

# Student Samples

Please look at the student samples below as possible models as you begin working on your own essays. Note that these samples are not "perfect" (whatever that may mean), nor are they meant to be, but they advance an interesting thesis, support their argument with sufficient evidence and research, and are generally well written. ---- Thank you to your fellow students for allowing us to have a glimpse at their work!

## Film Essay #1: Gapping the Bridge

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* is not your typical war film. It isn't full of patriotism or choosing to celebrate one country or ethnicity over the other. The movie is fairly unbiased and takes a deeper look into human thought and action. While the movie obviously portrays the importance and perhaps absurdity of obsessive discipline and conformity during war and life, it also allows the viewer to have an outside view of problems within current society. The problems of racial discrimination due to beliefs and the inability humans have to understand and accept one another when we are different are addressed throughout the film. The film shows the results from such actions and ideologies and uses photography, editing, and motifs throughout the film to portray these points.

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* was produced in 1957 and directed by a British director, David Lean. It was filmed on location in Sri Lanka, and most of the film portrayed the beauty of the jungles in Sri Lanka. The story line is simple and doesn't change much throughout the three hour film. A British group of soldiers are captured and taken prisoner by the Japanese in World War II. When they enter into the prison camp the British are assigned to build a bridge over the Kwai River which would allow trains to go from Thailand to Burma in order transport supplies for the Japanese. Immediately, the Japanese Colonel, Colonel Saito, and the British Colonel, Colonel Nicholson, don't see eye to eye. A competition begins between the two to prove whose superior and who can accomplish their objectives. Another group of soldiers including Shears, an American soldier who escaped the Japanese prison camp, are assigned to blow up the same bridge Colonel Nicholson and his people are asked to build. The movie is filled with irony and absurdity as the soldiers turn mad because of the war. The movie ends with a majority of the characters dying in a skirmish at the end as the bridge is destroyed. It makes the viewer wonder if accomplishing the objective was really worth the lives of so many individuals.

The opening and closing scene allow the audience to view a hawk flying high above the ground. After watching the hawk fly for a few seconds the camera turns towards the jungle far below and slowly zooms in. This introduction and a similar conclusion provide the opportunity for the audience to be just that, an audience. The viewer isn't meant to take sides throughout the film, and the film does a good job of staying away from any major biases. We are left to consider the problems portrayed throughout the movie rather than become tangled up in

emotional attachments to the characters. We have the bird's eye view given to us through the photography to decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong or whether either side is right at all.

This theme of not taking sides and attempting to keep the audience away from personal biases is prevalent throughout the movie. Names were only given to individuals for identification. Not one character was given a first name, only their military rank followed by their last name. The story doesn't make any particular individual the hero. All characters show moments of great courage as well as selfishness and bad decision making. Each character fulfilled his stereotype to the extreme exposing the strengths and weaknesses of each character. I never felt emotionally attached to any of the characters which played an important role in allowing the movie to accomplish its purpose.

Music, or the lack of emphasis on music, also helps keep the audience neutral. Outside of the opening scenes and a couple of other instances throughout the movie not much background music is heard. During the most intense parts of the film David Lean decided to allow nature to provide for any background sounds. The lack of emphasis on background music, especially during dramatic parts of the film, helps to remove biases or influences other than what the viewer is witnessing. The role of music in the film also adds to the reality of many of the problems addressed during the film.

