

***The Bridge of San Luis Rey***  
**Bringing the Novel to the Stage**

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*“On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below.”*  
— the opening sentence of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* by Thornton Wilder

**Thornton Wilder** (1897–1975), most famous for writing the American classic *Our Town*, was an American playwright and novelist. Thornton was born in Wisconsin but spent much of his childhood in China where his father was a U.S. diplomat. He graduated from Yale with a Bachelor of Arts degree and received his M.A. in French from Princeton in 1926. He taught at private schools and universities throughout his life and considered himself to be a teacher first and a writer second. He acted in his plays occasionally, most notably as the Stage Manager in *Our Town* on Broadway. In 1955, Tyrone Guthrie encouraged Wilder to rework *The Merchant of Yonkers* into *The Matchmaker*, which later became the basis for the hit 1964 musical *Hello, Dolly!* In 1962 and 1963, Wilder lived twenty months in Douglas, Arizona, apart from family and friends. There he started his longest novel, *The Eighth Day*. Wilder won three Pulitzer Prizes—for the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) and for the two plays *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) — and a U.S. National Book Award for the novel *The Eighth Day* (1967).



*“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.”*

***The Bridge of San Luis Rey*** (1927) tells the story of five people who are on an Incan rope bridge in Peru when it collapses. The book explores the question of why unfortunate events occur to people who seem innocent or undeserving. It also explores the nature of love in several key passages. *The Bridge* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928, and in 1998 it was selected by the editorial board of the American Modern Library as one of the 100 best novels of the twentieth century. The final passage was quoted by British Prime Minister Tony Blair during the memorial service for British victims of the September 11th attacks in 2001.

Excerpt from the novel of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

But the person who saw most of the difficult hours of the Marquesa was her little companion, Pepita. Pepita was an orphan and had been brought up by that strange genius of Lima, the Abbess Madre María del Pilar. The only occasion upon which the two great women of Peru (as the perspective of history was to reveal them) met face to face was on the day when Doña María called upon the directress of the Convent of Santa María Rosa de las Rosas and asked if she might borrow some bright girl from the orphanage to be her companion. The Abbess gazed hard at the grotesque old woman. Even the wisest people in the world are not perfectly wise and Madre María del Pilar who was able to divine the poor human heart behind all the masks of folly and defiance, had always refused to concede one to the Marquesa de Montemayor. She asked her a great many questions and then paused to think. She wanted to give Pepita the worldly experience of living in the palace. She also wanted to bend the old woman to her own interests. And she was filled with a somber indignation, for she knew she was gazing at one of the richest women in Peru, and the blindest.

She was one of those persons who have allowed their lives to be gnawed away because they have fallen in love with an idea several centuries before its appointed appearance in the history of civilization. She hurled herself against the obstinacy of her time in her desire to attach a little dignity to women. At midnight when she had finished adding up the accounts of the House she would fall into insane vision of an age when women could be organized to protect women, women travelling, women as servants, women when they are old or ill, the women she had discovered in the mines of Potosí, or in the workrooms of the cloth-merchants, the girls she had collected out of doorways on rainy nights. But always the next morning she had to face the fact that the women in Peru, even her nuns, went through life with two notions: one, that all the misfortunes that might befall them were merely due to the fact that they were not sufficiently attractive to bind some man to their maintenance and, two, that all the misery in the world was worth his caress. She had never known any country but the environs of Lima and she assumed that all its corruption was the normal state of mankind. Looking back from our century we can see the whole folly of her hope. Twenty such women would have failed to make any impression on that age. Yet she continued diligently in her task. She resembled the swallow in the fable who once every thousand years transferred a grain of wheat, in the hope of rearing a mountain to reach the moon. Such persons are raised up in every age; they obstinately insist on transporting their grains of wheat and they derive a certain exhilaration from the sneers of the bystanders. "How queerly they dress!" we cry. "How queerly they dress!"

Her plain red face had great kindness, and more idealism than kindness, and more generalship than idealism. All her work, her hospitals, her orphanage, her convent, her sudden journeys of rescue, depended upon money. No one harbored a fairer admiration for mere goodness, but she had been obliged to watch herself sacrificing her kindness, almost her idealism, to generalship, so dreadful were the struggles to obtain her subsidies from her superiors in the church. The Archbishop of Lima, whom we shall know later in a more graceful connection, hated her with what he called a Vatinian hate and counted the cessation of her visits among the compensations for dying.

Lately she had felt not only the breath of old age against her cheek, but a graver warning. A chill terror went through her, not for herself, but for her work. Who was there in Peru to value the things she had valued? And rising one day at dawn she had made a rapid journey through her hospital and convent and orphanage, looking for a soul she might train to be her successor. She hurried from empty face to empty face, occasionally pausing more from hope than conviction. In the courtyard she came upon a company of girls at work over the linen and her eyes fell at once upon a girl of twelve who was directing the others at the trough and at the same time recounting to them with great dramatic fire the less probable miracles in the life of Saint Rose of Lima. So it was that the search ended with Pepita. The education for greatness is difficult enough at any time, but amid the sensibilities and jealousies of a convent it must be conducted with fantastic indirection. Pepita was assigned to the most disliked tasks in the House, but she came to understand all the aspects of its administration. She accompanied the Abbess on her journeys, even though it was in the capacity of custodian of the eggs and vegetables. And everywhere, by surprise, hours would open up in which the Directress suddenly appeared and talked to her at great length, not only on religious experience, but on how to manage women and how to plan contagious wards and how to beg for money. It was a step in this education for greatness that led to Pepita's arriving one day and entering upon the crazy duties of being Doña María's companion.