

## Breaker's Bridge

Laurence Yep

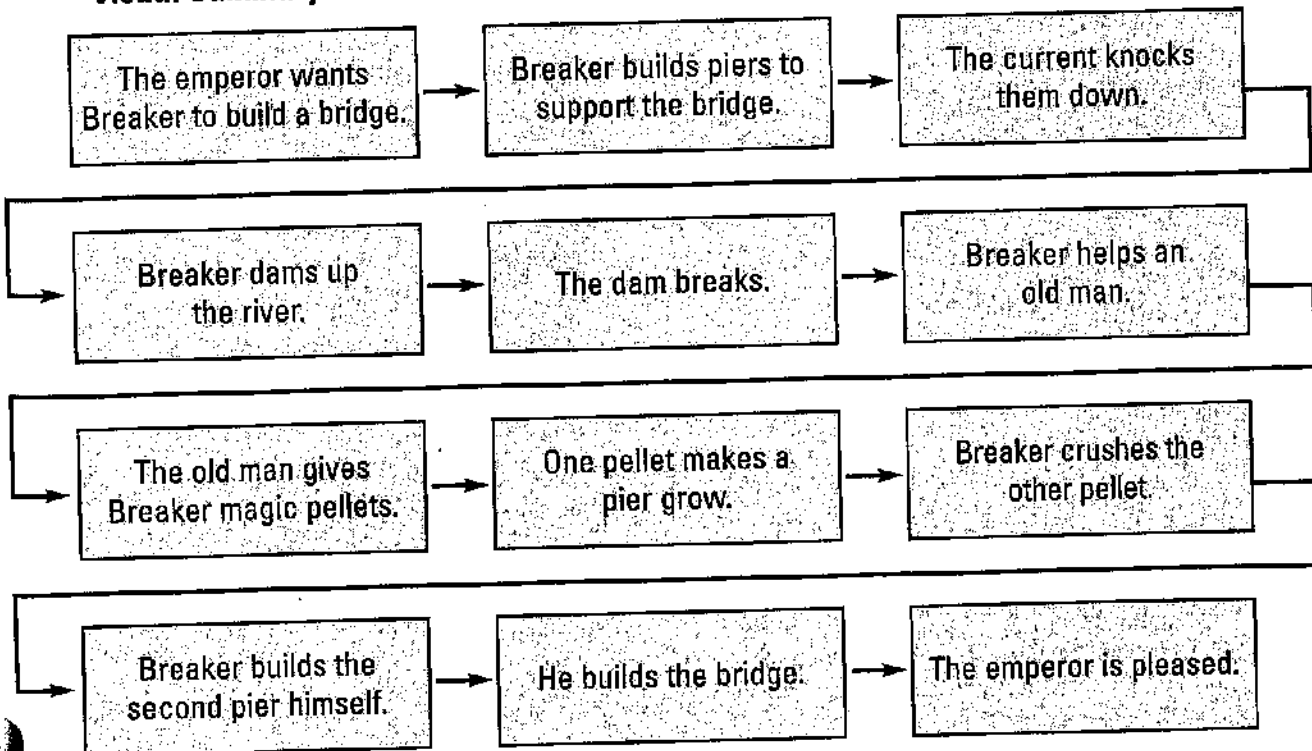
### Summary

Breaker is a clever bridge builder. The emperor orders Breaker to build a bridge over a river near his hunting palace. Breaker must succeed or be beheaded. The river's currents are fierce, destroying each pier Breaker builds. The river also breaks the dam Breaker constructs.

Breaker does not know what he will do. Then, he meets an old man who needs a new crutch. Breaker makes a crutch for the man. In return, the old man gives Breaker two magic pellets to create the bridge. When Breaker drops the first pellet in the river, the swirling waters build a pier out of stones from the bottom of the river. Breaker accidentally crushes the second pellet, so he and his men must build that pier to complete the bridge. Breaker's life is saved, thanks to the kindness and mysterious power of the old man.



