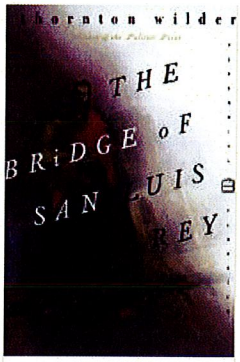

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Discussion Questions

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

by Thornton Wilder

1. Wilder is often labeled an optimist, and some feel that this quality makes his work seem shallow and a touch sentimental. As one critic put it, "People talk of outgrowing Wilder." Do you consider Wilder essentially an optimist or a pessimist? In framing your discussion, consider the accidental deaths in The Bridge of San Luis Rey.

2. Several critics have pointed out that the characters in Wilder's plays are types--the mother, the young girl, the embodiment of evil--rather than realistic human figures. What about the characters in The Bridge of San Luis Rey--the Marquesa, the Perichole, Manuel and Esteban, Uncle Pio: are they types too?

3. For his efforts to seek meaning in the accident, Brother Juniper is burned as a heretic. Discuss the role of religion in the book and Wilder's attitude toward religion. Consider not only Brother Juniper's fate but also the thoughts and deeds of the Abbess Madre Maria del Pilar and the apparent religious conversion of Camila Perichole.

4. In a sense, The Bridge of San Luis Rey can be read as a novel about meaning--how we assign and perceive meaning, how accidents and coincidences take on meaning in our daily lives. What conclusions does Wilder want us to draw about the human endeavor to find meaning in the world?

5. Wilder once declared "I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods." Discuss The Bridge of San Luis Rey in the light of this remark. What particular "forgotten goods" has he rediscovered?

6. The critic Edmund Wilson wrote that "Wilder occupies a unique position, between the Great Books and Parisian sophistication one way, and the entertainment industry the other way, and in our culture this region, though central, is a dark and almost uninhabited no man's land.Do you agree? Which aspects of his works do you find most sophisticated? Which most purely entertaining? As the entertainmentindustry comes to dominate our culture more and more, how has Wilder's position shifted? Does he seem more marginal today--or more relevantand accessible and pleasurable?

The Bridge of San Luis Rey
by Thornton Wilder

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The Bridge of San Luis Rey: Essay Q&A

Average Overall Rating: 4
Total Votes: 689

Essay Q&A

1. How does The Bridge of San Luis Rey address the existential questions of human beings in its opening passage?

Wilder's initial passage perfectly evokes the sense people often have when reacting to bad news that has befallen others, that mixture of fear and relief sometimes (though not in Wilder's text) summed up in the old phrase, "There but for the grace of God, go I"-or, more prosaically, "That could have been me!" As Wilder puts it: "People wandered about in a trance-like state, muttering; they had the hallucination of seeing themselves falling into a gulf" (p. 5). Wilder's choice of words bears some scrutiny, for it reflects, consciously or not, the existential concerns that came to the forefront of public philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this novelist was, of course, not an "existentialist writer" in the manner of such writers as Camus or Sartre, Wilder's choice of the image of the collapsing bridge aptly illustrates the existentialist concern with what such thinkers as Nietzsche called "the abyss." Have not all human beings hallucinated about "falling into a gulf" (p. 9)? Have not we all wondered what would happen if the metaphorical "bridges" that support us were to give way beneath our feet? Such thoughts would find a place among the "great searching of hearts" that ensued in Lima after the bridge fell (p. 6). We will see as the novel progresses, however, that some bridges are, perhaps, to be trusted more than others (cf. Madre Maria's reflections on love at the book's close; p. 107).

2. When the Marquesa urges Pepita to send her letter to Dora Maria, Pepita

declines, insisting that her letter is "a bad letter." Why does Pepita reach this conclusion, and what is that conclusion's significance for the character development of the Marquesa and the themes of the book as a whole?

Pepita seems to base her belief that her letter is a "bad letter" in the fact that, despite its simple and direct language, it is too much like the Marquesa's letters to Clara. It is "not brave" (p. 37). If the true purpose of literature is, as the narrator earlier claimed, "the notation of the heart" (p. 16), then Pepita's reaction to her own letter highlights the fault at the core of the Marquesa's letters. Pepita's letter hides her heart. She does not wish to stay with the Marquesa, but she conceals that truth as soon as she reveals it, all in the name of love: "I want to do only what you want." (p. 35). Similarly, the Marquesa's letters, for all they teach later generations about language and life in Lima, hide the author's heart. They conceal rather than reveal the Marquesa's heart behind the ornate and elaborate stylings now studied by schoolboys and grammarians. This reliance on style is what separates the Marquesa's other letters from Letter LVI, her "Second Corinthians" (p. 38). Readers may infer that this letter, at last, is courageous because it truly reveals the Marquesa's heart to her daughter. Sadly, the Marquesa is not able to follow through with her resolution to love her daughter bravely and thus "begin a new life" (p. 37) because the next day, on the bridge, her life will end. Wilder seems to be driving home the "carpe diem"-like message: we must love now, for we are not guaranteed we will be alive to love tomorrow.

