and friend to both the Abbess and Doña María; his restless journeying is a result of his grief for his own daughter, who died in childhood. Thinking that this man might comfort Esteban, the Abbess sends him to search for the young man. Captain Alvarado finds Esteban in Cuzco and asks him to join his crew for his next expedition. At first Esteban accepts the offer, but later in the evening he becomes upset and tries to hang himself; it's only Captain Alvarado's quick intervention that saves his life. The next day, they head towards Lima. When they reach the bridge outside the city, Esteban starts across before the captain and dies in the collapse.

The novel progresses to another narrative, that of Uncle Pio, Camila Perichole's acting coach, assistant, and manservant. Born in Castile as the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman, Uncle Pio runs away to Madrid at a young age and works and scrapes out a living through his inventiveness, charisma, and cunning. Although he's good at every job he undertakes, he can't bear to stay settled in one for long. His one passion is Spanish literature and theater, which he comes to know by working in and around the Madrid theaters. After a particularly bad scrape in Madrid's underworld, Uncle Pio flees to Peru, where he discovers Camila Perichole, an abused young girl singing in seedy cafes. Seeing her talent, Uncle Pio takes her home and teaches her to sing and act, eventually touring her around the whole continent as a performer. He's generally kind to the girl, but pushes her hard in order to make her perform well.

Eventually, Uncle Pio and the Perichole return to Lima, where she becomes the star of the city theater. Her success makes her somewhat complacent and less interested in her work. She becomes the mistress of Don Andrés, the Viceroy of Peru and learns to desire conventional respectability, rather than success as an artist. Eventually, she stops acting at all, begins to attend church, and moves to a fashionable neighborhood in the hills outside Lima. With the Viceroy, she has three children; her

favorite is the beautiful and sensitive Jaime. Perichole distances herself from Uncle Pio, who she sees as representing her lowly origins.

One day, the Perichole contracts smallpox and loses her famous beauty. Devastated, the actress secludes herself in her house, gives away all her jewels and fine clothes, and permits no visitors. In this time of crisis, Uncle Pio takes over the management of her house and children, even lending her money. The Perichole becomes angry with him and kicks him out of the house, but eventually he convinces her to let Jaime live with him in Lima, instead of being trapped in the gloomy house with no company. Reluctantly, the Perichole concedes. The next day Uncle Pio packs up all Jaime's things and they set off for Lima. Crossing the famous bridge into the city, they become the bridge collapse's last victims.

After the bridge collapse, Brother Juniper is convinced that "the world's time had come for proof" that all events, even the most catastrophic, are the result of God's will. He's already tried to prove this principle before—when a plague struck his parish, he attempted to rate all the villagers based on piety to see if there was any apparent logic in the deaths. However, he couldn't find any patterns. Now, Brother Juniper embarks on an exhaustive investigation of the bridge collapse, but this endeavor is also confusing: "he thought he saw in the same accident the wicked visited by destruction and the good called early to Heaven." Eventually, the Spanish Inquisition decides that Brother Juniper's book is heretical, and he is burned at the stake in Lima.

Some time after Brother Juniper's death, the Archbishop of Lima holds a memorial service for all the victims. The Abbess attends, full of mourning for Pepita and Manuel; moreover, she has to face the fact that without her protégé, it's unlikely that anyone will continue her work after her death. The Perichole also attends the service, leaving her house for the first time since her illness. Afterwards, she seeks out the Abbess and asks the older woman for spiritual advice. The Abbess listens to the actress tell of her son and her grief, and she shows her around her abbey's gardens. While the two women are talking, Doña Clara arrives, also seeking guidance from the Abbess. The Abbess comforts both women by showing the abbey and all the ways in which it helps the city's poor and orphaned. Both women are inspired by the Abbess's energy and goodwill.

After the visitors leave, the Abbess stands in the dark garden and reflects that soon not only Esteban and Pepita but everyone who knew them will be dead as well—not even their memory will remain. However, she's comforted that her belief that "even memory is not necessary for love" and that love provides an enduring connection between the living and the dead.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Brother Juniper – Brother Juniper is a Limean friar who witnesses the bridge collapse. He decides to thoroughly investigate each of the victims in order prove that the catastrophe was an act of God and discern why God specifically chose these five people to die. While Brother Juniper is a well-intentioned clergyman whose beliefs are sincere, the novel portrays him as overzealous and often silly; his attempts to literally prove that worldly disasters reflect divine will emerge as contradictory, and prevent him from providing help to his parishioners in more tangible ways. Paradoxically, despite his devotion to Catholicism, Brother Juniper's investigations are deemed heretical, and he is eventually burned at the stake. Ultimately, the friar's obsession with religious dogma stands in contrast to the Abbess's quiet devotion to good works and her close personal relationships with the people she helps; the novel ultimately uses Brother Juniper to argue that matters of dogma are less important than human connection and altruism.

Doña María – Doña María is a Limean noblewoman and eventual victim of the bridge collapse. Doña María's defining quality is her obsessive devotion to her daughter, Doña Clara, a passion she channels all her energies into. Although Doña María sees her feelings as well-intentioned, the novel shows that they are actually selfish, reflecting a desire to control her daughter rather than a clear-minded concern for the girl's well-being. Paradoxically, Doña María's devotion proves oppressive to Doña Clara and drives her daughter away from her, preventing them from sharing a close relationship. It's self-destructive as well—Doña María's single-minded obsession with her daughter leads her to neglect all other aspects of her life, turning her into a prematurely aged eccentric and laughingstock across Lima. However, the letters that Doña María writes her daughter, full of witty anecdotes and social satire that she hopes will gain her daughter's attention and respect, eventually become a highly acclaimed work of literature and record of colonial Limean society. This shows how art can help characters transcend their flaws to create works of deep beauty and understanding. Eventually, Doña María makes a pilgrimage to pray for her daughter's health during her pregnancy; in the church, she realizes that she'll never be able to control what happens to her daughter or how her daughter feels about her, and achieves a new feeling of tranquility. Although Doña María seems on the verge of improving her character and leading a better life, she dies in the bridge collapse the next day, unable to pursue her good intentions.

Doña Clara / Condesa Clara – Doña Clara is Doña María's daughter. In response to her mother's oppressively intense love, Doña Clara becomes emotionally unresponsive and attempts to distance herself from her mother as much as

possible, even marrying a Spanish nobleman just so she can move far away from home. In contrast to her mother's eccentricity, Doña Clara's pursuit of conventional respectability and social success makes her pretentious and vapid. It's only after her mother's death that Doña Clara's latent goodness reveals itself through her conversations with the Abbess and her sympathy for the older woman's charitable works.

Camila Perichole / Micaela Villegas – Camila Perichole is a talented but volatile Limean actress, usually known as "the Perichole." A lowly orphan, the Perichole spends her childhood singing in cafes under a series of abusive employers, until Uncle Pio, perceiving her genuine talent, takes her in and teaches her to become a true performer. Uncle Pio and the Perichole work together for decades; however, while Uncle Pio is driven by his passion for theater and doesn't care about worldly success, after the Perichole becomes the Viceroy's mistress and has several children with him she stops acting in order to become a more "respectable" woman. Moreover, she disowns Uncle Pio, who reminds her of her seedy origins. The Perichole's attempts to establish herself among the Limean elite are foiled when she contracts smallpox and loses the beauty which enabled her to attract powerful men. At this point, it's only Uncle Pio who stands by her, managing her house and taking care of her children while she's incapacitated by anguish over her lost looks. After her oldest son, Jaime, dies in a bridge collapse, her grief forces her to stop thinking about herself. Guided by the Abbess's wise counsel, by the end of the novel the Perichole seems poised to begin a life of devotion to others, rather than to herself.

Uncle Pio – Uncle Pio is Camila Perichole's acting coach and assistant, a cunning, intelligent, and highly cultured jack-of-all-trades. Born out of wedlock to a wealthy Spanish nobleman, Uncle Pio spends his childhood on the streets of Madrid, where he does errands and tasks for various people in the city's seedy underbelly. During this time, he develops a passion for Spanish theater, which he believes represents the world's highest culture. Eventually, he moves to Lima, where his passion for theater leads him to adopt the young Camila Perichole and train her as an actress. The Perichole shares Uncle Pio's clever nature, cultural awareness, and ability to navigate the city's elite despite their lowly origins; however, the master is distinguished from his pupil by his indifference to wealth or social success, whereas the Perichole comes to crave these things. While Uncle Pio often seems like an unscrupulous opportunist, he reveals his integrity by single-handedly caring for the Perichole after she contracts smallpox, loses her social position and beauty, and even tries to push him away. In a gesture of goodwill, Uncle Pio decides to take the Perichole's eldest son, Jaime, to live with him while his mother recovers. As they cross the bridge from the Perichole's house into Lima, they are both swept up in the collapse and die.

Pepita – Pepita is a young orphan who grows up under the guidance of the Abbess. Kind, intelligent, and industrious, Pepita distinguishes herself among her peers, and the Abbess decides that she will inherit her position as steward of the city's poor, sick, and orphaned. Although the Abbess loves and respects Pepita, in her zeal to prepare her she gives her difficult tasks, like caring for the eccentric Doña María. As a result, Pepita is forced to mature quickly even though she's only a child. While Doña María initially takes no notice of her young servant, she eventually comes to value Pepita's moral integrity and selflessness—in fact, Pepita's good qualities show the older woman how she herself should behave. However, before Doña María has time to reform her character, both mistress and maid die in the bridge collapse.

Viceroy Andrés – The Viceroy is a deputy of the Spanish king and the head of Lima's colonial administration. Like his colleague, the Archbishop, the Viceroy is less interested in serving the Limean populace than in enriching himself and leading an extravagant life. After falling in love with Camila Perichole, he takes her as a mistress. Together, they have three children; the eldest, Jaime, dies in the bridge collapse.

The Abbess – The Abbess, Madre María del Pilar, is a highly principled and formidable nun who superintends most of the city's charitable works. In her hopes for women's rights and a more equal society, she's centuries ahead of her time. Moreover, her ceaseless and unselfish industry on behalf of the city's poor and powerless differentiates herself from other church officials (namely, the Archbishop and Brother Juniper) who preach religious dogma without really caring about the people they supposedly serve, and from other members of the city's elite (like Doña María and Camila Perichole) who are motivated exclusively by selfish, rather than altruistic, desires. The Abbess's one worry is that she knows no one capable of continuing her work after she dies. In order to fill this gap, she grooms one of her young charges, Pepita, to be her successor by giving her difficult jobs (like caring for Doña María). Pepita's death in the bridge collapse forces the Abbess to acknowledge that she can't decide what happens after her death, but by relinquishing her desire for control she manages to gain some tranquility despite her sadness.

Esteban – Esteban is a young man who grows up in the Abbess's orphanage alongside his identical twin, Manuel. Reserved and industrious, Esteban works as a scribe and errand boy, but he forms few friendships and no romantic attachments due to his exclusive attachment to Manuel. The brothers are defined by their extremely close relationship; they live together and have even devised their own language in which to communicate. Esteban is distraught when Manuel's passion for Camila Perichole threatens to destroy their relationship, and relieved when Manuel renounces this passion for the sake of his brother. However, his relief proves short-lived when Manuel suddenly contracts an infection and dies. Manuel's death plunges Esteban into an existential crisis, as

he's never contemplated the idea of life without his brother. It's only Captain Alvarado's compassionate intervention that convinces him not to commit suicide; fortified by the older man's guidance, Esteban prepares to begin a new stage of his life as a member of the captain's exploring crew; however, his expectations are dashed when he dies in the bridge collapse.

Manuel – Esteban's twin brother. Manuel is almost exactly like his brother, except that whereas Esteban is completely satisfied by their close sibling bond, Manuel becomes infatuated with the actress Camila Perichole. His new passion almost drives him away apart from his brother, but eventually he renounces her in order to preserve their relationship. Shortly thereafter, he dies as the result of a sudden infection. His death forces Esteban to contemplate life as an independent and unattached man for the first time.

Archbishop of Lima – The highest religious official in Lima. Although he is occupies a position of grave authority, the Archbishop is generally decadent and silly, spending his time hosting large dinner parties and flirting with actresses, like Camila Perichole. He devotes little time or effort to his parishioners. In fact, his greatest frustrations are the frequent pleas of his colleague, the Abbess, that he appropriate more church funds for her charitable works.

Captain Alvarado – a well-known Peruvian explorer, Captain Alvarado is a reserved but deeply compassionate man. His friends, including Doña María and the Abbess, believe that his ceaseless traveling is a means of distracting himself from the tragic loss of his daughter several years ago. Captain Alvarado's experiences with grief allow him to connect with Esteban after the loss of his twin brother Manuel, when no one else can comfort him. Heroically, he prevents Esteban from committing suicide and convinces him to accept a position on his exploring crew. As the two men journey into Lima, Esteban dies in the bridge collapse, but Captain Alvarado is spared.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Don Jaime – The seven-year-old son of Camila Perichole and the Viceroy. On his way to live with Uncle Pio in Lima, he dies in the bridge collapse.

Conde Vicente d'Abuirre – Doña Clara's husband, a Spanish nobleman. It's the Conde who preserves Doña María's letters to her daughter, ensuring that they eventually become important works of literature.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ACTS OF GOD AND INDIVIDUAL WILL

The Bridge of San Luis Rey centers around the collapse of an ancient **bridge** outside Lima that sends five very different characters plummeting to their deaths. Because the calamity seems to defy rational explanation or moral understanding, it becomes a touchstone in the community, forcing observers to wonder if such events are a reflection of divine will or simply the result of random individual actions. The question of God's presence, or lack thereof, in everyday life is especially important in eighteenth-century Lima, a society predicated on faith and influenced by the Spanish Inquisition yet teetering on the edge of the Enlightenment, when thinkers would begin to insist on scientific explanations for worldly events and assert the role of individuals, rather than divine will, in shaping their own lives. While the novel doesn't come to any conclusion regarding the origins of disasters like the bridge collapse, it does argue that such dilemmas become more central to societies' conception of faith and reason as they move into increasingly modern eras.

The bridge collapse claims the lives of five people from vastly different walks of life. Therefore, it's extremely difficult to determine if they "deserved" to die, or to retrospectively find meaning in the event. Doña María had made a pilgrimage to a **church** in order to pray for her daughter's safe pregnancy; her maid, Pepita, accompanied her out of duty. Esteban was preparing to begin a sea voyage with Captain Alvarado (who managed to escape the calamity because he was handling the luggage). Uncle Pio, who had been taking care of Camila Perichole's (usually referred to as "the Perichole") house during her illness, was bringing her eldest son, Jaime, to live with him in the city.

In trying to understand the calamity, Brother Juniper applies the principle that God causes every individual death for a reason. This requires him to see "in the same accident the wicked visited by destruction and the good called early to Heaven." Besides leading him into extremely convoluted thinking, this belief requires him to make black-and-white character judgment about the victims. Brother Juniper seems to believe that Doña María and Uncle Pio are deserving of punishment, while the others are being rewarded with early entrance to heaven; however, the novel's compassionate examination of *all* the characters insists that none of them can be reduced to these simplistic images, and thus refutes Brother Juniper's reasoning.

