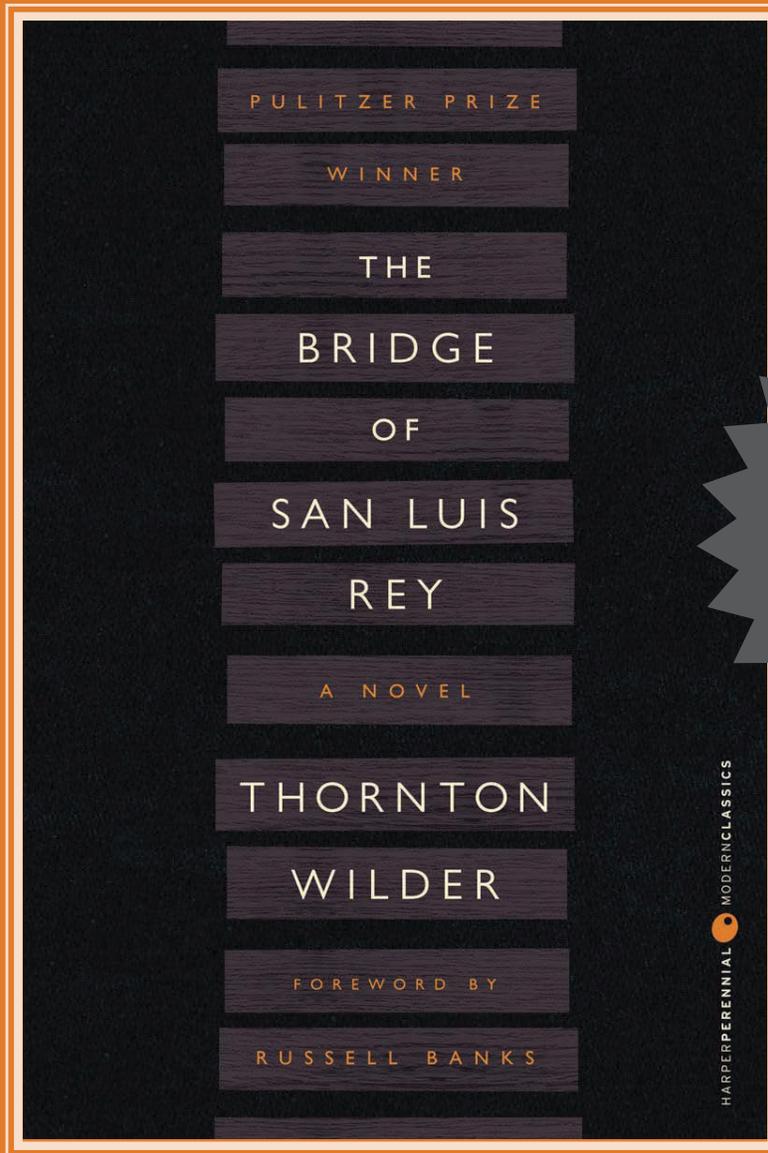


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO



**ALIGNED
TO THE
COMMON
CORE**

“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.” —from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

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Note to Teachers

Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, will be an excellent addition to your curriculum. It fits beautifully into courses focusing on world literature. It can be used as a cornerstone text in multi-genre thematic units on wisdom literature, moral fables, questions of fate, and types of love. Teachers are encouraged to read Russell Banks's excellent foreword to the novel before teaching the unit. The supplementary materials in the Perennial Classics edition of the text provide a rich backdrop for exploring the novel's inception, influence, and enduring legacy.

[The Thornton Wilder Society](#) and [The Thornton Wilder Family Official Website](#) are excellent resources to support the study of this important American writer.

The questions and activities in this teaching guide were written to support standards-based instruction. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* meets the standard for **Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity** for grades 9-12. Since the novel's structure and thematic content are complex, the CCSS for 11-12 grade level students were used in this guide.

A complete list of the Common Core State Standards can be found at <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>.

You'll find more guides aligned to the Common Core State Standards [here](#).

