

The Bridge On The River Kwai (#9826)

Suggested Age Level: Grade 8—Adult

Suggested School Topics: Social Studies,
Language Arts

Historical Period: World War II

MPAA Rating: PG

Running Time: 162 minutes

Credits: 1957; Based on the novel by Pierre
Boulle; Directed by David Lean



Major Characters

- **Colonel Nicholson** (Alec Guinness): A stubborn British officer whose life is controlled by idealism and a strong sense of justice.
- **“Commander” Shears** (William Holden): An American seaman with a cynical sense of self-preservation.
- **Major Warden** (Jack Hawkins): A British officer, much like Nicholson, in charge of a commando unit assigned to blow up the bridge.
- **Colonel Saito** (Sessue Hayakawa): A Japanese officer, commander of a P.O.W. camp in Burma, ordered to build a bridge across the River Kwai. Like Nicholson, Saito is a stubborn enforcer of his own moral code.
- **Lieutenant Joyce** (Geoffrey Horne): Youngest member of the commando team, inexperienced, has not yet learned to replace his own sense of morality with that of his military superiors.
- **Major Clipton** (James Donald): A doctor whose profession puts him in the position of observer.

Academy Awards

Actor: Alec Guinness; Adapted Screenplay; Cinematography; Director: David Lean; Film; Film Editing; Score.

Synopsis

In a Japanese prison camp in Burma, in 1943, British Prisoners are ordered to build a bridge over the River Kwai. The stubborn British officer refuses to cooperate unless the Japanese Commander follows the Geneva Convention to the letter of the law. After an intense power struggle, the British officer completes the bridge, only to have it blown up by a team of British commandoes.

Cautions

Although this is a war film, violence is kept to a minimum. However, the intense psychological struggle of the main characters in this film makes it one that requires a strong attention span from its audience.

Web sites included in this learning guide complement the contents; they were selected and reviewed by professionals who have experience in teaching. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and “kid-safe” sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

Educational Themes and Allusions

Tim Dirks, in his well-worded Internet [review](#), wrote, “The story’s theme is the futility and insanity of war, and the irony of British pride, viewed through the psychological, confrontational struggle of imperialistic wills between a British and Japanese Colonel.” There is much in this film to discuss in class, especially its incredible irony, but there is much to be said about the American character, as well.

William Holden plays Shears, the American soldier, stereotypically portrayed to the point where he becomes an almost symbolic character, as do they all, in a sense. Shears is selfish, realistic, and cynical. He has no sense of the morality of war. From his first appearance on the screen, when he bribes a guard with a cigarette lighter he stole from a dead man, his character is fixed, so that it is no surprise that he’d rather sleep with a nurse than return to the war and he has to be forced to join the team.

Shears acts like a Greek chorus in the film, commenting on the action, reflecting on the decisions of the officers by saying, “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.” As the film reaches its inevitable climax, however, Shears acts as we expect our American heroes to act. He’s forced to commit himself to course of action; he does what he has to do.

The psychological battle of wills between Colonel Saito and Colonel Nicholson clearly shows the futility of war, and the screenwriters’ sentiments about misplaced idealism. One is reminded of Paddy Chayefsky’s brilliant screenplay, *The Americanization of Emily*, an excellent companion piece to *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, where James Garner, as the selfish, Shears-like American, tells us, “Wars are always fought for the best of reasons . . .”

As Nicholson challenges Saito for control of his men, he becomes worse than Saito, as evidenced in the scene where Nicholson visits the hospital and persuades the sick men to work on the bridge. Barely able to walk, the men stumble from their hospital beds as the music of a military march swells in the background, almost in counterpoint to the bedraggled patients. In the final scene, it is Nicholson, confused and psychotic, who leads Saito to Joyce and the detonator.

Curiously, there was some deviation from the original script in the ending of the film. Both Guinness and Lean, being Englishmen, felt that Nicholson needed to redeem himself in the final scene, so the dazed Nicholson comes to his senses, saying, "What have I done?" as he heads for the plunger and a most ambiguous ending.