3. What is significant about the fact that the brothers revert to their "secret language" when arguing about the Perichole in Part Three? What does this episode allow Wilder to say about the potential power of language?

The secret language is the means by which the brothers share their hearts, their souls, with each other-a truth confirmed further when Manuel attempts to convince Esteban that he (that is, Manuel) does not love the Perichole: "He was talking in their secret language and the new pain at his heart gave a greater ring of reality to his assumption of rage" (p. 51). In other words, the pain that Manuel feels in that moment is so real, so intense, it defies conventional language and can only find honest expression in the language he shares with Esteban alone. Wilder thus illustrates the ways in which language can foster intimacy with our fellow human beings.

4. "Now as he sat among the guitarists and watched this awkward girl singing ballads. the determination entered [Uncle Pio's] mind to play Pygmalion" (p. 73). Who is Pygmalion, and why does the narrator choose to invoke him at this point?

Pygmalion is a character in Greek mythology, "a sculptor who at first hated women, but then fell in love with a statue he made of a woman. He prayed to Venus that she would find him a woman like the statue. Instead, Venus made the statue come to life" (Hirsch et al., p. 41). Pygmalion is a perfect allusion for Uncle Pio, since he, in large part, does not love Camila Perichole (the "awkward girl" of the passage cited) for herself, but rather for who he can "sculpt" her to become. She may as well be a statue to him. Pio does not love; he uses, and in that respect he is not much different from the Perichole's lover, Don Andres, who "had collected coins a little, wines, actresses, orders and maps" (p. 79)-people reduced to accessories.

5. What connections exist between the lesson Captain Alvarado teaches Esteban and the experience of Uncle Pio?

Uncle Pio fails to learn the lesson that Captain Alvarado tried to teach to Esteban: that love, though it hurts, stays with us, and continues even as we do: "We push on, Esteban, as best we can. Time keeps going by." (p. 64). This irony, however, is only compounded by another: that both Esteban and Uncle Pio, like the other three victims, perish in the collapse of the bridge. It is as though Wilder has in mind those words of Ecclesiastes: "I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not

to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all" (Eccl. 9:11, KJV).

The Bridge of San Luis Rey Wilder Thornton

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Thornton Niven Wilder

Dictionary of American Biography. 1994.

Born: April 17, 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin, United States
Died: December 07, 1975 in Hamden, Connecticut, United States
Other Names: Wilder, Thornton Niven
Nationality: American
Occupation: Writer

Full Text:

Wilder, Thornton Niven (Apr. 17, 1897 - Dec. 7, 1975), playwright and novelist, was born in Madison, Wis., the son of Amos Parker Wilder, a journalist and foreign service officer, and Isabella Thornton Niven, a housewife and autodidact. Thornton was the younger of the Wilder's two sons who, in turn, preceded three daughters. Wilder's first nine years were spent in Madison, where his father edited the *Wisconsin State Journal.* The family moved to China in 1906, when Wilder's father was appointed to a consular post. After only several months, Isabella, together with her (then) four children, returned to the United States, settling in Berkeley, Calif., where Thornton attended the public schools for three years. Returning with the family to China at the end of 1910, Thornton attended the English China Inland Mission School at Chefoo in Shantung Province, where he boarded. One of a dozen Americans, among them Henry Luce, his future classmate at Yale, Wilder was not very well assimilated at the mission school. Nor was he the following year (1912-1913), when he attended Thacher School in Ojai, Calif. Wilder felt insulated and disconnected at boarding school; he missed the company of his intelligent and attentive mother and his younger adoring sisters. In 1913, he was reunited with his mother and siblings in Berkeley, and completed his high school education at Berkeley High School.

As a small boy, Wilder had worshiped his stern father, but when circumstances separated them physically, an emotional estrangement began that was never repaired. In 1914, when Amos Wilder rejoined his family, father and son failed to achieve a rapprochement.