About this Guide

This Teacher's Guide is divided into two sections. The first, "**Guided Reading Questions**," will help students with reading comprehension and appreciation. Much of the characterization in this novel is indirect, and these questions will guide students to infer meaning from the text. These questions can be used as a guide for annotating the text, journal responses, or discussion. The second section, "**Writing and Research Prompts**," consists of analytical writing and research prompts and is subdivided into genres based on the Common Core writing standards. A variety of prompts are included for each genre, and teachers are encouraged to choose those that are best suited for their students. The argumentation prompts can be modified for use in Socratic seminars or class debates if a teacher wishes to focus on Speaking and Listening standards.

Before You Read

As an activating strategy, guide students in a discussion of the question, "Why do bad things happen?" Ask them to consider a recent tragedy. What questions does this tragedy raise? How would different groups of people (victims, survivors, politicians, theologians, academics, etc) answer the question, "Why did this happen?" Do they find any of these answers satisfactory?

Explain that *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* will engage with these questions. Share with students [Tony Blair's response to 9/11](#), [Danny Heitman's essay from the Wall Street Journal](#) and [John Kass' essay from The Chicago Tribune](#).

Guided Reading Questions

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

PART ONE: PERHAPS AN ACCIDENT

1. Why do you think Wilder includes the following description: “The bodies of the victims were approximately collected and approximately separated from one another” (6)? What does this suggest about the extent of the tragedy?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4
2. What effect does the collapse of the bridge have on the Peruvians? Why do you think they were impacted so strongly by this particular accident? Support your answer with details from the text. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
3. Analyze the way that Wilder introduces the reader to Brother Juniper. What are the first details the reader learns about Brother Juniper? Why is the collapse of the bridge especially shocking to him? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5
4. What theological question does the collapse of the bridge raise for Brother Juniper? What does he hypothesize that the answer to his question will be? How does he intend to prove his hypothesis? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
5. Why is the fact that the bridge collapse seems to be an Act of God important to Brother Juniper?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2
6. What does the narrator’s note that Brother Juniper’s research was “publicly burned on a beautiful Spring morning” suggest about the results of his attempt to “justify the ways of God to man”(8)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6**
7. Examine the mood and tone of this section of the book. What do you notice about the narrative voice? Who do you think the narrator is? Support your analysis with specific textual details. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**

PART TWO: THE MARQUESA DE MONTEMAYOR

1. Why is the Marquesa de Montemayor famous? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
2. Summarize the Marquesa’s early life. How would you describe her relationships with her parents and her husband?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1
3. Wilder describes the Marquesa’s love for her daughter as “idolatrous”(14). What does this term suggest about their relationship? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
4. How did Doña Clara’s marriage affect her mother? Cite specific textual details in your response.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1
5. What role did letter-writing play in Doña Maria’s life? What emotions did it allow her to express? How did Doña Clara respond to her mother’s correspondence? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
6. How did the knowledge that she would never be loved in return affect the Marquesa? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
7. The narrator introduces a series of excerpts from the correspondence between Doña Maria and her daughter by noting that they contain “a series of inconspicuous events that had a great deal to tell about the inner life of the Marquesa”(18). What do you think the excerpts on the following pages reveal about her inner life? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**