While Brother Juniper firmly believes that the bridge collapse is an act of God and simply wants to prove it, his inability to do so causes the reader to doubt that there is any divine meaning in catastrophes like these. Either possibility leads to troubling conclusions. If the bridge collapse is the will of Brother Juniper's omniscient and omnipotent God, this deity seems to be impersonal and possibly even cruel. He lets Doña María perish right as she's had a spiritual epiphany and is on the brink

of transforming her character for the better, and he allows Pepita to die young instead of continuing the Abbess's charitable works. He even allows Jaime, a young child who cannot have done anything wrong, to die as well. On the other hand, if the bridge collapse is a random tragedy that stands apart from God's influence, then human lives seem alarmingly irrational. Dependent solely on random choices—Doña Maria's impetuous desire to go on a pilgrimage, or Uncle Pio's decision to cross the bridge at a certain time—the characters' deaths are not part of some larger and potentially comforting pattern, but are wholly meaningless.

This question reflects central anxieties in a society torn between religious faith and new scientific possibilities. Colonial Lima is defined by its rigid Catholicism. Clergymen are among the most powerful officials, and the Spanish Inquisition is a frightening presence (ironically, despite his piety, Brother Juniper's investigation of the bridge collapse is eventually deemed heretical, and he is burned at the stake). However, the new atmosphere of scientific inquiry cultivated by the Enlightenment is also implicitly at play. The novel's setting in South America reflects this, as scientific developments in areas like navigation and engineering allowed Spain and other European countries to explore and eventually subjugate other continents.

Brother Juniper, who always tries to prove religious tenets with scientific methods, exemplifies the tension between these two modes of thinking. Besides attempting to explain God's will through his chronicle of the bridge collapse, he embarks on even more ridiculous projects, like devising numerical scales on which to tabulate his parishioners' piety and goodness. His inability to come to any meaningful conclusions represents the inability of both religious and scientific thinking to satisfactorily justify complicated worldly events.

The tension between the presence of God and the power of individual will is central to eighteenth-century Lima, but it was also important in the early 1900s, when Wilder wrote *San Luis Rey*. Stunned and shaken by World War I, societies around the world struggled to rationalize the carnage that had dominated the first part of the century. At the same time, they were witnessing rapid scientific development and economic globalization that seemed to emphasize the power of humans to define their own future and refute the possibility that divine will provides meaning to everyday lives. Although Wilder situates his narrative in a seemingly remote time and place, he wrangles with existential dilemmas of great import to his own environment.

LOVE AND OBSESSION

Set in eighteenth-century Lima, Peru, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* examines the lives of several characters who die suddenly in a **bridge** collapse. While the characters live disparate lives and seem to have little in common, many are similar in their obsessive love for a person or an idea. Love is often portrayed as a highly positive emotion, but the novel argues that such feelings can easily lead to obsessive, selfish, and destructive behavior. While some characters, notably Uncle Pio, believe that unbridled passion is necessary for a deeper understanding of the world and oneself, the novel argues that there is a clear difference between obsession, which involves a projection of one's own desires onto the beloved, and love, which is a disinterested desire for the beloved's well-being and happiness. It's only by learning to distinguish these emotions, and cultivating their more altruistic feelings, that most characters are able to attain personal tranquility and form meaningful connections with others.

Most of the novel's characters experience a form of obsessive love—whether it's romantic, platonic, or ideological—that blinds them to the flaws of their beloved and reflects a certain selfishness in their own behavior. The most obvious example of this pattern is Doña María, who is obsessed with her daughter, Doña Clara. Doña María's love makes her a bad judge of character—she's unable to see that her daughter is a vapid and pretentious social climber. Moreover, her constant fixation on her daughter prevents her from finding satisfaction in anything else and turns her into a prematurely aged eccentric, a laughingstock throughout Lima's high society. Doña Maria believes her love is well-intentioned, but the novel views it as a desire to control her daughter by persuading or forcing her to reciprocate the same strong emotions.

After seeing Camila Perichole perform in the theater, Manuel, a young orphan and scribe, becomes obsessed with the actress, idolizing her even though she feels such ardor only towards her own beauty and talent, and despite the fact that she repeatedly uses him to write letters to her other lovers. Meanwhile, his twin brother, Esteban, feels the same excessive devotion towards Manuel. Unable to imagine life without his brother, Esteban falls into a deep depression during his brother's infatuation with the Perichole and later, after Manuel's early death due to infection, almost commits suicide.

Uncle Pio and the Abbess are obsessively devoted to Spanish drama and charitable works, respectively. Their obsessions lead them to develop problematic relationships with their protégés. Uncle Pio, for instance, molds the Perichole into a great actress and acts as her father figure, but fails to give her the moral guidance she needs to function in the world offstage. Similarly, the Abbess decides that Pepita, a young orphan, is the only person smart and selfless enough to eventually take over the charitable institutions she currently superintends, but in order to prepare the girl for this role, she puts her through harsh trials and prevents her from enjoying a normal childhood.

Even though these experiences of passionate love are a projection of the characters' own desires rather than genuine a consideration of another's, they drive most of the novel's

creative endeavors and spurs its creates accomplishments. By putting so much effort into cultivating the Perichole's talent, Uncle Pio makes a great contribution to Limean culture, allowing citizens of this far-flung colony to experience what he regards as the greatest dramas of all time. Similarly—and perhaps more importantly—the Abbess's single-minded devotion to her work among the poor allows her to alleviate the suffering she sees around her, despite the general indifference of the city's wealthy elite. Meanwhile, as he watches the Perichole go through slews of lovers without becoming attached to any of them, Uncle Pio worries that without experiencing total and passionate love, his protégé will never fully access her formidable talent. In his mind, the Perichole's career is limited by her lack of obsessive love.

Even Doña Maria, in trying to gain her daughter's favor, channels her own frenetic energy into writing her witty and engaging letters that chronicle and satirize Limean high society. These letters eventually become an acclaimed part of the literary canon, allowing Doña María to transcend her own weakness and obsession and create a beautiful and meaningful work of literature.

However, it's only by tempering these feelings that some characters eventually achieve tranquility and form deeper and more selfless relationships with others. When she learns of her daughter's pregnancy, Doña María is thrown into a frenzy of worry for Doña Clara's health. Just before her death, she makes a pilgrimage to pray for her daughter's safe delivery; in the **church**, she has an epiphany realizes both that she can't influence what happens to Doña Clara by praying and that she must "learn in time to permit both her daughter and her gods to govern their own affairs." While Doña María dies before she can change her behavior towards her daughter, this episode hints that by learning to control her obsession, she might become a better mother.

Although Esteban's experience of losing his twin twice—first to his passion for the Perichole and then to death from infection—is deeply traumatic, it forces him to examine his own life and, for the first time, develop an identity that is separate from his connection to his brother. By the time he dies in the bridge collapse, Esteban has grappled with and rejected the temptation to commit suicide. Learning to think for himself even though "it had always been Manuel who had made the decisions," he is well on the way to becoming an independent man.

After Pepita dies, the Abbess learns to live with the fact that her charitable organizations might collapse after her own death. This realization allows her to find satisfaction in the work she's doing in the moment, rather than constantly worrying about its future. By the end of the novel, the Abbess has achieved a state of tranquility that allows her to act as a spiritual counselor to others who are bereaved by deaths in the bridge collapse, rather than wallowing in her own grief.

While the novel's depictions of fervent love form some of its most vivid and engaging moments, it insists that, in order to live meaningful lives, characters must examine even their feelings that initially seem positive, rather than blindly following their dictates. Many characters, from the eccentric Doña María to the wise and generous Abbess, eventually realize that their strong passions lead to essentially selfless behavior; by cultivating instead their more selfless impulses, these characters are able to enjoy better relationships with those around them and be more at peace with themselves.

DOGMA VS. ALTRUISM

The Bridge of San Luis Rey portrays the vibrant but highly flawed society of eighteenth-century Lima, Peru. One of the social problems the novel addresses is the tension between people who loudly promote (while not actually practicing) dogmatic principles and people who behave altruistically in everyday life. On a broad level, this dichotomy is represented by Brother Juniper, a missionary who is intent on "saving" the souls of the Peruvian heathens but does little to actually help them, and the Abbess, who rarely speaks about dogma but succeeds in improving the lives of the city's sick and poor. In terms of personal relationships, there's a notable contrast between Doña Maria, whose overwrought demonstrations of love for her daughter prevents her from being a good mother, and Uncle Pio, who at times behaves unscrupulously towards his protégé, the Perichole, but eventually cares for her when she suffers a devastating illness at the end of the novel. Based on these contrasts, the novel argues that pragmatic goodwill always trumps dogmatic principles, and urges wariness of those who identify too strongly with any particular dogma.

Though both Brother Juniper and the Abbess are Christian missionaries, their interpretation of their mandates is vastly different. Brother Juniper has good intentions and is determined to save what he sees as the imperiled souls of Lima's Native Americans, yet he does not provide them with any practical, concrete help. Instead, he devises far-fetched strategies to prove to them that God exists—for example, writing a book about the bridge collapse in order to prove it was a divine act. The novel treats his efforts with skepticism and sometimes ridicule—at the end of the novel, the narrator scornfully describes an episode during which Brother Juniper's parish suffers an outbreak of disease and, instead of ministering to the sick, the monk tries unsuccessfully to tabulate the villagers' piety and see who most deserved to die.

On the other hand, the Abbess rarely discusses her beliefs in God or tries to impose them on other people. Instead, she focuses on running hospitals and orphanages, providing tangible help to those in the city who need it most. The Abbess has much better relationships with her parishioners and even inspires more Christian piety than Brother Juniper—for

example, Pepita, Manuel, and Esteban are all devoutly religious because of their gratitude and admiration for the Abbess. Notably, the novel portrays Brother Juniper's ridiculous behavior as consistent with the religious establishment, while the Abbess's humanitarian endeavors are highly unorthodox (the extravagant Archbishop mentions his dread of the Abbess and her frequent pleas for funds). Through his often-humorous satire of church politics and his elevation of the Abbess, Wilder argues that people should be suspicious of those who profess dogma and reserve their admiration for those who actually practice good works.

In their attitudes toward their daughter and protégé respectively, Doña María and Uncle Pio echo the behavior of the Christian missionaries: like Brother Juniper, Doña María obsessively fulfills motherly conventions without providing real guidance or support to Doña Clara. In contrast, while Uncle Pio often seems disreputable and seedy, he proves a bulwark of assistance and loyalty when the Perichole most needs it. Doña María is obsessed with the *idea* of loving her daughter—she always addresses her with over-the-top endearments and spends her mornings embroidering her slippers—but her eagerness to see herself and to be perceived as an ideal mother actually impair her judgment and make her an overwhelming parent, driving her daughter away rather than fostering a close relationship. Doña Clara reacts to her mother's eccentricity by becoming unpleasantly conventional and pretentious, and she leaves home as soon as possible to marry a Spanish husband.

On the other hand, Uncle Pio's relationship to his acting protégé, Camila Perichole, initially seems problematic. In order to transform her into a great actress, he forces her to work hard from a very young age and often manipulates her. However, when the Perichole contracts smallpox, loses her famous beauty, and falls into depression, Uncle Pio takes over her household affairs and helps raise her children, preventing her from falling into poverty. Uncle Pio doesn't derive any social recognition by caring for the Perichole, and he doesn't think of himself as defined or elevated by his role as a parent. However, he provides the guidance and care that Doña María can't actually give her own daughter.

Throughout the novel, the assertion of dogmatic principles—namely, Brother Juniper's missionary fervor and Doña Maria's motherly zeal—contrast with the quiet efforts of others, like Uncle Pio and the Abbess, to improve the lives of those around them. In this way. the novel suggests that those who profess strong principles are often the least likely to observe them.

ART AND MEMORY

The Bridge of San Luis Rey portrays eighteenth-century colonial Lima through the lens of five different characters who are involved in a sudden **bridge** collapse. In chronicling their lives prior to this catastrophe, the novel presents various kinds of art and artistry—from Doña María's witty letters, to the Perichole's legendary acting, to Brother Juniper's unfinished book. The novel establishes art as an elevating and dignifying force, especially because of its role in crafting memory: art allows characters to create works that are beautiful and that endure far longer than their own lives, ultimately helping them transcend the accident in which they perish. At the same time, however, the novel remains firm in its belief about the limitations of art. By its end, it becomes clear that despite its beauty and profundity, art is unable to rationalize the catastrophe of the bridge collapse and won't prevent the memories of its victims from slipping away with time.

Throughout the novel, art helps flawed characters access the best parts of their nature and to leave positive legacies after their deaths. During her lifetime, Doña María is unhappy, widely mocked, and often foolish. However, she channels her emotions into an articulate correspondence with her daughter that becomes widely acclaimed both as a historical testimony and a work of literature. In this way, art helps Doña María transcend both her own flaws and the unfortunate circumstances of her life.

Camila Perichole begins life as a poor and abused street urchin singing in rowdy taverns. However, her real talent for acting (and Uncle Pio's coaching) elevates her socially, giving her security and prosperity. Just as importantly, it allows her to develop a meaningful craft and become passionate about her work. While the Perichole becomes an archetypal actress in many ways—she's vain, self-centered, and often selfish in her behavior towards others—her work ensures that she will be remembered as a beacon of high culture in a far-flung Spanish colony.

While the novel often ridicules Brother Juniper's literalist attempts to prove and rationalize God's existence, it looks kindly on his final project, an enormous compendium of information about the bridge collapse and those who died in it. In fact, the novel's omniscient narrator ostensibly draws on Brother Juniper's work to construct his own retelling of the incident. Therefore, it's Brother Juniper who is partly responsible for bringing this compassionate chronicle to fruition and preserving the memory of its characters.

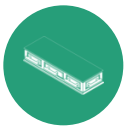
While it may seem problematic that art allows people to leave behind legacies that don't quite align with who they were during life, the novel argues that such artificiality can function as another means through which to examine character, rather than a sign of untruth. For example, the novel argues that Doña María exists *both* as the crazy old lady and the consummately witty letter writer. Her legacy doesn't falsify her character during life, but rather adds depth to it. The novel itself is written as a moral fable with an omniscient narrator—a highly artificial style. The lack of naturalism in its composition is a constant reminder that the reader is taking part in a work of

art. Through its own structure as well as the characters it depicts, the novel thus argues that art need not be entirely realistic to be meaningful and truthful.

However, the novel also remains clear-eyed about the limitations of art. After the bridge collapses, leading to the tragic deaths of five characters, it become clear that art can't provide any explanation or rationalization for this catastrophe. This is especially evident through Brother Juniper's work—although he does his utmost to collect details and form a history, his work remains incomplete and he never comes to any meaningful conclusions. His failure to accomplish his initial goal reflects the inability of art to provide black-and-white answers to complex philosophical dilemmas.

Moreover, the last chapter asserts that even the legacies which various characters have achieved through their art aren't unassailable. In the last paragraph, the narrator says that "soon we all shall die and the memory of these five will have left the earth." After encouraging the reader throughout the novel to view art as a means to preserve a good legacy, the novel eventually casts doubt on its own message by asserting that time will always triumph over memory.

The novel's final uncertainty about the power of art is especially interesting given that such doubt comes at the end of a very compelling work of art. Ultimately, the novel both reaffirms and pokes fun at its own medium. By emphasizing the artificiality of all art and its limitations while also demonstrating its many possibilities, it encourages the reader to appreciate art despite its shortcomings.



GRIEF AND LOSS

Throughout *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, characters try to justify catastrophes—namely, the fatal collapse of the titular **bridge**—using both religious and quasi-scientific explanations. Moreover, they try to foster connection with others through platonic and romantic relationships that often become obsessive in nature. The novel posits that these are unhealthy and often unsuccessful means to living a meaningful life and responding to trauma. In contrast, the novel highlights experiences of profound grief—especially when this grief is shared with another person—as an emotion that allows characters to move past tragedy and to connect meaningfully and unselfishly with others. Ultimately, the novel argues that grief is a much more formative and even beneficial experience than the search for understanding and the passionate interpersonal relationships that define so much of the novel.