Wilder developed a lifelong love of theater from weekly visits to the nearby Oakland Playhouse. His first two years of college were at Oberlin in Ohio. In his junior year he transferred to Yale, and after military service with the U.S. Coast Guard Artillery at Newport, R.I., received his undergraduate degree in 1920.

Wilder's father did all in his power to secure for his son the best possible education. Believing that Thornton's potential lay in teaching, he arranged for him to spend a year in Italy, studying Latin and classical history at the American Academy in Rome. The experience was profoundly liberating for Wilder; for the first time he could freely explore aesthetic, cultural, and sexual pursuits that in the United States had been, for the most part, vicarious. The year in Rome proved to be critical to Wilder's professional development as well, because it provided him with the material that launched his career as a novelist five years later. His presence at the first performances of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* had a profound impact on his career as a dramatist. Wilder's studies in Europe also proved helpful to his obtaining of an instructorship upon his return to the United States. He taught French at Lawrenceville School in Princeton, N.J., beginning in 1921.

Wilder published his first professional writing in *Theater Arts Monthly.* In 1926, his first novel, *The Cabala,* was respectfully reviewed in prestigious publications. Encouraged, Wilder took two years' leave from teaching to do graduate work at Princeton, where he earned a master's degree in French in 1926. More important, he composed his second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* which made him an international celebrity and won him his first Pulitzer Prize. Resigning from Lawrenceville in 1928, Wilder turned to full-time writing and lecturing. In the decade that followed, he wrote two novels, *The Woman of Andros* (1930) and *Heaven's My Destination* (1935), and published two collections of short plays, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* (1928) and *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1931). Between 1931 and 1936, he also taught one semester per year at the University of Chicago at the behest of his college classmate Robert Maynard Hutchins, the university's newly appointed president, who with Wilder's counsel, revised the university's undergraduate program.

The success of Wilder's short plays in the early 1930's spurred his concentration in dramatic writing. In 1932, he translated Obey's *Le Viol de Lucrèce* for Broadway and wrote a screenplay for Samuel Goldwyn, *We Live Again* (1934), and subsequently for Alfred Hitchcock, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). In 1938, he provided Jed Harris with an adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* which starred Ruth Gordon. More significant, he completed *Our Town* (1938), which brought him his second Pulitzer Prize, and *The Merchant of Yonkers,* which initially failed but, slightly revised and retitled as *The Matchmaker* (1955), had a rousing success in both England and the United States.

In 1939 Wilder, a liberal humanist and a patriotic American, was shaken by the outbreak of World War II in Europe. He placed himself at

the disposal of the United States government, which dispatched him on missions to South America and England. After Pearl Harbor, Wilder was commissioned an officer in the U.S. Army Air Force; his contribution to strategic planning in the Italian theater of combat was substantial (1942-1945).

Before going on active duty, however, he succeeded in completing *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), which, with a cast that included Fredric March, Tallulah Bankhead, and Montgomery Clift, won him his third Pulitzer Prize.

When Wilder returned to civilian life in 1945 he was in his forty-ninth year. Although he remained a celebrated and respected literary figure, his post-World War II work was overshadowed by a newer generation of playwrights and novelists. His postwar novels, *The Ides of March* (1948) and *The Eighth Day* (1967), are arguably more complex and challenging than his four earlier novels, but the response from a new school of critics was either inaudible or equivocal. Wilder completed one final full-length play, *The Alcestiad* (1955), which after its premiere performances at the Edinburgh Festival was not produced in England or the United States in his lifetime. He also completed a collection of short plays, *Plays for Bleecker Street* (1962), and two one-act plays for performance in Berlin (1957): "Bernice" and "The Wreck on the Five-Twenty-Five." Never published, they survive in typescript. Several of Wilder's one-act plays remain in the active repertory.

Wilder in his seventy-fifth year published *Theophilus North* (1973), a collection of short stories, bound together by the eponymous T. N., who, like Sherlock Holmes, resolves the conflicts in each tale.

Assessing the literary importance of Wilder's novels is difficult. A consummate stylist in the tradition of George Moore, Henry James, and Marcel Proust, and praised for wit and irony in virtually all of his work, Wilder was faulted partly because his fiction broke no new technical ground and partly because he appeared detached from an America torn by social unrest and ethnic conflicts. Wilder's novels were widely read and regarded as serious, careful, and mature observations of the human condition. Indeed, all his novels remain in print at the close of the twentieth century. No portrayal of Julius Ceasar in English-language fiction has surpassed Wilder's in *The Ides of March;* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* which transformed Wilder into an international figure, as James's *Daisy Miller* and Wharton's *Ethan Frome* did for those writers, may resonate indefinitely.