8. Describe the humiliation that the Marquesa suffered at the theater. What do you think motivated Camila (Perichole) to insult the Marquesa? Why was the Marquesa oblivious to the insults (what was she thinking about instead)? Who suggested that she leave the theater? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
9. Summarize the three reasons that the Viceroy had for demanding that Camila apologize to the Marquesa. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
10. How does the Marquesa respond to Camila's apology? What story does she tell about her daughter? Why does her response fill Camila with shame and consternation? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
11. Describe the vision and mission of the Abbess Madre María del Pilar. What role did she envision Pepita playing in her mission? Why did she offer the girl to the Marquesa as a companion? Cite specific textual evidence in your response. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
12. How does the Marquesa respond to the news that her daughter is expecting a child? Describe her attempts to ensure the safe delivery of her daughter and grandchild. Why do you think she goes to such extreme measures? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
13. Summarize Pepita's letter to the Abbess. Why do you think this letter impacts the Marquesa so profoundly? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
14. What do you think Pepita means when she says that she is not going to send the letter because it "wasn't brave" (37)? What does Pepita's remark help the Marquesa realize? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6**
15. Read First Corinthians 13 in the New Testament. Based on this description of love, what revelations do you think the Marquesa's final letter to her daughter "known to Encyclopedists as her Second Corinthians" (38) contained? How would these revelations relate to Pepita's letter and remarks about bravery? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
16. What do you think the Marquesa means when she says, "Let me live now. Let me begin again" (38)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**

PART THREE: ESTEBAN

1. How are Esteban and Manuel connected to the Convent of Santa María Rosa? Contrast the Abbess Madre María del Pilar's relationship with the twins with her relationship with Pepina. Use specific textual evidence to support your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
2. Wilder writes, "Because they had no family, because they were twins, and because they were brought up by women, they were silent" (42). Explain why each of these circumstances could contribute to the boys' silence. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6**
3. Identify and analyze Wilder's use of figurative language to describe the twins' reaction to being interrogated about their secret language. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1.4**
4. Wilder describes the relationship between the twins on page 43 in a passage that begins with the line, "so *love* is inadequate to describe the tacit almost ashamed oneness of these brothers." Why do you think Wilder says that the word *love* is inadequate to describe their relationship? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
5. What comes between the unity of Esteban and Miguel? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**

6. On page 45, Wilder contrasts the feelings that Manuel has for Camila Perichole with the feelings he had for other women. In your own words, summarize the difference in Manuel's feelings. Why do you think Wilder points out that Manuel has not read romantic literature? What is he suggesting about love? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6
7. What task does Camila hire Manuel to perform for her? Based on the content of the letters, what can you infer about Camila's reason for keeping them a secret? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
8. How does Esteban find out about his brother's feelings for Camila? How does he react when he finds out? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
9. How does the realization that Esteban feels excluded and miserable affect Manuel? What does he do in response to his brother's pain? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
10. What causes Esteban to question whether or not Miguel resents him? Do you believe Miguel when he tells Esteban that he does not have feelings for Camila anymore? Explain your answer citing specific textual evidence as support. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
11. Why does the Abbess visit Esteban? Why do you think he tells her his name is Manuel? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
12. What do you think Wilder is implying about the Abbess when he writes "Another woman would have said: 'Do you remember how much I did for you?'" (57). What is significant about the fact that she asked Esteban to remember what he did for her? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**
13. Why do you think the separation of the twins had such a profound effect on the entire town? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
14. What idea does the Abbess have while she is praying for the wisdom and grace to help Esteban? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
15. Examine the way that Wilder introduces the character of Captain Alvarado. (58) How does he reveal that the Captain has been heartbroken by the loss of his daughter? Why is this an effective structural and narrative choice? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**
16. Cite the specific textual evidence that reveals that Esteban is suicidal. Why does he agree to go with Captain Alvarado? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
17. What does Captain Alvarado say to comfort Esteban? (64) Do you find his words reassuring? Explain your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**

PART FOUR: UNCLE PIO

1. Wilder opens this section with excerpts from the Marquesa de Montemayor's letters that use figurative language to compare Uncle Pio to both an ant and "a soiled pack of cards" (68). What do each of these similes suggest about Uncle Pio's character and personality? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
2. Describe Uncle Pio's past. What attributes contributed to his success? Why didn't he ever settle on one career? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
3. What three aims did Uncle Pio eventually decide to pursue? How did these three aims lead him to Camila? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
4. Summarize Uncle Pio's relationships with women. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**