### Visual Summary

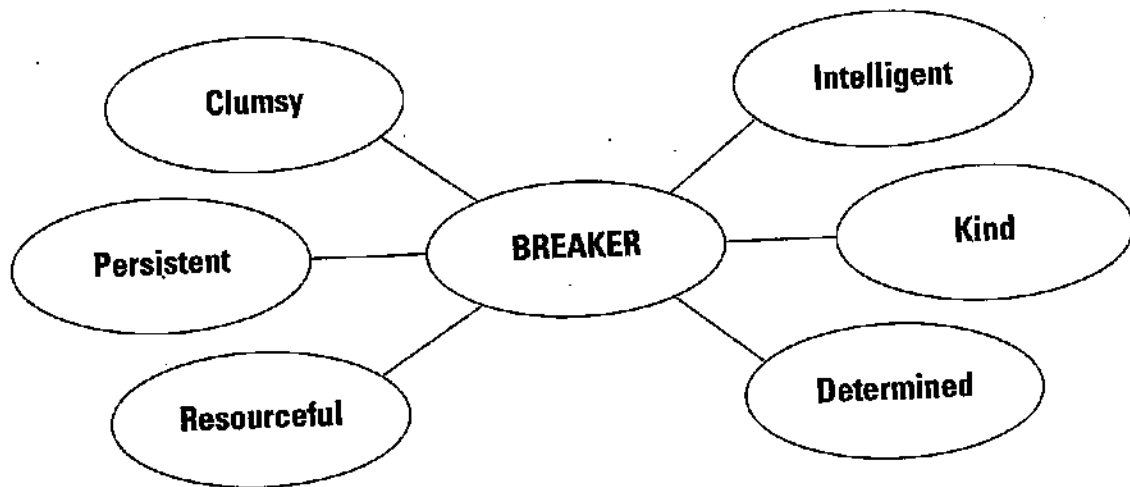


## PREPARE TO READ

### LITERARY ANALYSIS

#### Character Traits

Character traits are the qualities that make up a person's or character's personality. They determine how the character acts. The main character in "Breaker's Bridge" is a man named Breaker. The following diagram shows some of his character traits.



As you read the story, notice how Breaker acts. Then, tell which character trait makes him act that way.

### READING STRATEGY

#### Determining Cause and Effect

A cause is the reason something happens, or what makes something happen. An effect is the thing that happens. Here is a cause and effect from real life.

**Cause:** You study hard.

**Effect:** You get a high grade on a test.

When you read, look for causes and effects. Doing so will help you understand what is happening in the story. Here is an example from the story "Breaker's Bridge."

**Cause:** Breaker was a clumsy boy.

**Effect:** People gave him the nickname Breaker.

# Breaker's Bridge

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Have you ever been given a task that seemed so difficult you thought it was impossible? The emperor has given Breaker the task of building a bridge over a wildly raging river. Failure will cost Breaker his life. Although Breaker does not know how he will accomplish the task, he accepts the challenge.

The story begins with a description of Breaker's childhood and his character traits:

There was once a boy who was always breaking things. He didn't do it on purpose. He just had very clumsy hands. No matter how careful he tried to be, he always dropped whatever he picked up. His family soon learned not to let him set the table or send him for eggs. Everyone in the village called him Breaker.

But Breaker was as clever as he was clumsy. When he grew up, he managed to outlive his nickname. He could design a bridge to cross any obstacle. No canyon was too wide. No river was too deep. Somehow the clever man always found a way to bridge them all.

Eventually the emperor heard about this clever builder and sent for him.

"There is a river in the hills," the emperor said to him. "Everyone tells me it is too swift and deep to span. So I have to go a long way around it to get to my hunting palace. But you're famous for doing the impossible."

The kneeling man bowed his head to the floor. "So far I have been lucky. But there is always a first time when you can't do something."

## Vocabulary Development

**obstacle** (AHB stuh kuh!) *n.* something that stands in the way

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## ◆ Reading Strategy

What are two **effects** of the boy always breaking things?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

## ◆ Literary Analysis



Circle two of Breaker's character traits that are mentioned in this paragraph.

## ◆ Vocabulary and Pronunciation

Some words in English have letters at the beginning of the word that are silent. For example, the *k* at the beginning of the word *kneeling* is silent. Say each of the following words out loud. Do not pronounce the *k* at the beginning.

knee    knob    knock

## ◆ Reading Check

What does the emperor want Breaker to do?