Wilder's place in twentieth-century American drama, however, cannot be questioned: *Our Town,* by virtue of its intricate themes, its innumerable performances, and its innovative structure, is often regarded as America's national play. Together with *The Skin of Our Teeth,* it reestablished Wilder's international reputation. Both plays influenced scores of American playwrights, from Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) to Tony Kushner in *Angels in America* (1993). Even Wilder's lighthearted farce, *The Matchmaker,* had a significant impact on American theater, providing the inspiration for the enormously popular musical comedy *Hello Dolly,* whose heroine, Dolly Levi, has become as emblematic a figure in the United States as Mr. Micawber is in Britain.

Although Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, if only by virtue of their greater productivity, may loom larger than Wilder, his insistence that realism, expressionism, and symbolism had diminished the sense of spontaneity and improvisation (which Molière, Chekhov, and Pirandello had successively brought to the stage) prepared the theater public for the absurdist and experimental dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Joe Orton, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and Caryl Churchill.

Wilder's life story cannot compete in Sturm und Drang with those of his contemporaries, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. For one thing, although Wilder traveled extensively throughout western Europe, much of the United States, Mexico, and even South America, both literally and figuratively he never really left home. Emotionally crippled by his father's Philistine, Puritan attitudes, he formed few emotional attachments and never married. No matter how far he wandered, he invariably returned to his home in Connecticut, which, after his father's death in 1936, was dominated by his mother and his sister Isabel, whose adult life was divided between maintaining the house and acting as her brother's surrogate. Fortunately, Wilder's friendships with Robert Hutchins, Ernest Hemingway, Alexander Woollcott, Jed Harris, and most particularly, Gertrude Stein, were liberating influences, which together with his prodigious intellectual curiosity enabled him to transcend and transvaluate in his writings the conventional and provincial ambience of his New England background.

Wilder, who as a child and adolescent was shy, withdrawn, and insecure, became an engaging and fascinating man both privately and publicly. Those who attended his many university and public lectures were captivated by his earnestness, originality, and intellectual passion, qualities that most particularly characterized his personal relationships. A good and generous friend to scores of students and colleagues, Wilder's ultimate commitment was to the nourishment of his intellect and imagination. Among the several themes of his fiction and his plays, that of fidelity to mind and spirit is most pervasive.

Wilder died in his sleep at his home in Hamden, Conn.

FURTHER READINGS:
[A collection of Wilder's lectures and critical essays was published posthumously as *American Characteristics and Other Essays* (1979); letters and unpublished manuscripts are in the Beinecke Collection at Yale. Other major correspondence is at Harvard, the University of Chicago, Princeton, and New York University. The *Journals of Thornton Wilder,* selected and edited by Donald Gallup (1985), provides insight into his extensive philosophical, critical, and aesthetic speculations. Two full-length biographies are Richard Goldstone, *Thornton Wilder* (1975; rev. 1993) and Gilbert Harrison, *The Enthusiast* (1983). For further biographical material, see the *Paris Review* interview by Goldstone in Malcolm Cowley, ed., *Writers at Work* (1958). An annotated bibliography of works by and about Thornton Wilder is Richard Goldstone and Gary Anderson, *Thornton Wilder* (1982). An obituary is in the *New York Times,* Dec. 8, 1975.]

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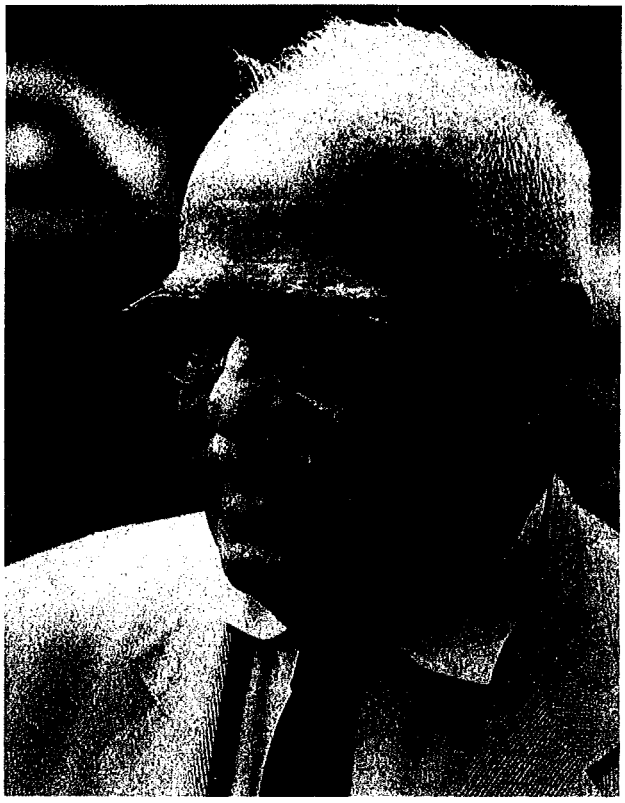
Thornton Wilder

1897-1975

(Full name Thornton Niven Wilder) American dramatist, novelist, essayist, and screenwriter.