5. Wilder notes that when Uncle Pio meets Camila “the determination entered his mind to play Pygmalion”(73). Research the Greek myth of Pygmalion and explain this allusion. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6**
6. Explain the complex relationship between Uncle Pio and Camila Perichole. What does it mean to say, “they loved one another deeply but without passion”(74). **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
7. Why does Uncle Pio withhold praise from Camila? Analyze the conversation between Camila and Uncle Pio on pages 75-6. How does Wilder use dialogue to reveal nuances of their relationship? How does Uncle Pio’s criticism affect Camila? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6**
8. Explain what the following line reveals about Don Andrés de Ribera, the Viceroy of Peru: “He was a widower and childless of an enormous and wealthy woman; he had collected coins a little, wines, actresses, order, and maps”(79). **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6**
9. How did Don Andrés contribute to Camila’s education? How did this impact her performances? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
10. Analyze the character of the Archbishop. What does he value? What does he believe in? What has stopped him from acting on injustice? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
11. How does Uncle Pio divide the world (83)? According to him, what is the difference between the two groups? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
12. Examine Uncle Pio’s definition of love. Do you agree or disagree with him? Why does he believe that Camila has never experienced love? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
13. What do you think motivates Camila’s desire to “be a lady” (84)? What steps does she take to achieve this desired social status? Is she successful? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
14. Who is Don Jaime? What characteristics does he inherit from each of his parents? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
15. What does Uncle Pio want Camila to do? What does he ask forgiveness for doing to her? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
16. What specific descriptive details suggest that Camila is moved by Uncle Pio’s visit and offer? How does she respond to his expression of love? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
17. What do you think Camila is asking forgiveness for when she asks Uncle Pio to forgive her? (89) **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
18. Analyze the paragraph that begins with the phrase, “She stood still a moment, searching for something deeply felt to say to him...”(89). Examine Wilder’s use of indirect characterization in this passage. What can you infer about Camila’s feelings towards Uncle Pio? What does Uncle Pio’s response suggest about the resolution of his visit? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**
19. How does contracting smallpox impact Camila physically, emotionally, and spiritually? Use specific details from the text to support your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
20. Why do you think Camila agrees to let Uncle Pio take her son for a year? What does her decision suggest about the way she loves her son? Explain your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**

PART FIVE: PERHAPS AN INTENTION

1. Explain the meaning of the saying, “unless the bridge falls.” How does this relate to the idea of being “under the sword of Damocles”(97)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
2. What was it about the master at the University of San Martín that impacted Brother Juniper’s worldview? What spiritual truth did Brother Juniper want to scientifically prove? Cite specific evidence from the text to support your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
3. What was the result of Brother Juniper’s first attempt to prove that there was a reason for the tragedy? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
4. Explain what Wilder means when he writes: “He [Brother Juniper] tore up his findings and cast them into the waves; he gazed for an hour upon the great clouds of pearl that hang forever upon the horizon of the sea, and extracted from their beauty a resignation that he did not permit his reason to examine”(99). **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4
5. What does it mean to say that the master of San Martín “resolved to expose this conspiracy of stone-cutters” (99)? What was he hoping to prove? What method did he use to test his hypothesis? What was the result of his inquiry? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
6. How was Brother Juniper’s method for proving God’s intention similar to the method that his master at the University of San Martín used? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
7. What causes Wilder to observe that, “The art of biography is more difficult than is generally supposed”(100). **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6**
8. Read Wilder’s summary of Brother Juniper’s conclusions about divine intention in the bridge collapse. In your own words, paraphrase his findings. Do you agree with him? Explain your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
9. What happens to Brother Juniper as a result of his publication of the book about the bridge collapse? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
10. Contrast the difference between the way that Don Andrés and Captain Alvarado mourn. Why do you think Captain Alvarado says, “Happy are the drowned”(102)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
11. Explain what Wilder means when he says that the night before the Abbess “had torn an idol from her heart”(102)? What was this idol? What fact does the Abbess come to accept? What does the Abbess realize about the way she should be living her life? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
12. What is Camila convinced about after the bridge collapse? Why does she believe that the tragedies in her life suggest that she is being “spoken to”? What message does she think they are sending her? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
13. Why does Camila decide to go to visit the Abbess? How does the Abbess respond to her? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
14. Why does Doña Clara come to visit the Abbess? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
15. Explain the Abbess’ response to the Marquesa de Montemayor’s last letter: “Now learn...learn at last that anywhere you may expect grace”(106). **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
16. Why do you think the Abbess gives Doña Clara a tour of the convent? What do you think she is hoping will happen? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
17. How has the Abbess’s approach to her work changed? Give specific textual evidence to support your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**