Before and after the bridge collapse, many characters' lives are defined by grief. Esteban is derailed by his twin brother Manuel's death from an infection, and almost commits suicide because of his inability to conceive of a life without him. Captain Alvarado, a minor character who narrowly escapes the collapse, is defined by the loss of his young daughter; Doña María posits that he's such an adventurous explorer because he's trying to distract himself from grief.

In one of the novel's last scenes, two grief-stricken women arrive at Lima's convent to see spiritual guidance from the Abbess, who herself is distraught by the loss of Esteban and Pepita (who had both been under her care as orphans); Camila Perichole, who has lost her young son, Jaime; and Doña Clara, who has arrived from Spain to mourn her mother. The fact that these three disparate but important characters first meet at such a moment emphasizes the centrality of grief within the narrative.

Shared grief contrasts with the search for answers, both religious and scientific, with which so many characters try to respond to tragic events; although grief doesn't provide any explanations, it proves a better method to accept—and, in turn, overcome—trauma. Despite being a devout Christian, Esteban is unable to derive any comfort from religious tenets after Manuel's death. Instead, he begins to recover from this life-shattering event by his newfound friendship with Captain Alvarado. The older man is able to commiserate with him based on his own experiences with loss. Although he can't explain why Manuel died so young and so suddenly, he helps Esteban pick up the pieces of his life.

Similarly, when the Abbess comforts Doña Clara and Camila Perichole, she doesn't attempt to explain the tragic bridge collapse, but instead focuses on highlighting the fact that all three women share similar emotions. After this meeting, the Abbess is able to go about her work and contemplate the coming days with more tranquility than she possessed previously.

Moreover, while the obsessive love which dominates so many characters' lives is usually an introspective emotion, causing characters to focus exclusively on their own problems and behave selfishly towards others, grief almost always emerges as an outward-looking emotion, which allows characters to connect meaningfully with others and help them. Captain Alvarado's long-standing grief for his lost daughter makes him uniquely suited to help Esteban through his own loss. His grief becomes a mechanism to foster empathy, rather than causing him to pity himself.

In order to comfort Camila Perichole and Doña Clara, the Abbess gives them a thorough tour of her **abbey**, showing them all the projects she's undertaken to help the poor, ill, and orphaned. Her implication is that charitable works are not only a distraction but a meaningful way through which individuals can overcome grief. Even though her good works have exposed her to sadness—she became attached to Esteban and Pepita by caring for them as orphans, only to lose them in the bridge collapse—her experiences of grief only make her more determined to help others.

Doña Clara is especially interested and attentive during this tour, and her sudden empathy is notable. Her mother's excessive love for her, and her extreme aversion to these emotions, caused her to become self-centered and pretentious. In contrast, grief over her mother's sudden loss sparks her interest in other people's troubles for the first time in the novel. The last chapter hints that while her mother's excessive love cultivated Doña Clara's worst traits, her grief now will bring about a character transformation and a new commitment to altruism.

Throughout the novel, characters try to find meaning in their lives through various unsuccessful methods—namely, by trying to rationalize everything that happens to them and by becoming excessively attached to other characters. While grief is obviously an unpleasant emotion that all the characters hope to avoid, it stands in contrast to these mindsets as an experience that allows characters to process the traumas that befall them and connect meaningfully with others.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY

Lurking behind each character's narrative is the ancient bridge which, as the first sentence of the novel proclaims, will eventually plunge them to their deaths. Before the collapse, the bridge is a cultural landmark, integral to social lore—people take pride in the fact that it's very old, and that it's consecrated to a specific French saint. To the citizens of Lima, Peru, "the bridge seemed to be among the things that last forever"; it has a grounding and stabilizing influence on the city. However, in a single moment, the bridge transforms from a symbol of a constancy to one of tragedy; after the collapse, people cross themselves when they think about the bridge and imagine "themselves falling into a gulf." After the collapse, the bridge represents the constant potential for calamity that undergirds daily life, and the meaninglessness that life seems to acquire if senseless death is only ever a second away. The attempts of various characters to overcome this sense of meaninglessness and build satisfactory lives through art, altruism, and love, is the defining triumph of the novel.

CHURCHES AND ABBEYS

As a Spanish outpost in the eighteenth century, Lima is an extremely faith-based society. Religious institutions and officials of those institutions abound, from the Archbishop to the Abbess. On one hand, these institutions often emerge as founts of hypocrisy, permitting and even fostering social injustice. An immensely corpulent and extravagantly attired man, the Archbishop enriches himself at the expense of the faithful. He firmly believes that "the injustice and unhappiness in the world is a constant," and that "the poor, never having known happiness, are insensible to misfortune"; these principles allow him to sit by in indifference while corrupt priests imitate him and energetically scam their parishioners.

On the other hand, as the steward of the city's hospitals and orphanages, the Abbess is a religious official who is actively engaged in fighting various social ills. In contrast to the Archbishop, she spends her free time dreaming of future societies in which "injustice and unhappiness" have been vanquished, and she exhausts herself trying to ameliorate the condition of the poor and helpless. The devotion and respect she's accorded by her charges—namely, Pepita, Manuel, and Esteban—demonstrate the sincerity and efficiency of her efforts. It's important that the same institution—the Roman Catholic Church—that empowers the Archbishop to abuse his power also spurs the Abbess to great altruism. Spurning dogma of all sorts, Wilder refuses to condemn religious institutions. Instead, he illustrates their ability to bring out the best and worst of different characters, and to function to the city's benefit and detriment.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Collins edition of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* published in 1927.

Part 1: Perhaps an Accident Quotes

❝ If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in a human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan.

Related Characters: Brother Juniper (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter, Brother Juniper shares his fascination with the bridge collapse and his hope that it can lead to greater understanding of the divine plan that he believes

must govern human life. As a Roman Catholic monk, Brother Juniper's entire worldview and self-conception rest on the belief that God actively participates and intervenes in everyday life; moreover, Brother Juniper believes that it's possible to explain God's intentions using rational investigative methods. While the novel doesn't really dispute the existence of God—in fact, it often voices a hope that God does exist—it does argue that it's impossible for humans to completely understand the divine, and it will frequently parody Brother Juniper's futile, pseudo-scientific attempts to do so.

> It seemed to Brother Juniper that it was high time for theology to take its place among the exact sciences and he had long intended putting it there. What he had lacked hitherto was a laboratory [...] but this collapse of the bridge of San Luis Rey was a sheer Act of God. It afforded a perfect laboratory. Here at last one could surprise His intentions in a pure state.

Related Characters: Brother Juniper (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Brother Juniper outlines the methods that he will use to investigate the bridge collapse. Although he's a cleric, his rhetoric is highly scientific and precise—he uses the phrases "exact science," "laboratory," and "pure state." However, Brother Juniper's commitment to rationality and clear intentions will not bring him further understanding or appreciation of the divine; instead, it puts him in a kind of competition with God, attempting to "surprise" him and in a sense beat God at his own game. Brother Juniper's bumbling attempts to turn the forces of science on complex theological questions is the source of much comic relief throughout the novel. However, his only moment of understanding comes at the end of the novel, when he tears up his findings and appreciates their beauty as the scraps float away on the wind. This episode shows that true enlightenment comes not from trying to "explain" divine phenomena, but learning to appreciate them.

> Some say that we shall never know and that to the gods we are like flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the first chapter, the narrator proposes two lenses through which the events of the novel may be interpreted. At first, the second choice seems obviously more desirable. In the first clause, the narrator brings up the possibility that the world is controlled by casually malevolent deities—or, in a more modern sense, a world in which no deity exists to provide structure to human life. The second option, positioning everyday events within a larger divine plan, provides comfort and stability. However, as the novel progresses, this option poses its own problems—if God is all-knowing, omnipotent, and benevolent, why does he allow Doña María and Esteban to die cruelly right on the brink of important character transformations? Why does he allow Jaime, a child who has had no opportunities to do good or bad deeds, to die tragically alongside his elders? While this passage seems to pose two clear alternatives, the novel will complicate the choice, insisting that neither option provides a perfect or satisfying interpretation of worldly events.

Part 2: The Marquesa de Montemayor Quotes

> But her biographers have erred in one direction as greatly as the Franciscan did in another; they have tried to invest her with a host of graces, to read back into her life and person some of the beauties that abound in her letters, whereas all real knowledge of this wonderful woman must proceed from the act of humiliating her and divesting her of all beauties save one.

Related Characters: Doña María

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

One of the novel's chief concerns is the role art plays in perpetuating human memory. The tension between the

importance of reflecting on real life through art, and the inability of art to mirror reality with perfect faithfulness, will appear throughout the novel. It's especially relevant with regard to Doña María—as an artist she is consummately witty and accomplished, and by writing she's eventually able to conceive of her own flaws and improve her character. However, for most of the novel she appears as an eccentric and extremely self-centered woman. Both Doña María's art and her personality reflect important and genuine aspects of her character, but this duality makes it difficult for her biographers (artists of a different kind) to neatly assess her. The novel argues that instead of using the reductive approach of Brother Juniper and other scholars—all of which choose to ignore various parts of her character—the reader should allow Doña María's contradictory qualities to coexist, thereby gaining a more comprehensive, nuanced, and holistic view of her as a multi-layered person.

> She was one of those persons who have allowed their lives to be gnawed away because they have fallen in love with an idea several centuries before its appointed appearance in the history of civilization. She hurled herself against the obstinacy of her time in her desire to attach a little dignity to women.

Related Characters: The Abbess

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In her first appearance, the Abbess is characterized in almost heroic terms—although it's clear that most of her heroism will be fruitless and unrecognized. Women's rights is just one of the many causes to which the nun devotes herself—she's also committed to helping the poor, the mentally ill, and orphans such as Pepita and Esteban. The Abbess's idealism, and the energy with which she carries out her projects, stems from her strong religious convictions. Thus, she demonstrates that the Roman Catholic Church can inspire individuals to altruism and bring out the best aspects of their character.

At the same time, she's a notable contrast to Church officials like the Archbishop, who abuse the privileges accorded to them by the Church without helping any of the people around them. Unlike these men, who frequently emphasize their devotion and expound on religious dogma to everyone else, the Abbess rarely speaks of her convictions; even when counseling others she does so primarily by listening thoughtfully to their stories. Through this character, the novel draws a strong distinction between those who loudly promote religious dogma without practicing it, and those who sincerely and quietly incorporate religious principles into their daily lives.

> At times, after a day's frantic resort to such invocations, a revulsion would sweep over her. Nature is deaf. God is indifferent. Nothing in man's power can alter the course of law. Then on some street-corner she would stop, dizzy with despair, and lean against a wall would long to be taken from a world that had no plan in it.

Related Characters: Doña Clara / Condesa Clara, Doña María

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

After Doña María's daughter, Doña Clara, reveals that she is pregnant, Doña María goes into a frenzy of worry that either her daughter or the baby will die during delivery. In order to avert such a disaster, she resorts to every religious and superstitious method possible, praying constantly and searching out even the most absurd folk remedies for her daughter to try. In a different context, Doña María is repeating Brother Juniper's mistakes—she's assuming without question that there is a divine entity controlling even the smallest aspects of human life, and she assumes that that this deity can be understood (and even, in a sense, negotiated with) through such concrete and transactional mechanisms as praying and performing rituals.

The idea that frightens Doña María now— that it's not possible for humans to interact with the divine in this way—will occur to her again when she makes a pilgrimage to a church just before her death. However, at this later moment, it will inspire her to resignation and tranquility, helping her relinquish the impossible task of trying to understand and rationalize the divine through limited human understanding.

She was listening to the new tide of resignation that was rising within her. Perhaps she would learn in time to permit both her daughter and her gods to govern their own affairs.

Related Characters: Doña Clara / Condesa Clara, Doña María

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

At the height of her worry over Doña Clara's pregnancy, Doña María makes a pilgrimage to a church outside of Lima in order to pray for her daughter's delivery. Of course, Doña María doesn't receive any audible divine assurance that her daughter's pregnancy will proceed safety. However, she does have a moment of spiritual epiphany that causes her to relinquish her need for control over the events around her. This helps her on two fronts. It allows her to form a more complex relationship to the divine, based not on rational explanation but on unforced feeling. Moreover, it allows her to understand that her behavior towards her daughter is a manifestation of self-centeredness, and that she needs to accept her daughter's choices rather than trying to control her from afar. Because of this epiphanic moment, Doña María seems on the brink of a character transformation; however, the new possibilities of her life are abruptly curtailed by her death in the bridge collapse. This additional tragedy is one of the reasons that it seems hard to conceive of the collapse as the action of a benevolent deity.

She had talked to Pepita as to an equal. Such speech is troubling and wonderful to an intelligent child and Madre María del Pilar had abused it. She had expanded Pepita's vision of how she should feel and act beyond the measure of her years.

Related Characters: Pepita, The Abbess

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

While Doña María is praying at the church of Cluxambuqua, Pepita sits alone in the hotel and begins a letter to the Abbess. As a woman, the Abbess is a notable contrast to Pepita's mistress: while Doña María is consumed by her own problems and her indulgent feelings of self-pity, the Abbess is completely oriented towards helping others and stewarding the city's charitable works.

However, as a parental figure, the Abbess is surprisingly similar to Doña María. Her behavior towards Pepita reflects the Abbess' own interests—worry over her approaching old age and the desire that someone will take over her work after she dies—rather than a disinterested desire for Pepita's welfare. Her intensity baffles and harms Pepita much as Doña María's does Clara. The Abbess's behavior shows that obsessive love for an idea, however altruistic in nature, can be harmful, just as obsessive love for a person is.

She had never brought courage to either life or love. Her eyes ransacked her heart. She thought of the amulets and her beads, her drunkenness [...] she thought of her daughter. She remembered the long relationship, crowded with the wreckage of exhumed conversations, of fancied slights, of inopportune confidences [...].

Related Characters: Pepita, Doña María

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

While Pepita is preparing her dinner, Doña María reads the girl's letter to the Abbess. She's struck by the bravery Pepita expresses—although the young girl feels lonely and unhappy in Doña María's service, she maintains her trust in the Abbess and her willingness to do whatever the Abbess decides is best. Doña María is usually oblivious and insensitive to the troubles of those around her, but her epiphany in the church has made her more sensitive and outward-looking. It seems like she will try to form relationships grounded not in her own self-interest but in selfless love. In a way, it's this moment of connection to the divine that allows Doña María to connect to Pepita and think about the ways she can improve. While the novel often parodies human attempts to understand the divine—such as Brother Juniper's pseudo-scientific "experiments"—it maintains that connection, based on feeling and intuition, is possible and has the potential to transform human lives.

Part 3: Esteban Quotes

[...] for just as resignation was a word insufficient to describe the spiritual change that came over the Marquesa de Montemayor on that night in the inn in Cluxambuqua, so love is inadequate to describe the tacit almost ashamed oneness of these brothers [...] there existed a need of one another so terrible that it produced miracles as naturally as the charged air of a sultry day produces lightning.

Related Characters: Manuel, Esteban

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Switching to a different narrative thread, the novel describes the extremely close bond between two orphaned twin brothers, Manuel and Esteban. Although their relationship is completely different from the family dynamics that govern Doña María's life, by calling her to mind the novel points out that their bond shares the obsessive quality of her maternal love—just as her obsession with her daughter leaves room for nothing else in Doña María's life, Manuel and Esteban cultivate no other friendships because of their wholehearted closeness to each other.