The following entry presents an overview of Wilder's career. For further discussion of Wilder's works see *CLC* Volumes 1, 5, 6, 10, 15, 35.



INTRODUCTION

The recipient of Pulitzer Prizes for both drama and fiction, Wilder is widely known as the author of such life-affirming and distinctly American works as the play *Our Town.* He is also recognized for the expansive and diverse nature of his writings, wherein he explored erudite themes informed by his travels and extensive education, as well as the simple and ordinary aspects of American daily life. As a dramatist Wilder is considered simultaneously a traditionalist and an innovator who used highly experimental staging techniques to promote values associated with Christian morality, community, family, and the appreciation of life's simple pleasures.

Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin. Travel was an important part of his childhood as his family resided alternately in the United States and in China, where his father served as American Consul General. He completed high school in Berkeley, California, attended Oberlin College for two years, and then completed his bachelor's degree at Yale University, where he published his first full-length play, *The Trumpet Shall Sound,* in the Yale *Literary Magazine.* After graduation, Wilder traveled to Rome, where he spent a year studying archaeology. This experience strongly influenced his interest in the human condition in relation to the passage of time—a theme that pervades many of his works. After returning to the United States, Wilder taught French at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey for four years, and then attended Princeton University, receiving his master's degree in French in 1926. In the same year, he completed his first novel, *The Cabala.* His literary reputation was established, however, with his second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. In 1928 Wilder began a tour of Europe with his sister Isabel in order to study stage production techniques in various countries. After returning to America, he taught at the University of Chicago during the 1930s and lectured throughout the United States, becoming well-known as a charismatic public speaker. His landmark play *Our Town* was initially produced in 1938, but received poor reviews until—at Wilder's suggestion—the props and scenery were removed to reflect his goal of capturing "not verisimilitude but reality." The play was subsequently praised for its simplicity and won a Pulitzer Prize. Wilder received his third Pulitzer prize for his play *The Skin of Our Teeth,* which was produced while he was serving in the Air Force during World War II. By the 1950s, Wilder was solidly established as a major figure in American literature. His novel *The Eighth Day,* for which he won a National Book Award, is considered the most significant achievement of his later years. He died in 1975.

Critics have emphasized Wilder's focus on historical and moral themes in his novels. Set in Rome, his first novel, *The Cabala,* depicts a young American student's introduction to a mysterious social group called "the Cabala." The work has been interpreted as both an analysis of the decadent European nobility and an allegory of Christianity, paganism, and modern civilization. Wilder's second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* is set in eighteenth-century Peru and portrays a priest's quest to discover a theological meaning for the accidental death of five people when a bridge collapses. Also situated in an exotic setting and presenting a moral theme is *The Woman of Andros,* which contrasts pagan motifs associated with ancient Greek culture with references to the advent of Christianity. Although *The Woman of Andros* was initially well-received, it became the center of controversy when Michael Gold, a noted Marxist writer, criticized Wilder for publishing "escapist" literature rather than addressing the unpleas-

ant social realities of the Great Depression. Wilder responded with *Heaven's My Destination,* a lighthearted picaresque novel set in the Depression which parodies facets of American life such as fundamentalist evangelism. Wilder later returned to historical themes with *The Ides of March,* a novel consisting of four books of documents, proclamations, and letters that relates the events leading to the assassination of Julius Caesar. Considered by some critics to be Wilder's most accomplished work, *The Eighth Day* portrays a man who lives as a fugitive after being falsely convicted of murder.

Wilder's plays focus on broad themes concerning the human condition and frequently use innovative staging techniques. The plays collected in *The Long Christmas Dinner, and Other Plays,* for example, reflect the influence of the experimental, nonrealistic theater Wilder viewed in Europe. *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* both feature a stage manager who speaks to the audience about the play; virtually bereft of scenery, the stagings employ chairs as the only props. Like Wilder's later play *Our Town, Pullman Car Hiawatha* presents formulaic characters that symbolize an individual's place in the universe rather than an individual's unique qualities. Prefiguring *Our Town, The Long Christmas Dinner* treats life as a brief interlude before death. While the play spans ninety years, the action focuses on a single Christmas feast in which characters enter and exit through two doors representing birth and death, with their time onstage symbolizing their entire lives.