Warden (Jack Hawkins), the foil character for Nicholson, having expressed the same idealistic attitudes throughout the film, shows the same remorse in his final scene. When having caused the death of the rest of his team, he turns to the native bearers and says, "I had to do it. They might have been captured alive. I had to do it!" then smashes his weapon against the rocks.

Major Doctor Cipton (James Donald), like Shears, also comments on the action, but, being a British officer, tends to side with Nicholson, making him more like Jiminy Cricket than a Greek chorus. He echoes the final lines of the story, summing up everything the screenwriters want to say about war. Overlooking the destruction, and the dead, he says: "Madness . . . madness . . . madness."

Activities

1. Literary Terms

The following literary terms are needed to understand films:

- Foreshadowing: Giving a warning of something that may happen later on.
- Flashback: Cutting back to something that happened before the current action.
- Irony: A surprising twist of fate.
- Symbolism: An inanimate object is purposely used to remind us of an idea.

2. Following are examples of each the four terms from some well-known films. After each example, write your own example from one of your favorite films.

Foreshadowing: Anakin, in *Attack of the Clones*, loses his temper a lot and is often seen wearing black. This reminds us that he will later become Darth Vader.

Your example: _____

Flashback: Simba, in *The Lion King*, gets strength when he remembers the image of his father.

Your example: _____

Irony: In *The Shop Around the Corner*, Alfred Kralik learns that the pen pal he wants to marry is really Miss Novak, his enemy at the office.

Your example: _____

Symbolism: In *My Bodyguard*, a boy puts his broken life back together, symbolized by the motorcycle he is rebuilding.

Your example: _____

3. Film Study Activities

[CRISS Learning Strategies](#) provide a number of activities which students may use while studying any film. Venn Diagrams are good ways to compare characters. Sticky-Note Discussion could be applied during the film. A Simple Story Plan could easily be applied to all films.

Vocabulary

Look up the meanings of each of these words or phrases in your dictionary and put the correct word(s) in the spaces provided.

administrative	simulated
infraction	civilization
synchronize	Geneva Convention
collaboration	sabotaged
discipline	absolved

1. Now sir, you may have overlooked the fact that the use of officers for manual labor is expressly forbidden by the _____.
2. In our case, escape might well be a(n) _____ of military law.
3. Without law, Commander, there is no _____.
4. We must consider ourselves _____ from our duty to obey you.
5. I've been thinking the matter over and have decided to put majors and above in _____ duties, not manual labor.
6. Thanks to the Japanese, we now command a rabble. There's no order, no _____.
7. As far as your present rank is concerned, we're fairly informal about those things in Force 316. So you'll have a _____ rank of major.
8. The fact is, what we're doing could be construed as, forgive me sir, _____ with the enemy.
9. You should _____ demolition with pass of this train.
10. Enlisted prisoners _____ the work. I could have them all shot.

Questions to Consider While Viewing the Film

These questions serve several functions. Some are intended to help the student focus on the film, to point out nuances and encourage awareness, thus helping students become better “readers” of motion pictures. Other questions are for group discussion, to encourage children to interpret the motives of characters in the film, perhaps to discover ideas and values relevant to their own lives.

Any discussion question could serve as a suitable subject for a writing assignment. Many in-depth questions have been provided for your convenience. Do your best. You do not have to answer them all.

Videotapes and DVDs are easy to pause and back up, so the teacher should not hesitate to replay key scenes for discussion.

