

MINUTES  
of the Meeting of  
the Novel Club of Cleveland  
January 2, 2018

On this frigid evening of the polar vortex, our hosts, Leon Gabinet and Jane Hammond, received us in welcoming warmth, for which we were thankful.

We welcomed guests of the Stupays, Rob and Victoria Ware, and of Linda Sandhaus, Trish and Kent Smith, reviewed the status of the Novel Club dues, and heard Louise Mooney's report that the Program Committee plans a meeting in January. No theme has been or will be chosen.

Our exploration of Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* was then undertaken.

David Novak gave the Club a rich history of Wilder's literary achievements and diverse endeavors, sketching in his somewhat somber childhood and accomplished family, and the branching personal, social, and cultural paths of his adult life.

Peter Haas introduced the argument of a theodicy, in part, to orient us to the task that Brother Juniper set himself in his investigation of the bridge collapse. This helped Haas to propose a possible socio-historical synthesis of the novel through a cast of Latin American colonial characters typical of the historical period. Haas seemed interested in locating among the conflicted human dramas that terminated in Wilder's imagined bridge failure an encompassing narrative to frame and somehow justify or explain the stories of each of the novel's characters.

Discussion of Wilder's intentions and the book's ultimate meaning (meanings) commenced. It was debated whether the Abbess' "Love" was sufficient as a key to understanding the tragedy of the bridge collapse, with some seeing it as true, some reading it as a failure of human capacity to love, and some finding in the concept a posed question, rather than a posited answer. Some readers expressed an inability to connect with the psychological particularities of the characters, while others understood them as fulfilling symbolic functions within the narrative, rather than as embodying emotional verities.

Most found the book's central moral question compelling. Did Wilder mean to judge his characters for their blameworthy lives or to select some of them for the salvation due those whose lives could be considered praiseworthy? Brother Juniper's quest to justify the loss of life in the bridge collapse raises parallel question sets: was he questioning God's moral lesson, or was he finally questioning (and subtly challenging) God's act of taking the five lives? Was

Juniper's execution a judgement in alignment with God's justice or a disjointed travesty? Or were the lost lives somehow God's gift to the living, a demonstration of deistic power or, at least, the final enduring question illuminated in their lives' disrupted narratives?

Our discussion was concluded with a brief note on the original meaning of the mystery, as the Greeks used the word, and a delightful testimonial about the Hotel Algonquin, Wilder, an elevator, and a young woman, in the days long before and notably different from these.

Respectfully submitted,  
Joyce Kessler