It's also interesting that the novel points out the impossibility of language to fully describe these intense bonds and emotions. While most characters love and are inspired by art, Manuel and Esteban are among the few that seriously doubt its power to reflect daily life—when they attend the theater, it seems marked by falsity and artifice. While the novel remains generally convinced of the value of art, it uses Esteban and Manuel to point out its limits.

Pleasure was no longer as simple as eating; it was being complicated by love. Now was beginning that crazy loss of one's self, that neglect of everything but one's dramatic thoughts about the beloved, that feverish inner life all turning upon the Perichole and which would so have astonished and disgusted her had she been permitted to divine it.

Related Characters: Camila Perichole / Micaela Villegas, Manuel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

After seeing her once at the theater, Manuel falls instantly in love with the Perichole. In his obsessive love, he's markedly similar to Doña María—the same loss of independent identity and even physical decay attend his passion that characterize her fervor over Doña Clara. Their similarities point out that obsessive love can occur—and be equally destructive—in romantic and platonic contexts.

Moreover, Manuel's sudden attack of love shows that even he responds strongly, if unwillingly, to art. He's seen the Perichole many times offstage without being impressed by her; it's only when she's acting, elevated by her talent as an artist, that he grasps her full force of character.

It was merely that in the heart of one of them there was left room for an elaborate imaginative attachment and in the heart of the other there was not. Manuel could not quite understand this [...] but he did understand that Esteban was suffering [...] and at once, in one unhesitating stroke of the will, he removed the Perichole from his heart.

Related Characters: Camila Perichole / Micaela Villegas, Esteban, Manuel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Manuel's obsessive love for the Perichole almost drives him and Esteban apart, but Manuel realizes this at the last moment and decides to overcome his romantic love in favor of familial love. This is an extremely poignant moment of brotherly compassion and sacrifice that differentiates Manuel from other characters (namely Doña María) who grapple with obsessive love—unlike them he's still able to perceive and act on the feelings of those around him, rather than just his own. However, even within the context of his sibling relationship he's acting on a somewhat restrictive and draconian concept of love. Esteban's concept of love is so strict that it prohibits the brothers from having any other meaningful relationships. Thus, even as they renew their happy relationships they limit their possibilities elsewhere in life.

He was the awkwardest speaker in the world apart from the lore of the sea, but there are times when it requires a high courage to speak the banal. He could not be sure the figure on the floor was listening, but he said, "We do what we can. We push on, Esteban, as best we can."

Related Characters: Captain Alvarado (speaker), Esteban

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

After Manuel's death, Esteban suffers an utter breakdown as he tries to mourn the loss of his brother and understand his own identity as an independent man, rather than part of a pair. It's impossible for anyone to console him during this process—even the Abbess falls short—and he flirts with the idea of suicide. Finally, the Abbess dispatches Captain Alvarado to talk to him. A brave and respected explorer, Captain Alvarado is defined by the loss of his own daughter some years ago. It's this shared sense of grief that allows him to connect to Esteban and provide him with comfort. Even though he's giving the same advice as everyone else, Captain Alvarado's words are bolstered by his shared experience. Captain Alvarado's compassionate counsel illustrates the ability of shared grief to facilitate meaningful connection between characters in a way that few other emotions can.

Part 4: Uncle Pio Quotes

In the third place he wanted to be near those that loved Spanish literature and its masterpieces, especially in the theater. He had discovered all that treasure for himself, borrowing or stealing from the libraries of his patrons, feeding himself upon it in secrecy [...].

Related Characters: Uncle Pio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Again switching to another character's narrative, the novel describes Uncle Pio's life in Spain before he immigrated to Peru. As a scrappy young man living off odd jobs in Madrid's seedy underbelly, Uncle Pio becomes obsessed with the art of Spanish drama—he finds all kinds of pretexts to visit the theater and educates himself on the genre he loves. Uncle Pio's self-motivated passion illustrates the fundamentally egalitarian nature of art—even though it's a mark of the highest culture, it's also relatable and accessible to someone like Uncle Pio, with little formal education. It also shows the ability of art to elevate human character and to reflect its best aspects. Although Uncle Pio will often seem unscrupulous and amoral, his love for theater remains a guiding force that pushes him towards his greatest accomplishments and facilitates his greatest deeds, like taking in Camila Perichole as a small child.

Her whole nature became gentle and mysterious and oddly wise; and it all turned to him. She could find no fault in him and she was sturdily loyal. They loved one another deeply but without passion. He respected the slight nervous shadow that crossed her face when he came too near her. But there arose out of this denial itself the perfume of a tenderness, that ghost of passion which, in the most unexpected relationship, can make even a whole lifetime devoted to irksome duty pass like a gracious dream.

Related Characters: Camila Perichole / Micaela Villegas, Uncle Pio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

The Perichole's relationship to Uncle Pio is complex and sometimes troubling—he raised her like a father but he's also her coach, servant, and occasionally flirtatious confidante. It doesn't seem to fit the mold of a "positive" parent-child relationship. However, the novel clearly shows that under Uncle Pio's care, the abused young girl grows up into an accomplished and "wise" young woman. While Doña María is obsessed with the idea of motherhood, and constantly proclaims her love for Doña Clara, it's Uncle Pio who quietly becomes a decent parent.

Moreover, their relationship shows the role of art in bringing out the best of various characters. In later life, the Perichole will demonstrate marked self-centeredness and vanity; however, it's always her acting talent and her commitment to her art that bring out the thoughtful and perceptive aspects of her character. For Uncle Pio's part, the devotion to art they both share allows him to be a loyal and steady friend to his young charge, suppressing the wild and unpredictable impulses that have heretofore defined his life.

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 of the world is a constant; that the theory of progress is a delusion; that the poor, never having known happiness, are insensible to misfortune. Like all the rich he could not bring himself to believe that the poor (look at their houses, look at their clothes) could really suffer.

Related Characters: Archbishop of Lima

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

In the Archbishop's first appearance, the novel delicately and humorously satirizes the hypocrisy and self-indulgence that drive his character. The scion of the Church in Peru, he's supposed to reflect Christian virtues of piety and selflessness; however, he just dines extravagantly and enriches himself at the expense of his impoverished parishioners. Although this is a comical passage, there's a serious contrast between his willful indifference to the plight of the poor and the compassion and altruism that have led the Abbess to devote her entire life to these people. The Archbishop demonstrates the lurking hypocrisy and selfishness of the same institution that the Abbess demonstrates is a force for good. Through these diametrically opposed characters, the novel urges the reader not to blindly embrace or disown religious institutions; instead of judging the Church, people should judge the individuals who work for it based on their actions, not the positions they occupy or the things they say.

"How absurd you are," she said smiling. "You said that as boys say it. You don't seem to learn as you grow older, Uncle Pio. There is no such thing as that kind of love and that kind of island. It's in the theater you find such things."

Related Characters: Camila Perichole / Micaela Villegas (speaker), Uncle Pio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

At the height of her ascension into snobby Limean society, the Perichole contracts smallpox and loses her famous good looks. Most of her supposed friends turn on her, and only Uncle Pio stands by her, although she's carefully distanced herself from her old friend over the years. However, when Uncle Pio voices his loyalty and love for her, she refuses to believe that such feelings can be genuine. The Perichole makes two mistakes here. First, she believes herself unable to command such devotion, especially now that her looks are gone; Uncle Pio attributes this lack of self-worth to the fact that she has never experienced selfless love for anyone else. Moreover, she assumes that the emotions portrayed in the theater are necessarily false and have no counterpoints in real life. In contrast, Uncle Pio—and the novel itself—argue that the theater only reflects and magnifies what already exists in life.

This assumption that she need look for no more devotion now that her beauty had passed proceeded from the fact that she had never realized any love save love as passion. Such love, though it expends itself in generosity and thoughtfulness, though it give birth to visions and to great poetry, remains among the sharpest expressions of self-interest. Not until it has passed through a long servitude, through its own self-hatred, through mockery, through great doubts, can it take its place among the loyalties.

Related Characters: Camila Perichole / Micaela Villegas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

After she loses her extraordinary beauty to smallpox, the Perichole distances herself from all her friends because she believes no one will love her anymore. Here, the novel makes its most explicit statement on the differences between obsessive and selfless love. While the Perichole has had many affairs and experienced "love as passion," these relationships have all been shallow manifestations of her vanity or her own desires. In contrast, Uncle Pio's love for her, which begun when he had nothing to gain from her and has endured even though she has long spurned and abused him, exemplifies love that consists more of loyalty than self-interest. The first kind of love is still valuable, especially artistically—the novel maintains that it inspires

"visions and great poetry," and it has helped the Perichole develop her talent. However, it's only the second kind of love that confers true self-knowledge of the kind that Uncle Pio possesses.

Part 5: Perhaps an Intention Quotes

❝ And on that afternoon Brother Juniper took a walk along the edge of the Pacific. He tore up his findings and cast them into the waves; he gazed for an hour upon the great clouds of pearl that hang forever upon the horizon of the sea, and extracted from their beauty a resignation that he did not permit his reason to examine. The discrepancy between faith and the facts is greater than is generally assumed.

Related Characters: Brother Juniper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Brother Juniper has attempted to rationalize and explain worldly phenomena by a "scientific" analysis of God's plan. In one humorous episode, he even rates local villagers on a piety scale to determine who most "deserved" to die in a disease epidemic (much to his dismay, the seemingly most pious people, undeserving of death, were largely the ones who died). However, unable to discern any rhyme or reason, he tears up his papers and throws them into the ocean. Paradoxically, although this gesture reflects Brother Juniper's frustration and lack of understanding, he gains "resignation" and tranquility by observing the beauty of the scraps; he's in closer proximity to the divine here than at any other point in his investigations. Brother Juniper's life shows that theological issues and faith can't be approached through scientific means; rather, all people must find their own relationship to the divine through individual contemplation.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Brother Juniper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Although Brother Juniper experiences a moment of understanding when he tears up his papers and watches them float away, he still continues with his ill-fated attempt to create a comprehensive biography of the victims of the bridge collapse. His project draws him into highly judgmental thinking: in his conclusions, he lauds some characters and condemns others as sinners, taking reductive and hardline stances on personal character that the novel generally condemns. Moreover, he can't even determine any comprehensible idea of God's plan. Brother Juniper's obsession with gleaning some sort of spiritual meaning of the bridge collapse prevents him from truly connecting with or understanding any of its victims, and it distracts him from giving aid to those who are left grieving in its wake.

❝ "All, all of us have failed. One wishes to be punished. One is willing to assume all kinds of penance, but do you know, my daughter, that in love—I scarcely dare say it—but in love our very mistakes don't seem to be able to last long?"

Related Characters: The Abbess (speaker), Doña Clara / Condesa Clara, Camila Perichole / Micaela Villegas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Some time after the bridge collapse, Doña Clara arrives in Peru to mourn her late mother. Immediately seeking out the Abbess for spiritual counsel, Doña Clara confesses that she never behaved as she should have during her mother's lifetime. Rather than chastising her for this sin, the Abbess emphasizes her similarity to other people—namely herself and Camila Perichole, now a nun—both in their grief and the imperfection of their conduct towards those they love. Here, shared grief and empathy is able to provide meaningful comfort and recognition and atonement of past sins. Moreover, it's important that while other clerics, like

Brother Juniper, frequently harangue parishioners on how they should behave using stringent religious dogma as evidence, the Abbess barely mentions religion but is able to inspire altruism and even piety (such as the Perichole's conversion) by providing a compassionate ear. This episode points out the importance of personal connection over abstract principles in forming a religious consciousness.

❝ But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.

Related Characters: The Abbess

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

After her conference with Doña Clara, the Abbess visits the hospital in her abbey to say goodnight to her patients. While she speaks to them, she is struck not only by her grief for Pepita and Esteban, who have died in the collapse, but for the imminent loss of even their memories, as everyone who knows them will eventually die as well. Although the Abbess derives serenity and stability from her religious convictions, this is a serious moment of doubt—she wonders whether any life can have meaning if it is so soon forgotten. However, she recovers her peace of mind by remembering the meaningful human connection that she has observed and facilitated so many times. Although religion helps many of the characters, especially the Abbess, through hard times, it's ultimately bonds of love between ordinary humans that make life meaningful and worth living.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: PERHAPS AN ACCIDENT

One July morning in 1714, a large **bridge** outside Lima collapses and plunges five people to their deaths. The collapse is particularly shocking and gains attention because the bridge connects Lima and Cuzco, and hundreds of people pass over it every day. The bridge is even sacred to St. Louis of France, and there's a small church on one side that is supposed to protect it. It's "unthinkable" that the bridge could break.

The novel poses its central question—whether or not worldly events have divine meaning—by opening with a cataclysmic and seemingly irrational event, which various characters will struggle to understand and rationalize throughout the novel.

The victims are mourned in a large service in the Lima cathedral, and the entire city is in uproar as a result of the calamity. Servants guiltily return things they've stolen from their employers, and "usurers harangued their wives angrily, in defense of usury." In fact, it's odd that the disaster gains so much attention, given that calamity is common in Peru—tidal waves and earthquakes are not uncommon, and diseases periodically threaten entire towns.

It's clear that this incident isn't just important in itself, but that it's a symbolic event through which characters can try to understand that many calamities whose occurrence pervades heir life.

One witness to the bridge collapse is Brother Juniper, an Italian missionary who is trying to convert the indigenous population to Christianity. On the morning in question, Brother Juniper is walking towards the bridge himself but stops to rest after climbing up a steep hill. He's thinking optimistically about his ministerial work when he sees the bridge fall into the valley below. Rather than feeling thankful that he wasn't killed himself, Brother Juniper begins to wonder why those particular five people had to die. Brother Juniper believes that "if there were any plan in the universe at all," then he must be able to decipher it through "those lives so suddenly cut off." He decides to investigate the victims' lives.

By carefully detailing the quotidian coincidences that prevent Brother Juniper from dying in the bridge collapse, the novel suggests that his salvation is the result of coincidence, rather than fate or divine will. However, Brother Juniper does not experience it this way. He has a deep-seated religious conviction and a desire to believe that a divine plan is governing his life.

Brother Juniper believes it's high time for a theologian to take on such an investigation—he wants to be the person to help religion "take its place among the exact sciences." Of course, he's witnessed disasters before among his individual parishioners, but he believes that this calamity is a "sheer Act of God" that creates a "perfect laboratory."

Brother Juniper's attempt to apply scientific rhetoric, like the idea of the "laboratory," to abstract philosophical questions, seems ridiculous—yet it reflects the conflict between religious and scientific methods of analyzing worldly events that pervaded the eighteenth century.

It might seem like such an experiment would be the result of a religious skeptic, but Brother Juniper is a completely earnest believer. He merely wants to prove his beliefs absolutely to the people he's trying to convert. He's often dreamed of such experiments before, and even thought of recording all of his "Prayers for Rain" ceremonies and their (not always consistent) results.

Brother Juniper may be a true believer, but throughout the novel his somewhat hapless experiments will tend to reinforce doubt rather than devotion. It's interesting that he wants to combine divinity and science here, suggesting that scientific thought has become so powerful that he must prove his faith through the paradigm of science.

For the next six years, Brother Juniper traverses Lima, interrogating the victims' friends and families about their inner lives and filling dozens of notebooks with even the most seemingly trivial facts. From this information, he crafts an enormous book. As the narrator will explain later, the book is eventually burned publicly in Lima. However, a secret copy survives in a university library, recording the life of each victim and "concluding with a dignified passage describing why God had settled upon that person and upon that day for His demonstration of wisdom."