1. How does Shears get himself placed on the sick list?
2. From where did he get the cigarette lighter he used to bribe the officer?
3. (*Discussion Question*) What is Shears telling us about himself when he says, “I don’t mock the grave or the man?”
4. What is Colonel Saito doing when he hears the arrogant whistling of the British prisoners?
5. Why is there no barbed wire or stockade at the camp?
6. What is the book Nicholson carries with him which has the rules of civilized warfare?
7. A person is said to commit a “faux pas” when he says something rude. What “faux pas” does Shears catch himself saying when he describes the original prisoners who built the camp?
8. An *understatement* is when a character draws attention to an idea by saying it quietly, in words that are less strong than one would expect. What understated remark does Shears make after hearing that Nicholson expects fair treatment from Colonel Saito?
9. Why might escape be against military law, according to Nicholson?
10. Why does Nicholson insist that his officers command his troops?
11. What is the symbol of Nicholson’s command which is destroyed by Saito?
12. How does Major Clipton save Nicholson’s life after Saito sets up the machine gun?
13. What happens to Nicholson after he and the officers remain standing in the hot sun all day?
14. As Shears escapes, why is work progressing slowly on the bridge?
15. Major Clipton finds himself in the middle, when Nicholson and Saito both characterize each other as _____(what)?
16. In a great bit of film transition, how does that hot sun morph into good news for Shears?
17. In what way does Saito change leadership of the bridge building?
18. What role does food play in Saito’s failed attempt to persuade Nicholson to compromise?
19. What excuse does Saito make for finally giving in to Nicholson’s demands?

20. Alone, in his room, knowing that he has failed to “save face,” and that he has lost the battle of wills to Nicholson, what does Saito do?
21. Why does Nicholson decide to build a “proper” bridge?
22. How does Nicholson use food to demonstrate his superiority over Saito?
23. After humiliating Saito with the food orders, what does Nicholson say to just give it one final “twist” to further destroy Saito’s self-esteem?
24. What does Shears finally tell Warden about his rank?
25. How does Warden persuade Shears to volunteer for the commando team?
26. As the bridge progresses, what concern does Clipton express?
27. What weakness does Joyce show in training?
28. (*Discussion Question*) What irony do we find when Nicholson asks officers and the sick to help with the bridge?
29. In what way is Joyce responsible for Warden’s getting wounded?
30. Why does Shears refuse to obey Warden’s order to leave him behind?
31. (*Discussion Question*) Analyze this speech by Shears:

You make me sick with your heroics. There's a stench of death about you. You carry it in your pack like the plague. Explosives and L pills. They go well together, don't they? And with you, it's just one thing or the other: 'Destroy a bridge or destroy yourself.' 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.

Is Shears right? Are Warden and Nicholson really the same kind of characters? Do you think they were raised like this, or have their war experiences made them this way? (One might read Stephen Crane’s classic poem, [“War is Kind,”](#) at this point.)

32. In what way does Joyce misinterpret Nicholson’s kneeling at the bridge?
33. As Nicholson muses about his twenty-eight years in the service, what does he drop?
34. As the commandos set the explosives under the bridge, and Nicholson congratulates his men, what ritual does Saito prepare?
35. Who discovers the detonation wire, now in the open because the river went down in the night?
36. As Nicholson leads Saito to the detonator, Joyce, who had trouble using his knife in the past, is able to kill Saito, but what is he unable to do?
37. Why does Shears swim across the river to Joyce?
38. Who is responsible for the deaths of Joyce and Nicholson?
39. In what way does Nicholson “redeem” himself?
40. (*Discussion Question*) When Warden smashes his weapon, facing the condemning gazes of the bearers, crying, “I had to do it!” has there been a

change in his personality? Do you think he has learned anything, or will he continue with his Nicholson-like ideas about rules and war?

41. How does Clipton sum up the authors' attitudes toward war as he views the death and destruction?

42. The last thing we see in the film is the same as the first thing we saw. What is it?

Internet Links

John Woggins' [History in Film](http://www.historyinfilm.com/kwai/index.htm)
(<http://www.historyinfilm.com/kwai/index.htm>)
A review by [Roger Ebert](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/greatmovies/18brid.html)
(<http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/greatmovies/18brid.html>)
Japanese Culture: [Suicide](http://www.artelino.com/articles/seppuku.asp)
(<http://www.artelino.com/articles/seppuku.asp>)
[A Farewell to Arms](http://www.homework-online.com/afta/part01e.asp)
(<http://www.homework-online.com/afta/part01e.asp>)
"War is Kind" (<http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/crane01.html>)

Background Information

Credit for the screenplay of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* went to Pierre Boulle, author of the original novel and the brilliant book, *Planet of the Apes*. Boulle won an Oscar for the screenplay. The Academy was obviously unaware of the fact that Boulle could not write in English. The actual authors of the script were Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson, who had been blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. (For details on the Blacklist, see the Captioned Media Program's excellent study guide for Foreman's film, *High Noon*.)