In his preface to a 1957 edition of *Our Town,* his most famous play, Wilder commented: "[*Our Town*] is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events of daily life." The work focuses on life in Grover's Corners, a small New Hampshire town, and is presented in three acts entitled "Daily Life," "Love and Marriage," and "Death." The play features an omniscient Stage Manager who narrates the drama, jokes with the audience, and implicitly connects the people of Grover's Corners with the whole universe. In "Death," a deceased woman named Emily Webb is granted the opportunity to relive her twelfth birthday. She returns to earth and is overcome with emotion at every mundane detail of the day. Time is also a prominent motif in *The Skin of Our Teeth.* In this play, stage time is manipulated to portray simultaneously events from various time periods. For example, in Act I a 1940s family from Excelsior, New Jersey, faces the perils of the Ice Age, and in Act II an Atlantic City beauty pageant is held amidst preparations for the Great Flood. Wilder employed staging techniques that were considered quite unusual at the time of the play's first performance—characters step in and out of their roles to share their "true feelings" with the audience, and the stage crew rehearses to fill in for actors and actresses who have supposedly fallen ill.

Wilder's achievement of critical acclaim and popular success is often attributed to his ability to address both scholarly themes and simple, folksy subjects. While drama critics have lauded his innovative staging techniques, crediting him with reviving American drama of the 1930s, Wilder's popular appeal is typically associated with his optimism and affirmation of traditional American morality and values. *Our Town,* for example, continues to be one of the most frequently performed dramas of the American theater. Although some reviewers have complained that his works are either too simplistic or excessively academic, most have praised the diversity and scope of his oeuvre and his independence from the dictates of popular literary trends. As Louis Broussard has asserted: "That Wilder should regard the problems of our age as insignificant within the scope of all time and space labels him a unique optimist among the writers of this century. In such company as O'Neill, Eliot, Anouilh, and many other post-war pessimists, Wilder emerges as a lone dissenter."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

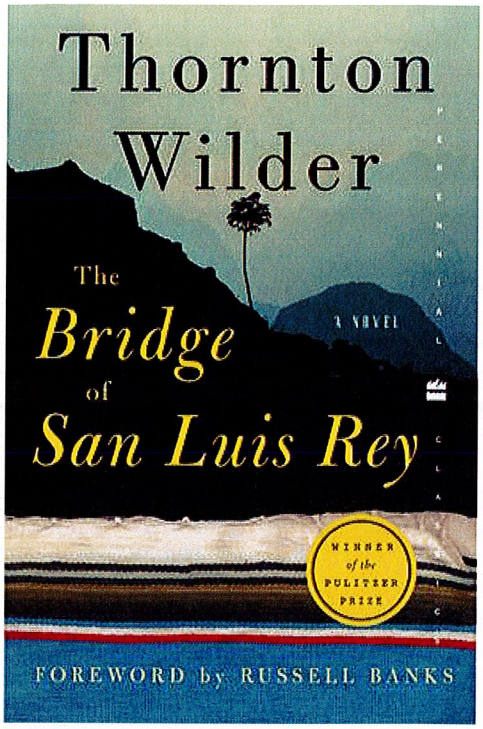
The Cabala (novel) 1926
The Trumpet Shall Sound (drama) 1926
The Bridge of San Luis Rey (novel) 1927
The Angel That Troubled the Waters, and Other Plays (dramas) 1928
The Woman of Andros (novel) 1930
**The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* (drama) 1931
**The Long Christmas Dinner* (drama) 1931
**Such Things Only Happen in Books* (drama) 1931
**Love, and How to Cure It* (drama) 1932
**The Queens of France* (drama) 1932
We Live Again [with Maxwell Anderson, Leonard Praskins, and Preston Sturges] (screenplay) 1934
Heaven's My Destination (novel) 1935
The Merchant of Yonkers: A Farce in Four Acts (drama) 1938; also produced as *The Matchmaker* [revised version], 1954
Our Town (drama) 1938
Our Town [with Frank Craven and Harry Chandlee] (screenplay) 1940
The Skin of Our Teeth (drama) 1942
Shadow of a Doubt [with Sally Benson and Alma Reville] (screenplay) 1943
The Ides of March (novel) 1948
A Life in the Sun (drama) 1955; also produced as *The Alcestiad,* 1962
Bernice (drama) 1957
The Wreck of the 5:25 (drama) 1957
Plays for Bleecker Street (drama) 1962
**Pullman Car Hiawatha* (drama) 1964
The Eighth Day (novel) 1967
Theophilus North (novel) 1973
American Characteristics, and Other Essays (essays) 1979

*These plays were published in the collection *The Long Christmas Dinner, and Other Plays,* 1931.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

"On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below." With this celebrated sentence Thornton Wilder begins *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* one of the towering achievements in American fiction and a novel read throughout the world.