Brother Juniper's book expresses confidence both in the existence of a divine plan for human life and in the author's ability to interpret that plan. This makes it a marked contrast to the novel itself, which will thoroughly undermine both these principles.

However, despite all his hard work, Brother Juniper is unable to plumb the secret depths of any of the victims. The narrator wonders whether he himself will fall prey to the same mistakes as the monk, even though he "[claims] to know so much more" than Brother Juniper.

Even though the narrator often differentiates himself from Brother Juniper by making fun of his efforts, the narrator emphasizes the novel's limits, as well.

The narrator concludes his introduction by musing that some people think that "to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day," while others believe that not even a bird dies without God's knowledge and intention.

Switching from the plural "gods" to the singular "God," the novel establishes a contrast between the comforting idea of a benevolent Christian God and what it regards as a destabilizing vision of indifferent pagan deities

PART 2: THE MARQUESA DE MONTEMAYOR

Every Spanish schoolchild is now familiar with Doña Maria, Marquesa de Montemayor; since her death, her letters have become "one of the monuments of Spanish literature," and many people have studied her life. However, her biographers have created an unfaithful portrait by falsely improving her image and creating a flawless character to match the beauty and wit of her letters. In his own research just after her death, Brother Juniper makes the opposite mistake, judging her too harshly.

The huge discrepancy between Doña María's life and her work questions the stereotype that art is necessarily an exact reflection of the artist. Rather, the novel will argue that a person's art can diverge from their character or experiences while also providing a profound lens through which to examine that reality.

Doña María is born to a wealthy Limean merchant. As a child, her ugliness and her persistent stutter make her unhappy; her mother constantly berates her and tries to "improve" the girl's appearance. Doña María resists marriage for a long time, but eventually she marries a poor nobleman in order to get away from her mother.

Doña María's bad relationship with her own mother is interesting, given that she will also have a dysfunctional relationship with her own daughter. The novel will ascribe Doña María's behavior as a mother chiefly to her own character flaws, but it implicitly suggests that she is unable to be a good parent because she herself suffered a traumatic upbringing.

When Doña María gives birth to her own daughter, Clara, she "fastened upon her with an idolatrous love." However, Clara responds to her mother's love with "astonishment and repulsion," and tries to avoid her mother as much as possible. When it's time for her own marriage, Doña Clara purposefully chooses a Spanish husband so that she can leave the country. She unemotionally leaves Lima and her mother behind, while Doña María openly weeps at the harbor.

While Doña María is clearly an exasperating mother, Doña Clara also appears as a profoundly indifferent child. It's important to keep in mind not just Doña María's erratic behavior but also Clara's failings as a daughter.

Now that she's alone again, Doña María's dress becomes even shabbier than normal and her habits more erratic. She talks to herself on the street, constantly playing out imaginary scenes in which she and Doña Clara lovingly reconcile. Because of her mental anguish, she prematurely ages into an old woman. People make fun of her in the streets; she's even denounced before the Inquisition, and only her son-in-law's high social position in Spain saves her.

Doña María's obsession with her daughter isn't just inconvenient for Doña Clara—it profoundly affects her own ability to live a meaningful life. While Doña María's case is clearly extreme, she reflects the ability of romantic or platonic fixations to overtake one's entire worldview.

Four years after Doña Clara's marriage, Doña María visits Spain. Both women vow to behave well, and both fail; the visit is punctuated by angry scenes and slamming doors. One day, Doña María packs up early and returns to Peru without saying goodbye.

The two women's inability to exist in close proximity is tragic. On the other hand, the necessity of conducting their relationship across a large distance inspires the letters that prove to be Doña María's greatest accomplishment.

From this point on, Doña María confines her love to the letters she writes Doña Clara. Even though she's strange and awkward in person, Doña María's letters are miraculously beautiful. The narrator says that her "genius" springs from her fervent desire to "attract the attention, perhaps the admiration" of her daughter. Doña María forces herself to venture into society in order to collect witty anecdotes to relate; she becomes well-versed in the literature of her time and rewrites her letters every night. Now, scholars know that Doña Clara barely read the letters, and it was her husband (Conde Vicente d'Abuirre) who preserved them for future study.

Even though Doña María's obsession with her daughter is presented as a character flaw directly responsible for her deep unhappiness, it also spurs her to great artistic heights. It's also interesting that her personality as a writer contrasts so starkly with her character in real life. This contrast doesn't make her letters less genuine or valuable; rather, it allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of her personality.

Many modern critics have accused Doña María of "keeping one eye to posterity" while writing the letters, but in fact Doña María was completely focused on Doña Clara's approval and would have been astonished to find herself so famous.

Even though Doña María is sometimes arrogant and demanding in her behavior towards her daughter, as an artist she is very humble.

Moreover, although the letters are lighthearted and funny, in fact Doña María is sad most of the time. She even wonders if the "constant pain in her heart" is related to some physical growth. One day, she includes this musing in a letter, and Doña Clara replies harshly that she is "making a cult of sorrow."

Because of her constant exasperation with her mother, Doña Clara is a notably harsh daughter. Doña María's parenting has brought out the worst of her daughter's character traits.

Doña María's knowledge that Clara will never return her love makes her a deep skeptic. She doesn't believe in God, because she doesn't think He would create a world where daughters don't love their mothers. Moreover, she becomes convinced that, besides herself, no one in the world truly loves anyone. In her opinion, families behave affectionately to each other simply to preserve customs, while secretly they are obsessed with themselves. Even as she has these thoughts, Doña María knows that her own love is "not without a shade of tyranny." She wants to improve herself, but she doesn't know how.

Doña María's obsessive love does imbue her with some self-knowledge—she understands that she is not entirely free of self-interest, even though she can't do anything about this. However, her love also makes her worldview completely selfish and unsympathetic towards other people. Although obsessive love is ostensibly an outward fixation, it actually prompts people to focus exclusively on themselves and prevents meaningful connection with others.

The narrator then paraphrases one of Doña María's letters to Doña Clara. In it, she writes of a gold chain that she's enclosing as a present to her daughter's friend. She fantastically imagines that in order to get it, she walks into a Velazquez portrait in a Limean church, whose subject wears a similar chain, saying that "the painter himself came forward to lift me into the pigment."

Doña María's transparently self-pitying worldview contrasts wonderfully with her inventive and fanciful language as a writer. Although her writing is a reflection of her desires in real life, it also helps her transcend her actual flaws.

Doña María then reports that the Viceroy of Lima is sick with gout, which incapacitates him most of the time. Recently, he tried to attend an official ceremony but couldn't even make it out of his palace. Instead, he returned inside, smoked a cigar, and sent for his favorite actress to entertain him. Doña María continues to include passages critical of powerful figures, even though Doña Clara warns her that the letters are probably opened during the sea journey.

One of Doña María's endearing qualities is her fearless eccentricities—she doesn't care what people think of her, even when it might imperil her social position. This habit underlines her daughter's rigid adherence to social norms.

Finally, Doña María writes that she and her maid, Pepita, are planning on going to the theater to see Perichole perform. Everyone in Lima is obsessed with this famous actress, although Doña María says she's aging and no longer attractive (the narrator interjects that Doña María was simply trying to flatter Doña Clara, and that in fact the actress is very beautiful). She concludes by noting that the actress is always accompanied by a strange man named Uncle Pio; no one knows if he is "her father, her lover, or her son."

Here, Doña María names several other characters who will become central to the narrative. By portraying characters who encounter each other only tangentially, the novel builds a prevailing sense of coincidence and causes the reader to doubt that there is a divine plan guiding their lives.

That night, Doña María does indeed bring Pepita to the theater. However, in her absent-mindedness she doesn't pay much attention to the play. Between the acts, Camila Perichole customarily comes onstage to sing humorous songs. Seeing the Marquesa in the audience, she begins to improvise nasty verses about her strange appearance and her strained relationship with her daughter. Everyone understands whom she's alluding to and laughs, but Doña María doesn't even notice what's going on. It's only Pepita who eventually shepherds her mistress out of the theater. Doña María remains content with her evening, since she can report on the play to her daughter.

The Perichole's songs are cutting and humiliating. However, her artistry isn't actually that different from Doña María's habit of skewering public figures in her letters. The novel frequently demonstrates that while art can be profound, moving, and valuable, it's not necessarily kind or gracious.

When the Viceroy learns that "one of his aristocrats had been openly baited in the theater," he forces Camila Perichole to apologize to her personally. He doesn't care much about Doña María, but he wants everyone to respect and fear the provincial aristocracy of which he is the head. Moreover, the Perichole is the Viceroy's mistress but he suspects her of cheating on him with a matador, so he wants to humiliate her.

The Viceroy's actions, almost always entirely self-centered, demonstrate the corruption and hypocrisy that undergirds Limean society. This in turn casts doubt on institutions like the church, which is both a bulwark and chief beneficiary of this society.

Doña María is not only surprised by Camila Perichole's visit, she's also drunk. At first, Doña María drank a local liquor, chicha, just to help her sleep at night; now she's drunk most of the time, except when she writes her fabulous letters. Pepita wakes up her mistress and tries to make her presentable by dressing her in a fur cloak and veil.

Pepita's quiet goodwill contrasts with the self-absorption of her mistress and the actress who has humiliated her. Although the novel elevates art itself, its most virtuous characters are rarely artists.

Seeing her victim up close, Camila Perichole is surprised by her dignity. She softly says that she hopes Doña María didn't "misunderstand" anything she said at the theater. Doña María has no idea what's happening, because she didn't hear the Perichole's insults; she praises the actress's beauty and talent, and then starts talking about her own daughter's virtues. Thinking that the older woman is simply being kind out of magnanimity, the Perichole is humbled and ashamed by the time she leaves.

Even though this interaction is founded on misunderstandings (Doña María doesn't understand why the actress is apologizing, while the Perichole doesn't grasp that the older woman is drunk and barely functional), it's moving and profound all the same. This is similar to the ability of art to be meaningful even though it doesn't exactly reflect real life.

It's Pepita who bears the brunt of Doña María's eccentricities. She's an orphan, brought up under the care of the Abbess Madre María del Pilar. One day Doña María had visited the convent to ask for a young girl to work as her companion, and the Abbess chose Pepita both to give her more understanding of the world, and to "bend the old woman to her own interests."

Even though the Abbess is a generous and idealistic woman, she's also canny and pragmatic (unlike her colleague, Brother Juniper). The novel shows that good works can't flourish without an ability to understand, and work within, the constraints of the flawed world.

The Abbess, one of the "great women of Peru," has "fallen in love with an idea several centuries before its appointed appearance in the history of civilization"—namely, she wants society to give more respect to women and more aid to the sick and poor. At night, she dreams of a future age in which the desperately poor women she helps can have dignity and prosperity. During the day, she has to contend with the fact that all the women around her believe that their misfortunes stem from not attracting a man, and that a man's love is worth "all the misery in the world."

While the novel skewers many of Lima's public figures, like the Viceroy and the Archbishop, it champions the Abbess's good character. It's notable that her ideals and convictions spring from her religious devotion. Even though religion can justify abuses of power or absurd speculations, it also leads to progressive, even revolutionary, thinking.

The Abbess exercises her idealism by running her **abbey** in addition to hospitals and orphanages throughout the city, but she also has to use considerable shrewdness and pragmatism to extract funds from officials who are indifferent to the work she's doing. For example, the Archbishop of Lima openly hates her and "counted the cessation of her visits among the compensations for dying."

The extreme contrast between the Abbess's altruism and the Archbishop's greedy laziness emphasizes the paradoxical ability of the church to bring out the best and worst of its different officials.

As the Abbess gets older, she begins to fear for the continuation of her work. None of the nuns around her seem capable or committed enough to take over the **abbey**. However, Pepita is very bright and kind, so the Abbess decides to groom the girl to be her successor. In order to prepare and educate her, the Abbess assigns Pepita the most difficult tasks and takes her on her own errands. Pepita's work for Doña María is simply the latest of these tests. Pepita doesn't like caring for the difficult woman, but she accepts her new assignment without question.

The Abbess's desire to see her work continue is altruistic—she doesn't want the poor to be abandoned when she dies. However, it's also a mark of personal ambition, since her hospitals are like an extension of herself, and she wants her legacy to outlast her actual life.

Pepita's life as Doña María's servant is very difficult. She's isolated from the other servants, who all steal from their mistress constantly. Sometimes, she accompanies Doña María to church and the old woman slips away, forcing Pepita to track her down for hours. Sometimes Doña María treats Pepita warmly, but when she becomes preoccupied with her letters and her daughter, she becomes cold and reserved, which is hurtful to Pepita. She only remains with Doña María out of her loyalty to the Abbess.

While Doña María is obsessed with the imperfection of her familial relations, Pepita meekly accepts her complete lack of family. The older woman's inability to look beyond herself prevents her from being a good guardian to her companion, and even prevents her from benefiting as much from Pepita's presence as she might have if she truly welcomed and paid attention to her.

One day, Doña Clara writes that she is pregnant, hoping to forestall her mother's worry and advice by announcing it casually. Despite her daughter's efforts, Doña María goes into a frenzy. She consults every doctor and old woman in the city for advice, sending her daughter strange talismans and observing superstitions practices in her hope for a safe birth.

By turning to both religious and superstitious means to help her daughter, Doña María implicitly accepts the existence of some sort of deity governing human affairs. Even though she ostensibly doesn't believe in God, she's unable to behave as if God doesn't exist.

In the midst of her worries, Doña María is often struck by the fear that "God is indifferent" and "nothing in man's power can alter the course of law." However, she never submits to these thoughts long enough to stop writing letters and seeking advice.

Throughout the novel, the truly frightening possibility is not that God doesn't exist, but that God doesn't care about human misery, or even purposely inflicts it.

At last, Doña María decides to fulfill an old Peruvian tradition and make a pilgrimage to the shrine of **Santa María de Cluxambuqua** in order to pray for Doña Clara's safe delivery. She travels across the famous **bridge of San Luis Rey** in her sedan chair and goes up into the beautiful and rustic hills. Leaving Pepita at the hotel, Doña María goes immediately to the church and begins to pray. A new sense of tranquility comes over her, and she reflects that maybe "she would learn in time to permit both her daughter and her gods to govern their own affairs." None of the other people in the church distract her, and she spends hours in calm reflection.

While churches often represent the abuses of power perpetrated by those who control them, they are also locations of important moments of epiphany and revelation. The novel suggests that while the clerical institutions often work to society's detriment, this does not preclude individuals from having transformative religious experiences.

As Doña María is leaving the **church**, a message boy runs up to her bearing a letter from her Doña Clara. The letter is "full of wounding remarks rather brilliantly said," but the mother simply reads it and then gently folds it away.

Doña María's epiphany enables her to accept her daughter as she is, rather than constantly trying to change her (as, indeed, her own mother did to her).

Meanwhile, Pepita prepares their rooms in the hotel and tells the cooks how to make Doña Maria's special porridge. Then she begins writing a letter to the Abbess, whom she remembers lovingly and respectfully. The narrator says that by treating Pepita as a mature adult and her equal, the Abbess had "abused" her power and acted unwisely. In fact, Pepita doesn't know she's being groomed for an important role, and she's troubled by her long and difficult solitude.

Pepita's relationship with the Abbess is the opposite of selfish love—rather than using the other woman to satisfy her own desires, she submits herself to her guardian completely. However, this relationship has its own detriments: Pepita's lack of concern for herself leads her to be lonely and unhappy.