The Oscar winning Alec Guinness was not David Lean's original choice for the role of Nicholson, although it is hard to picture anyone else in the role. Charles Laughton, an equally brilliant actor, turned down the role because he thought location shooting might be physically difficult.

The film was loosely based on fact. John Woggon's excellent "History in Film" Web site contains material by [Padre J. N. Duckworth](#) and [Fred Seiker](#) with firsthand information.

Answers to Questions

1. He bribes the officer with a cigarette lighter.
2. He stole it from the dead man.
3. He's trying to tell us that his cynicism may not be his true nature, but simply his way of dealing with the daily horror of war. (Compare this to the attitudes expressed in *M.A.S.H.*)
4. He is praying in traditional dress.
5. Escape is impossible because of the location of the camp.
6. The Geneva Convention.
7. He says, "some lime—some British." He almost used the derogatory word "limey" to describe British military men. In the 18th century, in order to avoid scurvy, British sailors used to eat limes on board ship. "Limey" became a racially offensive way to describe the British.
8. "I can think of a lot of things to call Saito, but reasonable, that's a new one." (*Discussion for a mature group*: Shears could be using "euphemism" here by avoiding words that could not be used in 1957. How different might the language in this film be if it were made today?)
9. They were ordered to surrender, so escape might be interpreted as disobeying orders.
10. To keep their dignity as soldiers, not as slaves.
11. His swagger stick.
12. He points out that everyone in the hospital are witnesses, and Saito will eventually be tried for war crimes if he shoots the officers.
13. He is tortured in Saito's office.
14. The men are deliberately making mistakes at work.
15. Mad. (*Discussion point, which foreshadows the film's denouement*: What is your reaction to Clipton's looking up at the sun and saying, "Are they both mad or am I going mad? Or is it the sun?")
16. What looks like a vulture becomes a kite, showing that Shears has made it to some civilization.
17. He assumes personal command.
18. He taunts Nicholson by offering him food, which the starving officer stoically refuses.
19. He says he is granting amnesty in honor of the anniversary of the Japanese defeat of the Russians in 1905.
20. He cries. (*Application*: Is it all right for men to cry? Are there rules about the way men and women are supposed to act?)
21. He wants to return dignity and pride to his men.
22. He comes close to repeating the entire scene from question 18, ordering food to be brought in, tea, etc. (*Discussion*: How does this compare with the other food scene? How is Nicholson using the food to show Saito that the British are now in control?)
23. He says, "After all, we mustn't forget that we've wasted over a month through an unfortunate disagreement for which I was not to blame." (*Discussion point*: Is

Nicholson being too cruel here? Do we still hate Saito or are we starting to feel sorry for him?)

24. He's just impersonating a dead officer, hoping for better treatment and a psychological discharge.

25. He blackmails him with the truth about his rank.

26. He is concerned that building a better bridge could be construed as collaboration with the enemy.

(Class discussion: Review this scene. Who do you think is right, Clijton or Nicholson? A good argument here might be the subject of a spirited debate or some excellent written work.)

27. He seems to hesitate before using his knife, suggesting that he may have moral questions about killing in cold blood.

28. He persuades the hospitalized soldiers to work, then gets the officers to pitch in. *(Discussion: What irony is implied here? After torture and the sweat box because he refused to make officers do manual labor for Saito, Nicholson himself is now using officers for manual labor.)*

29. He hesitates with the knife and forces Warden to kill the enemy soldier.

30. Shears thinks it's insane to follow idealistic rules in war.

31. Answers will vary. The important thing is that the students should be encouraged to think about these characters, about the nature of war, and draw their own conclusions.