18. What does Wilder reveal about what has happened to Camila? What does this suggest about how she has changed as a result of losing her son? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
19. In your own words, paraphrase the last lines of the book. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**

AFTERWARD

1. Summarize some of the modern tragedies that have inspired essayists to reflect on Wilder's novel. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
2. Why did Wilder refuse to allow *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* to be adapted for the stage? What adaptations did he allow? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
3. What evidence suggests that Wilder was influenced by Spain's imperial history when he wrote *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
4. How could the fact that Wilder was "a surviving twin" have influenced this novel? (120) **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
5. On pages 120-123, Tappan Wilder recounts Wilder's experience writing *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and the immediate public response to the novel. What details of his account do you find particularly interesting or significant? Explain why these details stand out to you. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
6. Compare the early version of the novel's opening paragraph with the final version (pages 124-6). How do the changes that Wilder made during revision impact the tone of the novel? Support your answer with specific evidence from the text. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**
7. Examine the 1954 letter that Wilder wrote to John Glendening about the theme of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (found on pages 131-2). Why does Wilder say the book is important? How does he relate the theme of the novel to current world events? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**

Writing and Research Prompts

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2.9

EXPLANATORY/INFORMATIONAL PROMPTS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 (a-f) Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

1. In the foreword to the novel Russell Banks states, "*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* can be read as a writer's manual of style." (xvi) Create a style manual that uses Wilder's novel as your mentor text. Include passages from the novel and a thorough analysis of their grammatical structure. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.1a-b CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.3**
2. Analyze the way that the theme of love is developed in the novel. Examine the different types of love (agápe, éros, philía, and storgē) that are explored in each section of the book. Which character is associated with each type of love? How are their lives impacted as a result? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
3. On page 70, Wilder lists the six attributes of the adventurer. Create a multimedia advertisement for an adventurer, using these six attributes as your primary qualifications for the position. In your advertisement, explain why each of the attributes is important and provide examples of people (or fictional characters) that exemplify each attribute. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.6 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
4. Consider the archbishop's favorite notions that are discussed on page 81. Explain how each of these notions can be seen in current political discourse. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5**
5. Wilder's novel features several strong female characters (Camila, Abbess Madre María del Pilar, the Marquesa de Montemayor). Analyze the novel from a feminist perspective. What do each of these characters reveal about the role of women? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5**
6. Camila refutes Uncle Pio's declaration of perfect love by observing, "There is no such thing as that kind of love and that kind of island. It's in the theater you find such things" (89). Compose an analytical essay that examines the way that love is portrayed in film or the theater. How does this view of love contrast with the view of love in Wilder's novel? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
7. Analyze the novel as a moral fable. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, especially the novel's final lines are often referenced or quoted in eulogies, sermons, and reflective responses to tragedies. "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning. (107)" Why is this particular novel used to comfort people who are grieving? Use specific textual evidence to support your analysis. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
8. Watch one of the film adaptations of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1944, 2005) and compose a thoughtful analysis of the film, noting the changes that the filmmakers made to Wilder's text and examining the impact these changes had on the development of the plot, theme, and/or characters. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5**
9. Consider "Thornton's Religion (A form letter for all inquirer's and pigeonholers)" by Thornton Wilder's older brother Amos Niven Wilder (142-3). Why was A.N.W. compelled to compose this letter? What theological questions do you think *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* raises? In what specific ways does this letter clarify or complicate your understanding of the novel? Use specific textual examples to support your analysis. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
10. Analyze the structure of the novel, noting the way that Wilder orders events and introduces characters. Pay particular attention to how his choices impact the tone of the novel. In a letter to Professor Fraz H. Link, Wilder explains the influence

of classical literature on his novel: "Hence the 'removed' tone, the classical, the faintly ironic distance from the impassioned actions is the expression – even a borrowing—from the Latin thought world. Thence comes also the occasional resort to aphorism"(118). Find evidence of this influence from "the Latin thought world" in Wilder's text. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.3**