When Pepita goes downstairs to look after the dinner, Doña María arrives at the hotel, sees the unfinished letter, and reads it. The letter hints at Pepita's dissatisfaction and loneliness, but also reiterates her willingness to do whatever the Abbess wants. She's struck by the humility and devotion Pepita expresses, and wishes that she were able to "command another's soul as completely as this nun was able to do."

Doña María's reaction is partly selfish—she wants to possess Pepita's love just as she wants to possess her daughter's—but it also builds on her earlier epiphany by allowing her to be more concerned about other people's affairs and look for new ways to connect to others.

When Pepita returns, Doña María invites her to share the meal. When Pepita politely declines, the older woman feels rejected. She tries to manipulate Pepita by asking if she has any letters to send with the next post, and even admits that she knows Pepita has been writing to the Abbess. Blushing, Pepita says that the letter wasn't "brave" and that she doesn't want to send it; she takes the letter into her own room and tears it up.

Even though both women want a stronger relationship with the other, they lack the mutual understanding to bridge the divide of character and circumstances between them.

Sitting alone, Doña María reflects that she had "never brought courage to either life or love." She decides that, starting tomorrow, she will change her behavior and "begin a new life." She begins a new letter to Doña Clara, in which she is more generous and less demanding than ever before. By the time she finishes, it's almost dawn. Doña María looks in at Pepita as she sleeps, then prays for the courage to change her ways. Two days later, both women are killed in the **bridge** collapse as they travel back to Lima.

The tragedy here lies not just in Doña María's death, but in the fact that this death occurs just as she is about to effect a character transformation. If, as Brother Juniper will argue, God is judging her for her self-interest, it's not very fair of him to punish her just as she's about to improve herself. The timing of her death posits either that God is active in human affairs but not benevolent, or that no deity exists who understands and acts upon individual human character.

PART 3: ESTEBAN

One morning, two foundlings appear at the door of the Abbess's **convent**. The nuns take them in and name them Manuel and Esteban. Although their parents are never discovered, Limean gossips view their graceful bearing as evidence of wealthy fathers.

Esteban and Manuel's lack of family or discernable origins will reinforce their remarkable closeness to each other.

Although she's generally suspicious of men, the Abbess grows fond of Manuel and Esteban, treating them to cakes and telling them biblical stories. When they are too old to remain in the **convent**, they do errands and tasks for all the churches in the city. However, the boys don't want to become priests; instead, they start working as scribes, transcribing plays for the theater, advertisements, and popular songs. When they grow tired of this, they work at the docks unloading vessels. They make few friends and only talk to each other.

Although Esteban and Manuel are active and known throughout the city, they remain aloof from its affairs. In a way, this demonstrates their good character: they don't descend into drink and other behavior that makes the Abbess dislike men. However, it's also clear that their close bond with each other establishes a barrier between them and the rest of the world.

Because they lack a family and were brought up exclusively by women, Manuel and Esteban are quite reserved. Although they are extremely close, they dislike the "continual comment and joking" about their resemblance, so they tacitly agree never to go about the city together. When alone, they speak to one another in a secret language that they made up as boys. Just as the word "resignation" understates what Doña María felt after her pilgrimage to the shrine, so "love" inadequately describes the brothers' bond.

Doubting the ability of its own words to convey its characters' emotions, the novel tacitly emphasizes its own limitations and the limitations of the artistry it describes. Moreover, by emphasizing the inability to truly convey genuine emotions through words, the novel elevates the brothers' bond, which conspicuously eschews language and articulation.

One night, Manuel and Esteban see a play at the invitation of a theater manager they sometimes work for. The boys don't like the theater, because for them "even speech was a debased form of silence," false and tawdry in comparison to their unspoken bond. Esteban goes home early, but Manuel stays—seeing Camila Perichole acting the lead role, he instantly falls in love with her. Both brothers have seen her before during their work for the theater, and she always seemed like "an irritable girl in a soiled bodice," but onstage she appears in a new light.

Even though Manuel claims to be immune to the kind of artistry Camila Perichole represents, he falls in love with the representation of herself created by her art – as he intuits now and the reader will see later, the Perichole is a very different woman offstage and onstage. This shows the ability of art to alter reality and to affect even those who are skeptical of it.

Now, Manuel lurks outside the theater on any possible pretext. This is the first time "his will and imagination had been thus overwhelmed" by a feeling he doesn't share with Esteban. He is beginning to lose his sense of self in his passion for the Perichole.

Manuel's loss of self coincides with his growing sense of distance from his brother. Their sibling bond is so close that it precludes any other relationships.

For Esteban, however, life with Manuel is enough to keep him content forever. He doesn't have "room in his imagination" for any other relationships. Now, he feels hurt and betrayed to discover that even in those most ideal relationships, one person always loves more than the other. With Manuel so distant from him, Esteban feels like his life no longer has meaning.

Esteban and Manuel seem to have crafted an ideal family, in marked contrast to Doña María and Doña Clara. However, even here it's clear that the same imbalances of love exist.

One night, a message boy tells Manuel that the Perichole wants to see him immediately. Manuel goes straight to the theater, where the actress asks him brusquely to write a secret letter for her. She makes him swear by the Virgin Mary that he is her friend and that he will never repeat the contents of the letter, not even to Esteban. The Perichole dictates one letter to the Viceroy, which is polite and earnest, asking why he believes the "calumnies" other people spread about her and stating her intention to return all the gifts he's given her. Then she dictates a shorter, more intimate letter to her matador lover, telling him when and where to meet her for their next rendezvous. She dismisses Manuel.

Here, the Perichole assuages the doubts of her powerful primary lover, while also stoking the flames of her illicit affair. Her adroit and aloof behavior contrasts to Manuel's earnest and unpremeditated passion. While the novel suggests that obsessive love isn't healthy or virtuous, the Perichole's unemotional approach to romance isn't very appealing either. Moreover, by making him swear not to tell Esteban what he's doing, the Perichole demands—and Manuel agrees—to prioritize this relationship over the sibling bond.

For the next two months, Manuel writes letters for the Perichole without ever telling Esteban what he's doing. One night, to his astonishment, the Perichole arrives at their room in the middle of the night, wanting Manuel to write a letter at once: she dictates a furious message ending her affair with the matador for good. Since she's whispering, Esteban merely sees her with her head next to Manuel's and assumes that they are lovers. He feels "infinitely unwanted."

Esteban's feelings are founded on a misunderstanding. In essence, he's watching a play whose script he invents, rather than understanding what's really going on. However, the response this provokes in him is genuine and important. Art is both divergent from and inextricably linked to the events of real life.

After the Perichole leaves, Manuel sits with his head in his hands, whispering about how much he worships her. Esteban gets up from bed and tells his brother that he should go and follow the woman he loves. Manuel realizes that if he does so he will be irrevocably separated from Esteban; moreover, he realizes that his passion for the Perichole is only an "illusion" compared to his attachment to Esteban. Manuel finally understands that Esteban has been suffering, and he resolves never to think of the Perichole again.

The height of Manuel's passion immediately precedes his disownment of that passion. This highlights the transitory nature of passionate love, especially compared to the deeper and self-abnegating loyalty that characterizes his relationship with his brother.

Blowing out the candle, Manuel feigns casual boredom and says that he's tired of writing for the Perichole and doesn't want to see her again. Esteban sees through the ruse and announces his intention to go for a walk; half angrily, he tells Manuel that he doesn't need to change anything for him, and that he doesn't want to be in his brother's way. Manuel responds that Esteban shouldn't be silly, and that he doesn't love her at all. Finally, Esteban lies back down in bed. The next time a message boy summons Manuel to the Perichole, he says harshly that he wants nothing to do with her.

It's fitting for two brothers whose relationship exists chiefly outside language that they resolve their one dispute without directly speaking about it. Relationships that have to be elaborately articulated (like Doña María's love for her daughter) are generally less profound than those that don't.


One night, Manuel cuts his knee on a piece of metal. Although neither of the brothers have ever been sick before, Manuel's knee swells up and becomes infected. Esteban fetches a barber surgeon, who prescribes many ointments and instructs Esteban to lay cold cloths on the wound. However, as the hours pass the pain becomes more intense, until Manuel resists even the application of the towel.

Manuel's infection is a coincidence that mirrors in miniature the larger calamity of the bridge collapse. In both cases, personal demise is attributable to an even that is specific but random and seems to lack evident meaning.

In the middle of the night, delirious with pain and anger, Manuel shouts curses at his brother, saying he hopes he goes to hell and saying that he came "between me and what was mine by right." Esteban isn't sure whether his brother means what he says, but he continues to care for Manuel devotedly.

In his delirium, Manuel refers to unresolved feelings for the Perichole, even though he moved away from her wholeheartedly and completely.

As dawn draws near, Manuel returns to his senses and is as kind to his brother as he normally is. Esteban even offers to send for the Perichole to visit him, but he says wholeheartedly that he doesn't want to see her. When Esteban asks tentatively if he resents him for keeping him apart from the woman he loved, Manuel seems confused and tells Esteban that he's "going crazy."

Manuel's feelings during his delirium are completely different from those he expresses when he is awake. Like representations of Doña María through real life and art, this shows how contradictory conceptions of a single character can coexist.

During the second night of Manuel's illness, their neighbors begin to protest at his shouting and coarse language. Esteban tries to calm his brother, but not being able to scream makes Manuel even more agitated. On the third night, Manuel dies.

Manuel's death is sudden, painful, and deeply traumatic for his brother. It's hard to imagine that this tragedy was caused by the gentle and thoughtful God whom the narrator in part one suggests "smoothes" away bird feathers.

Esteban leaves the building and refuses to come back. He goes on long walks and stares vacantly at passersby. The landlord summons the Abbess, who tracks down Esteban and asks him to come view his brother's body before the funeral. He stubbornly refuses, and even tells her that he is Manuel, and not Esteban. The Abbess remembers a moment during their childhood when she told them the story of the Crucifixion; Manuel had announced that if he and Esteban were there, they could have prevented it. Despite her pleas, Esteban walks down the street. When Manuel's funeral procession passes through the city, he watches it from a distance, "like a savage."

Esteban's distress is one of the novel's first portrayals of grief. It's evident that this experience almost causes Esteban to lose his identity—he flirts with discarding his name by calling himself Manuel, and by stalking the funeral he acts more like an animal than a person. Although grief often becomes a transcendent experience, it's a very destructive process at first.

From that point, Esteban wanders through and around the city. A shepherd finds him sleeping on a hilltop, and fishermen see him swimming in the ocean. Sometimes he does odd jobs, but he rarely keeps a job for long. Once he lingers outside the **convent**, but when the Abbess hurries out and tries to convince him to come inside, he runs away. The Abbess is so vexed that she rails to God that he has "not chosen to give me the least grace."

The Abbess's deep preoccupation with Esteban's grief is evidence of her generous character. Although she doesn't try to rationalize God's will as Brother Juniper so frequently does, here she's disillusioned (if only for a moment) with the divine plan she believes is governing her life.

After thinking long and hard, the Abbess summons Captain Alvarado. He is a seasoned traveler accustomed to making expeditions throughout the world. He's famous throughout Lima, and Doña María has even introduced him by letter to her daughter. She intuits that his passion for traveling stems from the fact that he once lost a young daughter; she writes to Doña Clara "he goes about the hemispheres to pass the time between now and his old age."

Like Esteban, Captain Alvarado is a man defined by personal loss. Moreover, like Doña María, he is a man whose accomplishments and career are inspired by his deep personal unhappiness. He shares the attributes of these two central characters without being marked by the obsessive love that governs their lives.

Esteban and Manuel have always respected Captain Alvarado and even done some work for him in the past, so the Abbess knows he is the one person who might be able to talk to Esteban. She sends him to Cuzco, where the boy is currently working, and Captain Alvarado finds the boy in a tavern. He pretends not to know that Manuel has died and offers them both jobs on his next expedition, to English and Russia. Reluctantly, Esteban admits that Manuel has died; however, he accepts a position on Captain Alvarado's crew.

Captain Alvarado's grief allows him to connect with Esteban and to approach him in this tactful manner. Although most characters seek to form relationships through passion and obsessive love, shared feelings of loss are more effective at forging interpersonal bonds.

That night, Captain Alvarado treats Esteban to dinner and gets him very drunk. Gently, the captain says that he's heard Esteban recently ran into a burning house and saved someone. Esteban says that he did it because "you're not allowed to kill yourself," but that dying in an attempt to save someone else is acceptable to God.

With its deep pathos, this speech shows that, for Esteban right now, grief functions much as obsessive love does for other characters—it makes him blind to everything but his own suffering and drives him to self-destructive acts.

Esteban says that he wants to give the Abbess a present before he sets out. Once, she told him that she suffered a "serious loss" just as he did, and he tells Captain Alvarado that "women can't bear that kind of a thing like we can." Captain Alvarado agrees to help him find such a gift.

It's notable that Esteban dwells not just on his own sadness but the Abbess's. This remark shows that, after the first trauma of grief subsides, the experience inspires empathy and consideration for others.

When the drunken Esteban finally passes out, Captain Alvarado stands outside the bar and looks up at the sky, remembering the last time he saw his own beloved daughter. Then he returns inside and carries Esteban to bed.

Helping Esteban reminds Captain Alvarado of his own loss, but he can finally think of his daughter with fondness rather than despair.

In the morning, Esteban has a change of heart and says he doesn't want to join the crew after all. When Captain Alvarado tries to coax him, Esteban goes upstairs. He doesn't know what to do, since Manuel always made all the decisions. Captain Alvarado can hear noises from downstairs, and he thinks that Esteban is throwing a rope over the ceiling beam to make a noose. He runs upstairs and catches Esteban just as he tries to hang himself.

Esteban's sudden change of heart shows his reluctance to make any decisions of which Manuel is not a part. His insular bond with his brother has again come to the fore, overriding the restorative process of grieving that Captain Alvarado has helped him begin.

Esteban falls to the floor, crying out in anguish that he is alone. Looking at him, Captain Alvarado re-lives the first hours of his own grief. Even though he knows that he's speaking the obvious, he tells Esteban that he has to "push on," and that "time keeps going by."

Even though Captain Alvarado is saying unremarkable things, his actions show deep compassion. This is fitting, since Esteban and Manuel have always distrusted language in favor of action.

Esteban recovers his composure, and the two men set off for Lima. When they reach the **bridge** of San Luis Rey, the Captain stays behind to arrange the transportation of the luggage. Esteban heads directly onto the bridge and dies in the collapse.

Like Doña María, just as Esteban passes through a period of crisis and is about to transform his life, he dies suddenly.

PART 4: UNCLE PIO

In a letter to Doña Clara, Doña María describes Uncle Pio by comparing him to a messenger ant she sees carrying information between various other worker ants she observes on her balcony. Just like the ants, Uncle Pio travels among the consequential people of Lima and their servants, gathering information and performing mysterious tasks. Doña María writes that she's laying down a piece of nougat for the aunts, and that she's summoned Uncle Pio to see her, arranging to give him an antique in exchange for a new popular ballad.

Doña María's comparison is not very flattering, but it is apt. An outwardly unprepossessing man, Uncle Pio turns social maneuvering into an art form, just as Doña María turns her letters into high literature.

In her next letter, Doña María writes rapturously of Uncle Pio, saying that he's "disreputable" but "delightful." If he wrote her letters, she says, future generations would praise her wit. However, she says that his eyes are "as sad as those of a cow that has been separated from its tenth calf."

Uncle Pio's calculating, even unscrupulous, nature contrasts with the psychological depths that Doña María perceives—and her ability to do so proves that she's not as self-obsessed as the novel often suggests.