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### ◆ English Language Development

In English, two words are sometimes combined into one word, called a "contraction." An apostrophe is used to replace one or more letters. For example, the word *didn't* is formed by joining *did* and *not*. An apostrophe replaces the letter *o*. Circle two other contractions in the bracketed paragraph.



The emperor frowned. "I didn't think you were lazy like my other bridge builders. You can have all the workers and all the materials you need. Build the bridge and you'll have your weight in gold. Fail and I'll have your head."

There was nothing for Breaker to do but thank the emperor and leave. He went right away to see the river.

◆ ◆ ◆

Breaker takes a steep road that winds through the hills toward the emperor's hunting palace. He comes to the edge of a deep river gorge. On the other side is the palace. Wildly rushing through the gorge far below is the river, which is fed by melting snow.

◆ ◆ ◆

Breaker shook his head in dismay. "The emperor might as well have commanded me to bridge the sea."

But his failure would mean the loss of his head, so the next day Breaker set to work. The river was too wide to span with a simple bridge. Breaker would have to construct two piers in the middle of the river. The piers would support the bridge like miniature stone islands.

◆ ◆ ◆

Supplies of huge logs and heavy granite stones arrive. Breaker organizes teams of workers to sink the logs into the muddy riverbed.

◆ ◆ ◆

Once the logs had been pounded into the mud, he tried to set the stones on top of the logs. But the river did not want to be tamed. It bucked and fought like a herd of wild stallions. It crushed the piles of stones into pebbles. It

### ◆ Literary Analysis

Underline the words in this paragraph that show that Breaker is determined.



### ◆ Reading Check

What materials does Breaker plan to use to build the piers?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Vocabulary Development

**piers** (PEERZ) *n.* heavy structures supporting the sections of a bridge

ing up the logs and smashed them against the rocky sides until they were mounds of soggy toothpicks.

◆ ◆ ◆

Over the next month, Breaker tries every trick he knows; and each time the river defeats him. Finally, Breaker builds a dam to hold back the river while the workers construct the piers. One day, an official from the emperor comes by. While Breaker shows him the piers, the dam breaks and the piers are swept away by the raging river.

"All this time and all this money, and you have nothing to show for it," says the official. He then gives Breaker a letter from the emperor. It says, "In one month I will have a bridge or I will have your head."

Breaker walks through the forest back to the inn where he is staying. As he walks, he tries to come up with another plan. But the dam has been his last resort.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Hee, hee, hee," an old man laughed in a creaky voice that sounded like feet on old, worn steps. "You never liked hats anyway. Now you'll have an excuse not to wear them."

◆ ◆ ◆

When Breaker asks the old man how he knows that, the old man laughs again and says that he knows lots of things. He then says that it is the law of the universe that all things must change. But Nature hates change the most of all.

◆ ◆ ◆

"The river certainly fits that description." Although he was exhausted and worried, Breaker squatted down beside the funny old man. "But you better get inside, old man. Night's coming on and it gets cold up in these mountains."

"Can't." The old man nodded to his broken crutch.

#### ◆ Reading Strategy

Underline two effects of the river's wildness in the bracketed paragraph.



#### ◆ Reading Check

What will happen to Breaker if he does not finish constructing the bridge in a month's time?

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#### ◆ Reading Check

What excuse will Breaker have for not wearing a hat?

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#### ◆ Literary Analysis

Underline the words in this paragraph that show that Breaker is kind.



### ◆ Vocabulary

A *sapling* is a young tree. Circle the words near *sapling* that make its meaning clear.

### ◆ Reading Strategy

In the bracketed paragraph, underline two effects caused by Breaker's clumsiness.



### ◆ Vocabulary and Pronunciation

The word *pellet* is pronounced (PEL it). A pellet is a little ball of something like clay, paper, or medicine pressed together. What do you think these pellets are made of? \_\_\_\_\_

### ◆ Literary Analysis

What old **character trait** does Breaker demonstrate with the second pellet? \_\_\_\_\_

Breaker looked all around. It was growing dark, and his stomach was aching with hunger. But he couldn't leave the old man stranded in the mountains, so Breaker took out his knife. "If I make you a new crutch, can you reach your home?"

"If you make me a crutch, we'll all have what we want." It was getting so dim that Breaker could not be sure if the old man smiled.