Note to Teachers: The following informational prompts require significant additional research and/or reading.

11. In the foreword to the novel, Russell Banks asserts that, "Wilder's sentences are elegant, but never self-admiring, exquisitely balanced, yet not overformal, and complex, without being elaborate. They are closer in construction and diction to Hawthorne's sentences than to those of Wilder's famous contemporaries, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Don Passos." (xv) Compose a thoughtful analysis of Wilder's style, comparing his style with one of the authors who Banks mentions. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9a**
12. Russell Banks notes that *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is written with "an aphoristic style, resembling that of wisdom-literature" (xv). Research the characteristics of wisdom-literature and prepare a multimedia presentation giving an overview of the genre. Include an explanation of the characteristics of wisdom-literature, examples from classic and more contemporary works, and an explanation of why Wilder's novel could be categorized in this genre. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
13. In his novel, Wilder observes: "Peru had passed within fifty years from a frontier state to a state in renaissance. Its interest in music and the theater was intense."(68-9) Research Peruvian art and culture. How does it borrow from Spanish traditions? In what ways is it unique? As a class, organize a celebration of Peruvian culture, using Wilder's text as inspiration. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a-d**
14. Tappan Wilder explains the editorial purpose of the Afterword in his editor's note: "We hope that this Afterword fulfills a useful mission: to open helpful, even arresting windows on the birth, reception, history, and future of a literary classic"(109). Choose one of these aspects of the novel and complete additional research on the birth, reception, history, and future of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Create an informational video about your discoveries. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.6**
15. Wilder drew on a rich understanding of world literature and history when he wrote his novel. As a part of the education of the orphans Manuel and Esteban, the Abbess tells the boys "stories about the Cid and Judas Maccabeus and the thirty-six misfortunes of Harlequin"(41). Research one of these stories and create an informational presentation summarizing the story and explaining why the Abbess would have thought it was important to share with the twins. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5**
16. Critics have noted the influence of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in several other works, including John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, David Russell's *Cloud Atlas*, and Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Analyze Wilder's influence on one of these works. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9a**
17. In 2009, two works by Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *Our Town*, were chosen to be read together as a part of the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read program. The NEA explained this selection by writing: "Only after contemplating these timeless stories side by side do we begin to discover the signature they share: an appreciation for life's preciousness in the shadow of eternity." Read *Our Town* and compare Wilder's play to *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. The NEA's [Big Read guide](#) will be a helpful resource for your exploration. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9a**
18. Read Wilder's lecture, "On Reading the Great Letter Writers" on pages 133-138. What does this lecture reveal about the influence of letters, and specifically the letters of Mme. de Sévigné on *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*? Research the life and writing of Madame de Sévigné and create an informative presentation highlighting key details of her biography and analyzing the content of some of her most significant letters. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4**

ARGUMENTATION PROMPTS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 (a-e) Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