Uncle Pio is the Perichole's "singing-master, her coiffeur, her masseur, her reader, her errand-boy, her banker"—and, some people say, her father. He helps her learn her parts for each play, and he writes her letters, since she is illiterate.

Uncle Pio and Doña María are the novel's two major parent figures. Although they are alike in their unconventionality, their approach to their respective charges will be very different.

In the past fifty years, Peru has developed "from a frontier state to a state in renaissance." Lima's elite import the newest settings of the Mass and the newest poetry. Whenever the Archbishop travels to Spain, he brings home some new piece of culture. The most popular art is that of the theater, which captures the imagination of the whole city. Camila Perichole has built a reputation as the city's most talented actress. Most people assume that she's nothing compared to Spanish actresses, but Uncle Pio knows she is the among the best in the world.

It's important to note that Lima's "renaissance" depends on the complete suppression of indigenous culture, which began when Spanish conquistadors first arrived on the island. The city's obsession with the latest Spanish trends indicates its conception of itself as essentially peripheral, never able to measure up to the "parent" country it emulates.

Uncle Pio is born the illegitimate son of a wealthy Spanish landowner. At the age of ten, he runs away to Madrid where he lives "by his wits," relying on his "inexhaustible invention" and "freedom from conscience" to provide for himself. He runs errands, works for circuses, cooks, and spreads slanders at a price. He becomes legendary for his capability and discretion.

Uncle Pio's lineage combines high birth and scandalous circumstances—in this way, he's much like Doña María, who springs from a wealthy family but contributes to that family's demise with her socially unacceptable behavior.

Although he is good at every job he does, Uncle Pio is never satisfied with one job for long. As he grows older, he realizes that the things he craves most are the ability to be omniscient and active in the underbelly of society, proximity to beautiful women, and to be near the masterpieces of Spanish theater. He's come to love drama by working around the theaters and scrounging up copies of different plays for himself.

Uncle Pio's obsession with the theater is comparable to the Abbess's charitable fervor—an all-consuming love not for a person, but an idea. This love will spur his greatest accomplishments, but at the same time impair his relationships with others.

Because of "one of those quarrels that arise so naturally in brothels," Uncle Pio has to flee Spain for Peru. In South America, he's even more successful than in Europe, quickly becoming indispensable to Limean society. He performs many tasks for the Viceroy, enriching himself at the hapless official's expense. Uncle Pio becomes used to coming and going from the palace whenever he wants.

Uncle Pio arrives in Lima under seedy circumstances. His personality and his occupation seem to disqualify him from being a good parent, but the novel will eventually show otherwise.

However, although Uncle Pio is capable and cunning, he never becomes rich—he's indifferent to money. He buys a house and fills it with dogs, but he himself lives in solitude, both proud and lonely.

Uncle Pio's lack of interest in money underscores his fixation on drama.

One day, Uncle Pio comes across Camila Perichole—who, at the time, was a twelve-year-old girl named Micaela Villegas, working as a café singer. He realizes that she's extremely talented and decides to take her under his wing. He "buys" her from her master at the café, who keeps her locked up and whips her. At home, he takes good care of her and teaches her how to act, sing, and appreciate good theater.

Although he rescues the Perichole more as an experiment than an act of charity, Uncle Pio does a good deed—he removes her from a terrible situation and provides her both with material security and a greater purpose in life.

Camila grows up into a beautiful woman, but remains deeply loyal to her first protector—"they loved each other deeply but without passion." Sometimes Uncle Pio feels attracted to his protégé, but this "ghost of a passion" is the kind of feeling that makes "even a whole lifetime devoted to irksome duty pass like a gracious dream."

Although Uncle Pio's ambiguous feelings towards his young charge seem problematic, they actually make him a cautious and thoughtful parent figure; in this sense, they are more laudable than Doña María's straightforward but overwhelming passion for her daughter.

Together, Uncle Pio and Camila Perichole travel across South America, seeking new audiences for her songs. As Camila grows older, Uncle Pio teaches her not only songs and vaudeville, but how to perform challenging theater roles. Although he never beats her, he sometimes exploits her desire for perfection in order to prevent her from becoming complacent in her talent and push her towards greater success. The "suggestion that she was a limited artist" always makes Camila upset and angry, but it also improves her work.

It's important that Camila is able to improve—even transform—herself through art. Throughout the novel, art offers characters the ability to transcend the sordidness or desperation of their ordinary circumstnaces. Though her success as an actress will only exacerbate her character flaws, Camila is no exception to this trend.

After each performance, Camila and Uncle Pio talk over the entire play, analyzing what she's done well and what can improve. Even though the theatergoing population of Lima is already completely satisfied with her work, Camila and Uncle Pio are still trying to fulfill their own impossible standards.

Uncle Pio and Camila work so hard not to make money but out of their devotion to their craft. Even though they both have self-indulgent tendencies, art brings out their earnest and enterprising side.

As time goes on, Camila becomes less obsessed with artistic perfection than Uncle Pio. In part, this is due to the lack of interesting roles for women in Spanish drama—all the heroic or villainous parts go to men, and she has few opportunities to show off her talent. One day, in order to interest her again in her work, Uncle Pio introduces her to a famous playwright who has recently come to Peru. In awe of the playwright, Camila carefully chooses a play to perform for her. On the night of the performance, Camila peeps through the curtains to gaze worshipfully at the tidy little middle-aged woman. Afterwards, the woman visits Camila's dressing room, where the actress throws herself at the woman's feet in tears. For hours, the three of them stay together as the visitor tells them family stories of her grandfather.

The novel will later show Camila's social snobbery—she wants to associate only with the highest echelon of Limean society, like the Viceroy and his entourage. However, far from socially-motivated, her encounter with this unprepossessing woman is sincere and based on mutual devotion to the same art. As this episode shows, art is a mechanism for meaningful human connection that society, riddled with hypocrisy and convention, often prohibits.

Uncle Pio is always happy when a new actress arrives in the city, because Camila always performs best when she has to compete. She can always outshine another actor "without any resort to tricks," just her sincerity. But as her technique becomes stronger, she relies on her innate talent less and less. When she's absentminded during a performance, only Uncle Pio notices.

Camila's art relies on its lack of artifice, while Doña María's is actually predicated on artificiality.

Camila is very beautiful, except when she rests—then her face seems long and thin, and she looks like "a rather pinched peasant girl," rather than a woman who can master the greatest dramas.

Even though Camila's acing is based on her sincerity, onstage she appears as much different than her ordinary self. This remark highlights the inherent artificiality of all art.

Camila becomes even more distracted from her work in the theater when she attracts the attention of the Viceroy, Don Andrés. After spending his youth gambling and carousing in Spain, he is exiled to Peru, where he spends his time trying to replicate as much of Spanish aristocratic society as possible. Trying to distract himself from his gout and boredom, he invites Camila to midnight dinners at the palace after her performance. Camila begins to adore him and believes he's going to make her happy forever. The Viceroy teaches Camila how to dress neatly and speak properly to people of high birth.

Her affair with the Viceroy is the beginning of the end for Camila's acting career. Although the Viceroy is attracted to her because of her exotic air, he wants to imbue her with conventional social graces. As the novel shows, such attention to conventionality doesn't coexist very easily with a serious commitment to art.

Uncle Pio doesn't like Camila's invitations to the palace, although he's intrigued that her lessons from Don Andrés add a new sophistication to her performances. He reflects to himself that she would be a success in Spain if he took her there.

Here, Uncle Pio is losing control of a charge who used to be completely under his sway. Although he resents this, he doesn't react as extremely as Doña María does when faced with the same situation.

After some time, Don Andrés asks if Camila would mind sharing their dinners with other guests. He offers to introduce her to the Archbishop, which delights her. The Archbishop is an enormously fat man whose body imprisons "a curious and eager soul." He is very devout, except for his constant indulgence in rich food and his obsession with secular literature. Although he knows that most of the priests in Peru are corrupt and inefficient, he's too lazy to do anything about them. Instead, he consoles himself with the belief that "the injustice and unhappiness in the world is a constant," and that "the poor are insensible to misfortune." Whenever he hears about priestly abuses, he goes into such a rage that he has to remind himself to ignore these problems in order to keep calm.

Caricatured here, the archbishop is a direct foil to the Abbess, and he demonstrates the height of ecclesiastical corruption and hypocrisy. Although he flaunts the attire and the privileges of his office, he has no empathy for the people he's supposed to help. In contrast, the Abbess eschews signals of her position and pronouncements of dogma. This allows her to be a much more effective and genuine shepherd of her flock.

Eventually, Don Andrés invites Uncle Pio to join the dinner parties, as well as Captain Alvarado. All the men gather in the early evening, when the Perichole is still performing; she arrives tired and fantastically dressed after the play, and they treat her like a "great queen." All night the men talk as Camila leans on Don Andrés's shoulder. They discuss such issues as whether the soul can be seen at the moment of death, and how long the news would take to reach Peru if Christ returned to Jerusalem. Usually, the dawn breaks to find the conversation still going and the Perichole asleep at the table.

Even though all these characters (with the possible exception of Captain Alvarado) are deeply flawed characters, whom the novel criticizes at other points, here they enjoy profoundly meaningful conversation and relationships. The duality and complexity inherent in all characters is one of the reasons that Brother Juniper's straightforward biographical project so utterly fails.

However, Uncle Pio never stops worrying about Camila. In his mind, the world is divided into "those who had loved and those who had not." People who have not truly loved cannot truly understand the meaning of life. Uncle Pio views love not as a pleasure but a "cruel malady;" still, it's a necessary process "through which the elect are required to pass" in order to begin "the business of living." Only this trial can imbue people with real tranquility and the ability to connect meaningfully with others. Uncle Pio knows that this process would make Camila's acting even better, but he worries that she has never felt the necessary love. Even though she has three children with the Viceroy, she eventually tires of him and begins conducting other affairs on the side.

Here, Uncle Pio makes one of the novel's most important pronouncements on passionate love. Although the novel has shown that feelings of this nature are often destructive and selfish, he points out that they are also necessary, both for artistic improvement and for greater self-knowledge. Uncle Pio regards love in much the same way as characters like the Abbess do grief—an undesirable event that nevertheless contributes to the development of good character.

Meanwhile, the Perichole becomes increasingly bored with acting; instead, she's filled with the desire to become a lady. Craving respectability, she hires a "duenna" and several servants to accompany her to **church**. She donates to charities, learns to read and write, and challenges anyone who refers to her as a bohemian. She forces the Viceroy to legitimize her children and assumes the delicate air of a great lady. Still, as a disreputable actress, she'll never truly fit into Limean society.

The Perichole's ridiculous obsession with social refinement contrasts markedly with her sincere address of the playwright's granddaughter. Her gradual transition away from art coincides with the growing artificiality and unpleasantness of her own character. Moreover, her use of religion to gain superficial social credibility highlights the extent to which religious principles transform from legitimate convictions to social tools.

Near the **church** of Santa María de Cluxambuqua is a fashionable neighborhood where Don Andrés has built an imitation-French palace. The Perichole builds her own villa and retires outside the city for her health, which she claims is declining. In her letters, Doña María writes witty descriptions of the gambling and pretensions that dominate social life at these two ornate houses. Also living with the Perichole is her eldest son, Don Jaime, a beautiful little boy who has inherited his father's poor health. Occasionally he has seizures in public, but his face is so sensitive that everyone loves and admires him. Dressed in rich velvet, he forms a beautiful picture when placed next to his glamorous mother.

Although the Perichole and Doña María have much in common—and although they shared a meaningful encounter at the novel's outset—she now becomes fodder for older women's incisive epistles. By this point, each woman has parodied the other for the purposes of her own art and the satisfaction of her own audience. As the novel has shown before, art may be profound and valuable but it doesn't always promote kindness or generosity.

Camila quits acting when she is thirty and spends the next five years obtaining her place in society. She starts overdressing, collecting jewels and scarves, and she wears garish makeup. In her interactions with others, she alternates between furious temper and "unnatural sweetness." At the beginning of her entrance to society, she forbade Uncle Pio from appearing with her in public; now, she doesn't even like it when he visits her privately. She speaks to him formally and vaguely, refusing to make eye contact. Still, he determinedly perseveres in his monthly visits.

Camila's betrayal of Uncle Pio is the worst consequence of her mania for social acceptance. Uncle Pio has been a much better parent than Doña María, yet he's faced with the same filial ingratitude that she endured. However, his steadfastness in the face of this reveals the genuine character of his love for her.

One day, Uncle Pio arrives at Camila's villa and coaxes her into speaking with him in her French gardens. He has been living a very lonely life, and the thought of even spending a short time in her presence, being addressed as "Uncle Pio," and reliving the "trust and humor" of their former relationship, fills him with anticipation.

Although Uncle Pio usually appears as Camila's guide and benefactor, his almost childish enthusiasm here reveals how much he himself relies upon her for his own happiness.

Uncle Pio awaits Camila in the French gardens, which look out onto the Andes. The sun is setting and small animals can be seen throughout the garden. Uncle Pio feels nostalgic, but when Camila arrives, she abruptly asks him what he wants to say to her, insisting that he address her as Doña Micaela.

Here, Camila's obsession leads her to disown her original name, just as other characters' passions (like Manuel's for her) lead them to abandon previous conceptions of their identities.

Uncle Pio begs Camila to hear him out, but she instantly begins to rail at him that she won't return to the "filthy" theater, that she's happy with her new life, and that she doesn't want to be criticized. She begins to weep, and Uncle Pio doesn't understand why or what to say. He tells her that the audience is unsatisfied with the performers who have replaced her, and the theaters only show farces instead of real dramas.

Although Camila is adamant in her refusal to return to the theater, she's clearly not completely happy with her decision. Obviously, her ascension within Lima's high society hasn't proved as satisfying as she thought it would be.


Eventually, Camila relents and begs Uncle Pio to forgive her. She says that Jaime has been ill all afternoon, and she is frustrated at her inability to do anything about it. Still, she says it would "be no good" if she went back to the theater. People would still want to see silly comedies, instead of the meaningful plays they both love.

Although Camila's children are only auxiliary characters in the novel, this reference to her parental anxiety hints that her identity as a mother is gradually overtaking her identity as an actress. This important transformation is one that the novel never fully explores.

Uncle Pio says that Camila is "a very great artist" and that she could even succeed in Madrid. He tries to tempt her into going to Spain with him, but she says that "all the world is alike, Madrid or Lima."

Refusing to consign her to peripheral status, Uncle Pio bestows the greatest artistic commendation possible in colonial Peru.

Humbly, Uncle Pio says that having known Camila is "enough for my whole life," and that he is "always ready" to help her if she needs it. Amused at his protestations of love, Camila says he is confusing real life with the theater, which is the only place that such strong emotions exist. Thinking of her son, her lovers, and Uncle Pio at the same time, Camila doesn't know what to say. She kisses Uncle Pio's fingers and walks away quickly.

Camila feels that Uncle Pio has taken on the artificiality of the theater. However, in fact he's being truly sincere, while by repressing her feelings behind a veneer of poise it's she who is playacting. This paradox shows that sometimes the things that seem artificial are actually the most genuine.

Soon after this, the news spreads throughout Lima that Camila Perichole has contracted the smallpox. Although her illness is part of a great epidemic, people are especially focused on her because they resent her pretentiousness and social climbing; in fact, "a wild hope ran around the town that the beauty would be impaired that had enabled her to despise the class from which she sprang." Rumors abound describing her newly "ludicrous" appearance, and everyone mocks her.