So what is the purpose of this film? As stated in the opening paragraph this movie is trying to show the problems that come from human nature and feelings of supremacy over another's lifestyle or belief system. Near the beginning of the movie the camera follows a train. As the train reaches it's destination a man on top of the train with a machine gun is shown pointing and yelling out orders to prisoners who have been put to work on train tracks. Eerie music played in the background sets the tone for controversy and power struggles throughout the movie. Thunder, lightning, and a heavy rainstorm signify another bad omen and a rough relationship between the Japanese and the British after the first conversation held by Colonel Saito and Colonel Nicholson. The British considered themselves superior to the Japanese because they didn't understand Japanese culture or way of life and vice versa. During the first real confrontation between Colonel Saito and Colonel Nicholson the two argue about the relevancy of the Geneva Convention at a prison camp located in the jungle. Colonel Saito has informed the British they will build a bridge over the Kwai River to allow a train to cross and provide the Japanese with a rail system connecting Thailand and Burma. He has also required the officers to work along side their soldiers, an act that violated the terms of the Geneva Convention. Colonel Saito could care less about standards or codes as stated in the Geneva Convention. He considers the Geneva Convention a code for cowards and that the officers of the British should be ashamed for choosing to "live like a coolie rather than die like a hero." Colonel Saito has no intention of giving British officers special treatment and tries to symbolically remove Nicholson's power by breaking his command stick. Colonel Nicholson retaliates by refusing to obey Saito's command to work. He chooses to remain put until Colonel Saito changes his mind. The two officers compete with each other throughout the remainder of the film to prove superiority over the other.

The photography of the film helps portray Colonel Saito as one who is in charge and looks down upon others. As Colonel Saito first enters the film, the camera shows the British troops between the legs of the Colonel. He is often standing on higher ground compared to those around him giving off a sense of his feelings of racial superiority. Not only does he feel superior to the British but the locals as well. He uses a poor local man to fan him. The local man is forced to sit outside Saito's living quarters and pull a string to fan the Colonel instead of being in the presence of the Japanese leader. Saito also seems to have little self confidence and surety about his decision making. He keeps an American calendar with a picture of a white woman on it which shows he may question his culture and way of doing things. He may feel jealous of the Americans and British because of their accomplishments and global fame. These feelings could lead to more contention. Colonel Nicholson is equally prideful throughout the film, and no matter what Colonel Saito tries to do Colonel Nicholson won't give in unless things happen on his own terms.

This argument and battle over pride becomes ironic and even absurd throughout the film. Colonel Saito tortured Colonel Nicholson, bribed the British soldiers, tried to compromise, and even threatened to force sick officers to work which would likely lead to their death. No matter the threat or punishment Colonel Nicholson stubbornly refuses to give in to the demands of Saito. Colonel Saito was put into a difficult situation when the bridge being built fell behind schedule and reluctantly gave into all of Colonel Nicholson's demands. Eventually Colonel Nicholson and the British gain complete control over building the bridge, and they decide to outdo the Japanese in engineering and efficiency. To complete the task, British officer's volunteer and are allowed to work along side the soldiers to provide extra man power to build the bridge. Nicholson requests those sick and injured to sacrifice for the greater cause of building the bridge and support building the bridge as an act of patriotism. Major Clipton, who serves as the British prison camp doctor, even suggests what Colonel Nicholson is doing could aid the enemy and be considered treason. Nicholson never heeds any warnings and is set on proving to Saito the superiority of the British.

When Nicholson takes control and decides to assist the Japanese cause is when the movie begins to prove its point. Racial hatred along with an obsession over discipline and conformity are the downfall of Nicholson and Saito. In order to outdo Saito, Colonel Nicholson and his officers volunteer to engineer and build a better bridge than originally planned. They get done on schedule, and in order to do so Colonel Nicholson has the officers and the soldiers in sick quarters work as well. Colonel Nicholson ended up breaking many of the rules he so strongly supported at the beginning of the film. Nicholson was driven mad because of his pride and ego and ultimately is the reason so many of the characters died throughout the film. He exposes a plan to destroy the bridge by fellow British officers which leads to his own death as well as Saito, Shears, and Lieutenant Joyce (a young Canadian soldier). People can get overly rapped up in things that are of little significance and the results can be catastrophic, especially in times of war.