By chance, a monk witnesses the tragedy. Brother Juniper then embarks on a quest to prove that it was divine intervention rather than chance that led to the deaths of those who perished in the tragedy.



Published: 1927
Type: Novel
Award: Pulitzer Prize

Overview

by Ashley Gallagher

Plot Summary

Winner of the 1927 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* begins: "On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below." Much like the opening of *The Eighth Day* (1967), Wilder begins at the height of havoc. Immediately, the reader knows the tragic fate of the novel's five main characters, but their significance is still a mystery. Wilder then introduces Brother Juniper, a Franciscan missionary who witnessed the tragedy. Deeply affected by the lives lost in the bridge's collapse, Brother Juniper begins a mission to uncover the truth about the five victims. In so doing, he asks the novel's pivotal question: "Why did this happen to those five?" *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is comprised of five parts or chapters; the first, entitled "Perhaps an Accident," introduces readers to the tragedy and Brother Juniper's role in its history. "The Marquesa de Montemayor" presents how the eponymous character based on the distinguished French letter-writer, Madame de Sevigne, and Pepita, a teenage girl the Marquesa borrowed from the convent, both die in the bridge collapse. The reader learns of the Marquesa's arranged marriage and estranged daughter who, despite the Marquesa's constant letters and obvious affection, shuns her mother. Pepita, who serves as the Marquesa's only companion, is an orphan raised by the Abbess Madre María del Maria, one of the great women of Peru. It is not until Part Three, "Esteban," that the reader learns of twins brothers Esteban and Manuel, who were also orphans raised by the Abbess. Esteban, distraught at the recent loss of Manuel, who died from an infected gash on his leg, attempts suicide but is prevented by Captain Alvarado. His decision to join the captain's crew for a long voyage causes Esteban to be on the bridge at the exact moment of its collapse. In Part Four, "Uncle Pio," the reader meets the Svengali-like Uncle Pio who has dedicated much of his life to Camila Perichole, a brilliant Peruvian actress and another historically-based character. As the reader learns, serving as Perichole's uncle-mentor is only one of the many roles Uncle Pio plays; he is an adventurer, linguist, teacher, and Spanish theater aficionado. On the day of the bridge's collapse, Uncle Pio perishes along with Camila's epileptic son, Jaime, who had recently been entrusted to his care. In *The Bridge of San Luis Rey's* conclusion, "Perhaps an Intention," Brother Juniper's painstaking research reveals the error of his initial hypothesis about the victims of the bridge collapse: "…the wicked [were] visited by destruction and the good called early to Heaven."[1] Disheartened and distraught, Brother Juniper tears up his findings and casts them into the Pacific. Brother Juniper, deemed a heretic by the Church for his blasphemous project, is sentenced to be burned at the stake. Although

penance of those who were left behind, such as Camila and Doña Clara. With the death of Uncle Pio and her son, Camila pursues a purer existence in the convent as a volunteer for the Abbess's charity work, and Doña Clara comes from Spain to mourn her mother's passing. The Abbess's witnessing of Camila and Doña Clara's spiritual awakening triggers a realization that acts as Wilder's ultimate commentary: "'But soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. 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.'"[2]