Especially in her social ascent, Camila has prospered at the expense of others. Now, however, she's exposed to the judgment and taunts of exactly those people. Her predicament shows that the wealth and advantages acquired by social advancement don't provide any real security—much less, in fact, than her previous satisfaction in her art did.

As soon as she is well enough to move, Camila travels from her home in Lima to her villa in the mountains. She returns all the jewels she has ever received from her lovers, and forbids the Viceroy, the Archbishop, and her other admirers from visiting. No one is allowed to see her appearance except her maids. "Like all beautiful women," Camila assumes that everyone who has loved her only did so because of her looks, and that now she must "look for no more devotion." Her erroneous belief stems from the fact that she has experienced no love "save love as passion," which is "among the sharpest expressions of self-interest" rather than a kind of loyalty.

Uncle Pio's worries are coming to fruition, although not, as he imagined, regarding Camila's stage career. The fact that she has never experienced the debilitating passion which so many other characters suffer prevents her from truly esteeming herself, and causes her to see value only in her works. Because of this, she's unable to cope at all with the trauma of her illness.

As Camila's few remaining friends continue to try to see her, she becomes angrier and more insulting in her rejections. Her servants don't know what to do, as she has given away so many possessions that she's now approaching poverty, and her temper is getting worse every day.

In fact, Camila should feel lucky to be alive. Her over-the-top reaction to this setback shows the serious character deficiencies that have arisen given her lack of serious connection to other people.

Undaunted, Uncle Pio worms his way back into her household, managing her affairs and lending her money. However, whenever he comes into Camila's presence, she becomes convinced that he pities her and comforts herself by yelling at him. Despite all this, he only continues to love her more.

Although Uncle Pio has absolutely nothing to gain (and has every reason to resent his protégé), he sticks by her in this time of crisis. His behavior here redeems him from any of his previous self-interested actions.

One day, Uncle Pio opens Camila's door to find her face covered in a "paste of chalk and cream." She had hoped to devise a new kind of makeup to hide her scars, but it hadn't worked and she looks ridiculous. She feels humiliated and enraged that Uncle Pio has seen her like this, and she yells at him to "get out of my house forever." After kicking him out, she forbids her servants to let him enter again. Uncle Pio returns to Lima and strategizes about what to do next.

Camila is unwilling to appear vulnerable in front of anyone—even the man who has always been her most loyal friend. This trait makes her high-handed and difficult to deal with, but more importantly it reflects her crippling lack of self-worth, which in Uncle Pio's mind springs from her lack of passionate love for anyone around her.

One morning, Uncle Pio wakes up at dawn and steals onto Camila's estate. Lying beneath her window, he begins to weep in imitation of a young girl. Eventually, Camila wakes up and asks who is outside. In a falsetto voice, he says he is a girl called "Estrella" and begs for Camila to come down and help her. Eventually, she emerges in a thick cloak, and Uncle Pio reveals himself. Camila calls him a "dreadful person" and says that since "my life is over" she doesn't need to speak to him anymore, but Uncle Pio begs her to listen to him just once more.

It's notable that Uncle Pio resorts to art—however primitive and crude—to get Camila to listen to him. Using the playacting that has always defined their bond, he entices her out of her self-absorbed stupor, albeit against her will.

Uncle Pio entreats Camila to let him take Jaime back to Lima, where he can be the boy's teacher. Although Jaime is smart and wants to be educated, here he is left to his own devices. Uncle Pio promises to clean his house and hire a housekeeper so that the place is fit for Jaime's presence. Camila says that, as a mother, she can't be separated from her child.

Camila is drawing on tropes of motherly love, but she's not actually in the position to be in a good parent. On the other hand, Uncle Pio seems like a seedy bachelor, but he can provide for Jaime better than she can.

Trying to force Camila into agreement, Uncle Pio demands that she pay back the money he's lent her (although he has no intention of actually taking it). Proudly, Camila says she will give him her remaining jewels, but Uncle Pio relents and repeats again that he will love Jaime and take good care of him. He says she should trust him, since he's never harmed her and was always a good teacher to her.

Although no one else will give him credit for successfully raising Camila, Uncle Pio points out humbly that he's actually done a good job as a parent. Just like those who spout religious dogma, the people who trumpet their abilities as parents often fall short of those who don't.

Camila says Uncle Pio is a cruel man to continually force gratitude on her. For a while, she looks at the stars in silence, but then she concedes that Jaime can go to Lima if he wants it. If so, she says, Uncle Pio will find him at a nearby inn, and disappears.

Camila's accusations of "cruelty" when Uncle Pio is doing everything in his power to help her reflect the extreme self-pity into which she's descended as a result of her illness.

The next day, Jaime appears at the inn, dressed in tattered clothes. He and Uncle Pio set off in a cart, but since Jaime becomes sick from the rough movement, Uncle Pio carries him on his shoulders. As they reach the bridge, they encounter Captain Alvarado, and soon after they stop to speak to "an old lady who was travelling with a little girl," clearly Doña María and Pepita. Uncle Pio promises Jaime that they will take a rest after crossing the **bridge**, "but it turned out not to be necessary."

This matter-of-fact passage is especially poignant because it prefaces the death of a small and helpless child. Although Brother Juniper can devise divine reasons for the deaths of any of the adults, it's impossible to do for the death of a child, who has had no opportunity to distinguish himself by either sin or virtue.

PART 5: PERHAPS AN INTENTION

Some time after the **bridge** collapse, the city builds a new bridge out of stone. Meanwhile, the event enters the community's lexicon of slang: people say that they will see each other soon "unless the bridge falls."

While Brother Juniper wants to use the bridge collapse to justify and understand God's plan, other people interpret it as a sign of the utter unpredictability of life and death.

However, the real "monument" to the catastrophe is Brother Juniper's book. He comes up with this idea from a friend who is filled with bitterness because his wife has run away with a soldier, leaving him to care for two small children. He continually shares with Brother Juniper "such thoughts as belied the notion of a guided world"—for example, repeating an old story about a sick queen who died despite the fact that all her subjects prayed for her sincerely.

Although Brother Juniper and his friend hold diametrically opposed religious convictions, they are united by their literalist approach to philosophical issues: the friend thinks that because prayer doesn't always have tangible results God must not exist, while Brother Juniper believes that the existence of God means that an intelligible plan must exist somewhere.

Hearing skepticism like this, Brother Juniper becomes sure that it's time to produce "tabulated proof" of his own contrasting beliefs. He has tried to arrive at such proof before—when an epidemic struck his own village, he surreptitiously made numerical charts in which he rated his villagers based on "goodness, piety, and usefulness." However, this method proved unsuccessful, both because of the difficulty of rating the villagers and because Brother Juniper's calculations eventually revealed that "the dead were five times more worth saving."

Brother Juniper's ridiculous experiment is one of the novel's funniest passages. Its humor (and Brother Juniper's use of super-scientific jargon) emphasizes the complete futility of trying to address philosophical and theological issues through such experiments, and the hubris of believing that man can definitively answer such questions.

After this failure, Brother Juniper tears up his papers and casts them into the ocean; watching them float away, he "extracted from their beauty a resignation he did not permit his reason to examine."

While facts and experiments baffle Brother Juniper, he's able to gain greater understanding and tranquility simply from an appreciation of aesthetic beauty.

Brother Juniper also draws inspiration from a fellow cleric who one day stopped in Lima's **cathedral** to read an epitaph over a woman's gravestone. The epitaph paints a glowing picture of the woman's beauty and virtues as a wife and friend. He becomes enraged, saying that it must be an exaggeration that "perpetuates a legend of selflessness" rather than painting a true picture. Since the woman has been dead only twelve years, he decides to interview all her family and friends to prove the epitaph wrong; however, everyone she knows unanimously agrees that she was just as good in life as she was portrayed after death.

This woman's life and biography prove very straightforward—her character was so unblemished (and uncomplicated) that the simple gravestone is able to represent her faithfully. However, Brother Juniper will encounter far more complex characters in his own project, and will be unable to fully "explain" them even after compiling a massive trove of facts and analysis.

Brother Juniper works hard on his book, determined to include even the most seemingly insignificant details. He hopes that eventually someone will be able to read this information and piece it together into meaningful conclusions. It's very difficult to arrive at cohesive character portraits—for example, one man tells him that Doña María used to come to his parties in order to steal the spoons, while a bookseller describes her as "one of the three most cultivated persons in Lima."

Brother Juniper's predicament is especially important given that many characters—for instance, Doña María and the Perichole—have always displayed different personalities through their art and their real-life behavior. Brother Juniper wants to discover which is the "real" character, but the novel suggests that any single character necessarily contains different and even contradictory personas.

Brother Juniper learns to concentrate on those who knew the victims best. The Abbess tells him in detail about Pepita, but not about her hopes for the young girl. The Perichole contradicts the "unsavory testimonies" that others give about Uncle Pio.

While these characters give the most sympathetic portraits of their loved ones, they aren't very helpful in reducing them to easily understandable portraits for Brother Juniper's work.

The few conclusions at which Brother Juniper arrives aren't very useful—his work leads him to believe that the same catastrophe has punished wrongdoers and summoned the righteous to heaven. Eventually, the book attracts the attention of the Inquisition; it's declared heretical, and both the book and Brother Juniper are sentenced to be burned at the stake.

The earnestness with which Brother Juniper approaches this work contrasts with the humorous way in which the novel describes it. By trying too hard to understand the catastrophe, Brother Juniper is driven to nonsensical interpretations.

Orthodox to the end, Brother Juniper accepts the conclusion that "the devil had made use of him to effect a brilliant campaign in Peru." The night before his execution, he stays awake in his cell trying to understand the meaning in his own life, even though he's been unable to discern that meaning for so many others. He is willing to die for the **church**, but he wishes people could understand that his intentions were good. In the morning his villagers, who feel genuine affection for him, come to Lima to watch in puzzlement as he is burned. Brother Juniper calls on St. Francis to protect him and dies.

Even though Brother Juniper was doing his utmost to assist the church, he still gets punished. Brother Juniper's persecution and death show the utter hypocrisy of ecclesiastical institutions and their blind promotion of religious dogma, which ends up harming the true believers as much as anyone else.

The day of the memorial service for victims of the **bridge** collapse is sunny and warm. The Archbishop sits sweating on his throne, while Don Andrés feels ill and self-conscious in the **church**, knowing that everyone is watching as he mourns his only son; he wonders if Camila is in attendance. Captain Alvarado stands in the square and thinks about "how false, how unreal" the whole affair is before leaving early to sit on his boat and reflect on Esteban.

Even though the church is supposed to help people mourn, the ceremony feels very false and no one derives any comfort from it. Rather, true closure will come from solitary reflection (like Captain Alvarado's here) or shared experiences of grief between characters.

The Abbess sits among her nuns, "pale but firm." She's finally had to accept that she can't control the continuance of her work after her death, and must learn to take satisfaction in what she's doing now. She wishes that her relationship with Pepita had been one of "disinterested love," rather than a result of her worry and ambition.

Although the Abbess is the novel's most altruistic character, even she has to accept that her ideological fervor contains a tinge of obsession and has harmed her relationships with those she loves most.

Camila Perichole has finally left her villa to attend the service. She feels that God has spoken and punished her through her illness and Jaime's death. However, as she travels to the city, she imagines the overwhelming crowds looking at the bodies of Jaime and Uncle Pio, and the meaningless rituals of the church. As she nears the **church** of San Luis Rey, she goes inside and sits down to rest. She wants to feel some meaningful emotion but can't, and concludes that she has "no heart." Just as she has this thought, a "terrible and incommunicable pain" comes over her and she wishes fervently that she could see her two loved ones again. She returns to her farm and spends a year in despair and seclusion.

Even though the church ceremony in Lima proves meaningless and unsatisfactory, Camila Perichole has a profound spiritual experience while sitting in a church by herself. The novel doesn't condemn Christianity and even suggests that religion can help individual characters grow spiritually (as Camila does here)—rather, it objects to the corruption and abuses of power that often occur within religious institutions.

One day, Camila learns that the Abbess, like her, has lost two loved ones in the bridge collapse. She wants to visit, but is almost ashamed to appear before such a venerable woman. Still, she goes to Lima and lurks about the **convent**, eventually summoning enough confidence to introduce herself to the Abbess. She asks the older woman what she should do, now that she is all alone and has no one to love.

Even Camila understands that she will benefit less from religious ceremonies than from a meaningful conference with someone else who is suffering the same pain that she is.

The Abbess takes Camila into the **convent**'s garden, speaking soothingly of her previous acting career. Camila protests, saying that she is a "sinner" and doesn't deserve praise. The Abbess asks about Jaime and Uncle Pio, and Camila pours out the entire story of her life, from her lonely childhood to her current predicament.

It's important that the Abbess is so non-judgmental and accepting, even though Camila's life and career might not agree with her religious principles. Her willingness to look beyond religious dogma allows her to truly connect with those around her.

A long time later, a nun enters the Abbess's office and says that the Condesa d'Abuirre, newly arrived from Spain, wishes to see the Abbess. The Abbess has no idea who this is, but allows her into the garden. Tall and beautiful, the stranger explains that she is Doña Clara, and has traveled across the ocean to mourn her mother's death. She immediately makes "long [and] passionate" speech about Doña María, reproaching herself for failing as a daughter.

Clara was never able to appreciate her mother in life as she does after her death. This reflects the flaws in Clara's character, but also her ability to change and grow as a result of grief.

The Abbess speaks to Doña Clara of her own grief, and of Camila's simultaneous visit. She says gently that they have all failed the people they loved. Doña Clara produces her mother's last letter, which to the Abbess is astonishingly beautiful and wise. She reminds herself that she should "expect grace" everywhere, even out of this self-centered old woman.

The Abbess is able to build connection and understanding between three very different women as a result of the same feelings of loss. Here, grief connects people more than other forms of love did throughout the rest of the novel.

The Abbess asks permission to show Doña Clara her work and leads her around the **abbey**, showing her the orphans and the ill. As she looks over these people, the Abbess becomes full of energy and speculation, asking Doña Clara if the Spanish are any better than the Limeans at caring for the insane or the deaf. Doña Clara is impressed and touched by her fervor.

Charity and good works help the Abbess overcome her feelings of personal loss—even though Doña Clara has less experience in this area, it proves helpful for her as well.

At last, the Abbess says she must go and speak to the sick people before they go to sleep. One of the Abbess's helpers appears to consult with her about some problem, and the Abbess explains that this woman used to be an actress and was also involved in the bridge collapse.

It becomes apparent that Camila Perichole has become a nun. Eschewing her self-centered past, she has found true tranquility in a life centered around helping others.

After Doña Clara leaves, the Abbess visits the sick people. Thinking of Esteban and Pepita, she talks to them of people who are left in the dark with no one to help them. However, the sick people in their beds feel secure and warm under the Abbess's watch even though they know they may soon die.

The bridge collapse may have tested the Abbess's religious convictions, reminding her that meaningless death can threaten anyone she loves. At the same time, it has strengthened her commitment to good works.

While she is talking, the Abbess reflects that almost no one else on earth even remembers Esteban and Pepita. After she and Camila and Doña Clara die, no one will remember those who died on the **bridge**. However, it seems to her that "the love will have been enough," because "even memory is not necessary for love." The only thing that connects the living and the dead, and the only thing that provides meaning to life, is love.

Brother Juniper believes that an understanding of the divine plan is crucial to living a good life, but the Abbess argues the opposite; rather than rational thought, it's the feeling of selfless love that allows people to live well and to grow spiritually, even though they may never understand God's plan or even believe in its existence.

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