1. In the foreword to the novel, Russell Banks explains that Thornton Wilder described the central question raised by *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in this way: “Is there a direction and meaning in lives beyond the individual’s own will? (xi)” How do you think the novel answers this question? Support your answer with carefully chosen support from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2
2. Wilder writes: “Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan”(7). Do you believe that our lives are controlled by fate? Debate this question as a class, using *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and other works of literature you have read to support your position. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a-d**
3. In his discussion of the Marquesa de Montemayor’s internal struggle with faith, Wilder writes: “But soon a belief in the great Perhaps would surge up from the depths of her nature and she would fairly run home to renew the candles above her daughter’s bed”(32). (This idea of the “great Perhaps” is also a central motif in John Green’s popular YA novel *Looking For Alaska*.) Compose an essay exploring your own questions about, experience with, and/or feelings regarding the concept of a “great Perhaps.” Do you, like the Marquesa, believe in a great Perhaps? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5**
4. Is it ever possible for two people to love each other equally? In the section of the novel about Manuel and Esteban, Wilder writes: “Now he discovered that secret from which one never quite recovers, that even in the most perfect love one person loves less profoundly than the other”(45). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Compose a persuasive essay in support of your position. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5**
5. Uncle Pio believes that love is pain, but that this pain is a necessary rite of passage: “He regarded love as a sort of cruel malady through which the elect are required to pass in their late youth and from which they emerge, pale and wrung, but ready for the business of living”(83). Do you agree or disagree with his position? Discuss this question in a Socratic seminar.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a-d
6. Scientists, theologians, artists, and philosophers have examined questions about the existence of a divine being and the role that a creator might play in the universe. Wilder examines this question in his novel when he observes, “Some say that we shall never know and that to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God”(9). What role, if any, do you believe God plays in the daily lives of individuals? Compose a persuasive speech that explains and makes a convincing and well-supported argument in favor of your position. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4**
7. When Camila contracts a disfiguring disease, the public response is one of *schadenfreude* rather than empathy. “Several hundred other persons had the small-pox also, but popular interest and malignity were concentrated upon the actress. A wild hope ran about the town that the beauty would be impaired that had enabled her to despise the class from which she sprang”(89). Why do you think people enjoy watching the downfall of the rich and famous? Compose an argumentation essay examining this question. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
8. Uncle Pio approaches his relationship with his protégé Camila as one that requires “tough love.” He considers criticism necessary for her development as an artist. (75) Do you think he is right to coach her in this way? Compose an argumentation essay about the role that criticism plays in development. Is criticism ultimately a good or bad thing?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9
9. Out of all of the types of love that Wilder explores in his novel, he reserves the sharpest criticism for sexual, or passionate love. He writes: “Such love [love as passion], though it expends itself in generosity and thoughtfulness, though it gives birth to

visions and great poetry, remains among the sharpest expressions of self-interest”(90). Do you agree or disagree with Wilder’s perspective? Debate this question as a class. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a-d**

10. “As of this writing in 2014, the jury remains out on whether *The Bridge* will someday find its way from page to stage or screen in a celebrated adaptation”(118). Do you think that it is possible to adapt Wilder’s novel for the stage or screen? What unique challenges would a theatrical or cinematic adaptation face? Could they be overcome? As an extension of this prompt, work with a group to adapt a short scene from the novel into a 3-7 minute-long video. As a class, evaluate the effectiveness of each adaptation. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a-d CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5**
11. Jonathan Yardley wrote in *Washington Post*: “There is nothing to kill off a book like being force-fed it, especially if the book is a complex moral fable that poses questions rather far advanced and complex for the teenaged mind”(115). Do you agree that the novel is “too advanced and complex” for a teenaged mind? Compose a letter to the editor challenging or agreeing with Yardley’s assertion. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
12. Wilder states that the church criticized Brother Juniper’s examination of the bridge collapse: “The book being done fell under the eyes of some judges and was suddenly pronounced heretical. It was ordered to be burned in the square with its author”(101). Examine the novel in light of this quote. What elements of the book could be viewed as heretical? Stage a mock trial for this book, with one side accusing the book of heresy and the other defending the text.
**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a-d CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.6**

NARRATIVE PROMPTS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 (a-e) Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