Critical Analysis

Although Wilder had never journeyed to Peru, his description of the country in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* remains, as Edmund Wilson commented, "solid, incandescent, distinct."[3] Wilder's superior ability to capture the essence of an unknown place contributes to the novel's overall tone and style. Despite the novel's neatly constructed denouement, which Castronovo deems "...clumsy and sentimental...,"[4] Goldstein counters that *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is "not sentimental; it offers no promises of earthly rewards and no overestimation of the worth of characters."[5] Instead, Wilder focuses on a sundry of philosophical concepts ranging from transcendentalism to existentialism to humanism. Apart from his style and integration of philosophical and symbolic content in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder's use of an unidentified first-person narrator enables the reader to experience more than simply Brother Juniper's limited point of view. However, as the narrator expresses in "Perhaps an Accident," "Yet for all his diligence Brother Juniper never knew the central passion of Doña Maria's life; nor of Uncle Pio's, not even of Esteban's. And I, who claim to know so much more, isn't it possible that even I have missed the very spring within the spring?"[6], thus establishing an ambiguity or even mystery in matters of human character and theology. Among the plethora of themes Wilder incorporates in his novel — obsession, isolation, neglect, and death — the common thread among these themes is love. As Kuner writes, "Every type of love is scrutinized in this novel: primitive sexual love, exaggerated fraternal love, one-sided mother love. All are, in one way or another, impure."[7] The impurity of love in characters such as the Marquesa de Montemayor and her daughter Doña Clara causes them to struggle to expel their illusions and accept each other as they truly are. Wilder received nearly universal praise for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Laurence Stallings of *McCall's* called the novel "the philosophical novel brought to perfection."[8] Confirming *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* initial reception, the novel was ranked thirty-seventh on the Modern Library Board's list of the hundred best novels of the twentieth century.[9]

Footnotes

[1]Wilder, Thornton. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. 1927. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

[2]Wilder, Thornton. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. 1927. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

[3]Wilson, Edmund. "Thornton Wilder." *The Shores of Light*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952. 388.

[4]Castronovo, 51.

[5]Goldstein, 60.

[6]Wilder, 9.

[7]Kuner, 77.

[8]Stallings, Laurence. "Booth of the Month: *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*." *McCall's*. 34. (May 1928): 124.

[9]Paul, Lewis, "*Ulysses* at Top as Panel Picks 100 Best Novels," 4.

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Further Commentary

Thornton Wilder's second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, was published in 1927 to worldwide acclaim. The plot is deceptively simple: On July 20, 1714, "the finest bridge in all Peru" collapses and five people die. Brother Juniper, a Franciscan missionary, happens to witness the tragedy, and as a result, he asks the central question of the novel: "Why did this happen to those five?" He sets out to explore the lives of the five victims, and to understand why they died. Ironically, his quest will lead to his own death.

In later years, when someone asked Thornton Wilder about his purpose in writing *The Bridge*, he replied that he was posing a question: "Is there a direction and meaning in lives beyond the individual's own will?"

Wilder populated his novel with an interesting cast of characters. The Marquesa de Montemayor, dies when the bridge falls, as does her maid, Pepita. As an awkward, homely young woman, the Marquesa was forced into an arranged marriage. At the time of her death, she is estranged from the person she loves most in the world, her daughter Clara. The Marquesa writes her daughter voluminous letters. The lonely Marquesa's companion at home and on the doomed bridge is Pepita, an orphan who was reared by the Abbess Madre Maria del Maria, one of the great women of Peru.

The Abbess has also watched over the orphaned twins Esteban and Manuel. Esteban, who is thrown to his death when the bridge goes down, has been in such despair over Manuel's recent death that he has contemplated suicide. It is because he has decided to "push on" and to go to sea that he is on the bridge at the exact moment of its collapse. [It is interesting to remember that Thornton Wilder had a twin brother who died at birth.]

Uncle Pio has devoted much of his life to Camila Perichole, the most celebrated actress in Peru, if not in all of the Spanish world. According to the Marquesa, Pio was an "aged Harlequin." In addition to guiding the Perichole's career, he has been an adventurer, a linguist, a teacher, and an expert on Spanish literature, especially the literature of the theater. He is traveling on the bridge that fateful day with the Perichole's little son Jaime because he is going to spend a year educating the boy.

Describing the sources of his novel, Wilder explained that the plot was inspired "in its external action by a one-act play by [the French playwright] Prosper Merimee, which takes place in Latin America and one of whose characters is a courtesan. However, the central idea of the work, the justification for a number of human lives that comes up as a result of the sudden collapse of a bridge, stems from friendly arguments with my father, a strict Calvinist. Strict Puritans imagine God all too easily as a petty schoolmaster who minutely weights guilt against merit, and they overlook God's Caritas' which is more all- encompassing and powerful. God's love has to transcend his just retribution. But in my novel I have left this question unanswered. As I said earlier, we can only pose the question' correctly and clearly, and have faith one will ask the question in the right way."

When asked if his characters were historical or imagined, Wilder replied, "The Perichole and the Viceroy are real people, under the names they had in history. Most of the events were invented by me, including the fall of the bridge." He based the Marquesa's habit of writing

The Bridge received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, was translated into many languages, and established Wilder's reputation in "the front rank of living novelists."

For further discussions of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, please visit the Bibliography.

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