Although it was hard to see, Breaker found a tall, straight sapling and tried to trim the branches from its sides; but being Breaker, he dropped his knife several times and lost it twice among the old leaves on the forest floor. He also cut each of his fingers.

◆ ◆ ◆

Breaker finally manages to make a crutch out of a sapling, and he gives it to the old man. In return, the old man gives Breaker two little pellets. He tells Breaker to leave each pellet at a spot in the river where he wants a pier. The old man picks up his crutch and hobbles away.

The next morning, Breaker rows out onto the river. As soon as he drops the first pellet into the river, the waters begin to whirl around in circles.

◆ ◆ ◆

Open-mouthed, Breaker watched the river lay stone after stone. The watery arms reached higher and higher until the first pier rose to the top of the gorge.

◆ ◆ ◆

Breaker tries to drop the second pellet in the river. But in his hurry, his clumsy fingers crush part of the pellet. When he throws what is left of the pellet into the river, nothing happens.

◆ ◆ ◆

Even so, Breaker wasn't upset. His workers could easily build a second pier and meet the emperor's deadline.



So Breaker finished the bridge, and that summer the emperor reached his hunting place with ease. When the emperor finished hunting and returned to his capital, he showed Breaker with gold and promised him all the work he could ever want.

◆ ◆ ◆

The following spring, the river, fed by melting snow, is wild again. It smashes against Breaker's bridge. The first pier is solid, but the second pier is swept away. The bridge is repaired in time for the summer hunting season. But the emperor is angry and he summons Breaker to his hunting palace.

◆ ◆ ◆

"You were supposed to build a bridge for me," the emperor declared.

"Hee, hee, hee," laughed a creaky old voice. "He did, but you didn't say how long it was supposed to stay up."

◆ ◆ ◆

The old man is leaning on the crutch Breaker has made for him. Breaker says, "How did you get here?" Out of the corner of his eye, Breaker sees that all the court officials and even the emperor himself are kneeling down. Breaker now knows that the old man is one of the immortals and a powerful magician.

◆ ◆ ◆

So the emperor spared Breaker and sent him to build other projects all over China. And the emperor never regretted that he had let Breaker keep his head. But every year, the river washed away part of the bridge and every year it was rebuilt. And so things change and yet do not change.

### Vocabulary Development

**immortals** (im MORT uh lz) *n.* beings who live forever

### English Language Development

The word *fed* is the past tense of the verb *feed*. Here, *fed* is used as an adjective. In English, verbs form their past tenses in different ways. Some change the vowel and others just add *-ed*. Write the past tense form of each of these verbs from the same paragraph.

sweep \_\_\_\_\_

repair \_\_\_\_\_

### Reading Strategy

What causes the court officials and the emperor to kneel down? Circle the reasons in the bracketed sentences.



### Reading Check

What happens to the bridge every spring?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## REVIEW AND ASSESS

1. What job does the emperor give Breaker? \_\_\_\_\_

2. How does the old man Breaker meets help him build the bridge?

3. What will happen to Breaker if he does not build the bridge?

4. **Reading Strategy:** Fill in the missing causes and effects in the following sentences.

- Because the river is wild, the piers \_\_\_\_\_.

- Because Breaker makes the old man a crutch, the old man \_\_\_\_\_.

- The first pier rose out of the water because Breaker \_\_\_\_\_.

- The second pier washes out every spring because Breaker \_\_\_\_\_.



5. **Literary Analysis:** In the chart, list three character traits that Breaker has and then write how he demonstrates each.

Character Trait	How Breaker Demonstrates Trait

## Writing

### Proposal for Research

Now that you have read "Breaker's Bridge," there might be some things about bridges or bridge-building that you would like to find out. For example, you might want to get answers to questions such as these:

- How do bridge builders get the piers set in water?
- What are the different kinds of bridges?
- Which is the best type of bridge to build in a particular location?

Before doing research, write a proposal for research. Do the following:

1. First, decide on the one question about bridges that you will research. Review the story to refresh your memory. Write the question on the line:

- 
2. Think about your reasons for wanting to research this question. Write your reasons here:

- 
3. What resources will you use to find information? (You might want to interview engineers, do an Internet search, or use an encyclopedia.)

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Now, write your proposal for research. Include all of the details above in your plan. Write your proposal on a separate sheet of paper.