1. One of the types of love that Wilder examines in his novel is brotherly love. In the section of the novel that focuses on the relationship between Manuel and Esteban he writes: “All the world was remote and strange and hostile except one’s brother”(44). Compose a personal essay that considers this quote in the context of your own relationship with a sibling. How has your relationship impacted your life? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
2. Wilder examines the impact that the introduction of romantic love has on the relationship between twins Manuel and Esteban and observes, “But at last the first shadow fell across this unity and that shadow was the love of women”(44). Think about a time that a romantic relationship came between you and a friend and compose a narrative essay that recounts how your relationship was changed. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
3. Wilder writes: “We come from a world where we have known incredible standards of excellence, and we dimly remember beauties which we have not seized again; and we go back to that world” (76). Think about a time when you were moved or touched by something beautiful and compose a narrative essay describing your experience. (Note to teachers: If your students are familiar with visual essays, this is an excellent visual essay topic) **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
4. Brother Juniper desperately wants to find a logical, scientific explanation that supports his belief system, but this quest proves more difficult than he imagined. “The discrepancy between faith and the facts is greater than is generally assumed”(99). Consider a time when you believed in something even though you did not have facts to support your belief and compose a personal narrative describing your experience. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
5. Wilder observes, “There are some poems about the accident, classics to be found in every Peruvian anthology, but the real literary monument is Brother Juniper’s book” (97). Since the bridge collapse in Wilder’s novel is fictional, and there are no

actual poems about it. Create your own commemorative poem about the bridge collapse, using details from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**

6. On page 86, Wilder includes a vivid and evocative descriptive paragraph describing the setting: “The French gardens were at the southern end of the town. Behind them rose the higher Andes and before them there was a parapet overlooking a deep valley and overlooking wave after wave of hills that stretched toward the Pacific. It was the hour when bats fly low and the smaller animals play recklessly underfoot...”(86) Using Wilder’s passage as a model, compose your own detailed narrative describing a place that you have visited. Use specific details and figurative language to add depth to your description. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
7. Consider this quote: “Surely you must have tried books that you weren’t ready to read, in those years before you lived a life and could bring that life back to the book”(114). Have you ever been assigned a book that you just didn’t “get”? Why do you think you were unable to appreciate the text? Compose a piece of reflective writing about your experience with the text. How do you think life experiences might change your understanding of the book? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
8. In Thornton Wilder’s lecture “On Reading the Great Letter Writers,” he writes, “Art is a confession; art is the secret told. Art itself is a letter written to an ideal mind, to a dreamed-of audience”(134). Consider yourself as the audience for Thornton Wilder’s work and write a letter to him telling him about yourself and including a thoughtful reflection about how reading the novel impacted you. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**

Links of Interest

[The Thornton Wilder Family Official Website](#)

[The Thornton Wilder Society](#). Academic site devoted to Thornton Wilder

[NEA: The Big Read](#). Teaching materials for *Our Town* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

[The Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale University](#)

Books of Interest

[The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder](#) edited by Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer

[Thornton Wilder: A Life](#) by Penelope Niven

[Thornton Wilder and the Puritan Narrative Tradition](#) by Lincoln Konkle

Works by Thornton Wilder

NOVELS

[*The Bridge of San Luis Rey*](#)

Foreword by Russell Banks

[*The Cabala and The Woman of Andros: Two Novels*](#)

Foreword by Penelope Niven

[*The Eighth Day*](#)

Foreword by John Updike

[*Heaven's My Destination*](#)

Foreword by J. D. McClatchy

[*The Ides of March*](#)

Foreword by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

[*Theophilus North*](#)

Foreword by Christopher Buckley

PLAYS

[*Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*](#)

Foreword by Donald Margulies

[*The Skin of Our Teeth*](#)

Foreword by Paula Vogel

[*Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker*](#)

Foreword by John Guare

About This Guide's Author

Amy Jurskis is the author of numerous teaching guides, including *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot and *American Tapestry* by Rachel Swarns. She holds a B.A. in English from the University of Georgia and a MAT from Agnes Scott College. A former department chair for language arts in a title one public school in Atlanta, she currently serves as a chairperson of curriculum and English teacher at Oxbridge Academy of the Palm Beaches.