Major Warden is another example of a man who loses sight of what's truly important. Warden along with an escaped American prisoner named Shears and Lieutenant Joyce are assigned to blow up the bridge that Nicholson is building. Warden injures himself and asks to be left for dead by Shears and Joyce. Shears who has opposed the war and his mission

from the start of the movie gives a powerful speech on war when Major Warden can no longer walk under his own strength and asks to be left behind. Shears responds by saying, "This is just a game, this war. You and that Colonel Nicholson, you're two of a kind. Crazy with courage. For what? How to die like a gentleman. How to die by the rules when the only important thing is how to live like a human being. I'm not going to leave you here to die, Warden, because I don't care about your bridge and I don't care about your rules. If we go on, we go on together." Lean makes a strong political point during this speech stating the life of a human being is more important than the objectives of war. Ironically Warden is the man who ends up killing Shears and Joyce to make sure they weren't captured. He was more worried about the mission than about the welfare of those who had saved his life. He tried to justify his actions by yelling aloud, "I had to do it. I had to do it. They might have been captured alive! It was the only thing to do." The only individuals around to listen were a group of native women assigned to help carry their belongings and were unable to understand English. His was trying to justify himself and remove guilt from his conscience, because he was aware of the moral implications of murdering other individuals.

This story could easily be seen as an antiwar film. It exposes many of the sad and horrible events that occur during war. Shears and Major Clipton are two of the only people who oppose the objectives and strategies of the war throughout the movie. Shears was an American and never was loyal to the British but was loyal to himself and the individuals he served with near the end of the movie. Major Clipton was in charge of looking after the British prisoner's health and medical treatment. He saw the effects war had on individuals and seemed to oppose putting individuals in danger when there was no need. Shears states at the beginning of the movie he doesn't see what people are fighting and dying for. Major Clipton appropriately states at the end of the film that everything is madness. These two individuals seem unattached from the British and Japanese armies because of their background and position, and provide an outsiders view of what's going on throughout the movie. The movie highlights everything bad about war and having leaders who place their mission over the lives and happiness of those around them.

The title of the movie, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, could have significant meaning towards the film. Both the Japanese and the British are intelligent people who have provided a lot to the world especially in the past hundred years. Even though the British are prisoners and forced to build a bridge, this assignment could be an opportunity for the British and Japanese to come together and accomplish something great. Had they worked together throughout the film they would've have been more efficient and could possibly have developed good relations and respect for one another. Sadly both sides refuse to cooperate with each other and continually argue about how things should be done. They were able to produce an amazing bridge considering the time and resources available, but they could've avoided a few problems, such as using sick and injured soldiers for labor, if they had worked together. Naturally the movie ends with the bridge being destroyed. Any bridges or relationships that could've been built between the two countries were destroyed because of pride, discrimination, and war.

David Lean, the director of the film, was known for bringing madness into his films (Rafferty). His childhood, even though he didn't like to talk much about it, and personal life may have led Lean to direct such a film as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and others like it (

Silver). As a child he was raised in a very strict Quaker home. His parents wouldn't allow him to attend the theater. He wasn't introduced into film until adulthood. Lean was a perfectionist and possibly a bit compulsive and it showed by the amount of time and effort he put into his films (Rafferty). This obsession towards social conformity in his family likely led to personal problems and family conflict as Lean strayed away from his parents' lifestyle to become involved in film. Lean could easily have blamed religion on problems he faced throughout his life. While watching *The Bridge on the River Kwai* there seemed to be resentment towards people who, possibly like Lean's parents and Lean himself, were obsessively disciplined and conformed to their society and upbringing. A few of the themes throughout the movie show problems that come about because of religion such as racial and ethnic feelings of superiority and the inability to understand people with a different belief system.

David Lean shares his story with us as outsiders allowing us to consider the consequences of obsession whether it's in war, religion, or any other aspect of life. He also shows how racial and ethnic discrimination can ruin people and ultimately end lives. If we as humans aren't careful and aware of the consequences of our actions or way of thinking we may wind up causing a bigger mess than we ever expected. If we take time to think about our actions rather than act out of instinct or principle we may be able to live a better life and make the world a more enjoyable place to live in.

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