32. Joyce thinks Saito is abusing Nicholson. Ironically, he's hammering a commemorative sign on "his" bridge.

33. His swagger stick. *(Discussion: The last time he lost this symbol of leadership, Saito broke it. This time, he's caused himself to lose it. Might this be the final touch? Has Nicholson "become" Saito? He talks of India as his favorite post. Students should be reminded that the final destination of the railroad is, indeed, India.)*

34. He is preparing himself for suicide. *(Sidebar for the student's general interest: Historically, [suicide](#) is quite common in Japan as a matter of honor. As the Japanese believe in reincarnation, however, suicide does not mean the end of life, but rather it's rejection in favor of giving it another try.)*

35. Nicholson.

36. He can't kill Nicholson, even though Nicholson is attacking him.

37. Shears wants to kill Nicholson. *(Discussion: Has Shears gone crazy, too, or does he believe that Nicholson's beliefs are dangerous, that Nicholson deserves to die?)*

38. Warden.

39. He comes to his senses, muttering, "What have I done?" then heads for the detonator, eventually destroying the bridge as he dies, falling on the plunger.

40. Student answers will vary, but the class should understand character development. In most good films, characters undergo learning experiences that change their lives. Students should understand and recognize these moments when they see them in climactic moments of the film: Joyce can kill Saito, but not a British officer; Shears decides he can't stand back and let the Nicholsons of the

world be the cause of death and destruction; Warden sees the error of his hard line attitude about war; Saito plans suicide because he can no longer face himself.

41. He says, "Madness . . . madness . . . madness."

42. A hawk flies alone in the sky. (This could be a suggestion of nature's return to the natural order. See "[Follow-up Activities](#).")

Applications

Once, the primary function of American schools was to teach us to read the Bible. Then, as more media became available and the world got smaller, we learned to read other books, to work with other subjects, but always with this in mind: all knowledge originates with the printed word.

Today, the world is smaller yet. We are bombarded with media. Today, we must learn how to read more than the printed word. We must learn how to read films. The lessons we can learn from them can be as enriching and fulfilling as those we learn from books.

Below are a few ideas to consider from viewing *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Think about them. Discuss them. Perhaps you would like to write about them.

1. In the film, Shears bribes a guard to get out of his work detail. Many times, we find ways to avoid things we dislike. We might read "Cliff Notes" because we don't want to read the book the teacher assigned in class. Maybe we give the spinach to the dog when Mom and Dad aren't looking. What are some things you do to avoid things you dislike?

2. Nicholson believes that planning an escape could be against orders. He does not try to interpret the orders to his present circumstance. Are there any orders we have had to interpret? Under what circumstances might we have to disobey orders to fit a changing situation? If Dad says, "Don't leave the house," do we stay there if the house catches fire? What rules might we need to disobey for special circumstances?

3. When Saito realizes he has "lost face," he cries, and later, according to Japanese custom, considers suicide. He reacts very drastically to failure, yet failure is a very real thing that we all have to face at some time in our lives. How do you deal with failure? Do you just give up and feel bad, like Saito, or can you turn failure into a positive thing? Can failure be a good thing because it can strengthen us and give us the resolve to do better next time?

4. Last line of the film is, "Madness." War seems to have made people forget their normal ideas of right and wrong. Are there any times when we forget ourselves, when we get swept up in the madness? Maybe loyalty to a group of friends might encourage us to smoke or drink or do things we wouldn't think of doing on our own. Can the experience of characters in a movie like this help us remember to do the right thing?

Follow-up Activities

1. Read the novel by Pierre Boule. See how it compares to the film. You might compare the characters to their movie counterparts with [Venn diagrams](#).
2. Read *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway. If that final image was meant to make us think about war's relationship to nature, it has never been stated as well as in the wonderful [first chapter](#) of *A Farewell to Arms*. In it, Hemingway bombards us with imagery that suggests war is the antithesis of nature: leaves fall early because the troops kick up dust; rain, which usually brings life to plants, brings mud and death; soldiers carry weapons and ammunition under their raincoats making them look pregnant, but these soldiers are pregnant with death, not life.
3. Write a new ending to the film. Suppose Nicholson had decided not to build a better bridge, and work had continued as originally planned. What would have happened?
4. If members of your class are interested, set up a mock tribunal. Put Nicholson on trial for helping the enemy during war, or try Warden for being responsible for the deaths of Shears and Joyce. Have students act out the roles of justices, attorneys, and witnesses, and decide if the accused deserves punishment.

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