

By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept Study Guide

**By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept by Paulo
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Plot Summary

By *The River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* is a story about a woman named Pilar and her journey to find herself. She is reunited with a childhood friend that has spent the last ten years traveling around the world, learning about different cultures, religions, and the representation of the feminine side of God in those different cultures. He tries to teach Pilar about what he has learned, and their time together is a manifestation of his attempt to get her to open her mind up to different possibilities. Pilar was raised to be a cautious Catholic, taught that she should not question authority, and needs to grow up to fit the perfect Spanish Catholic mold. She has many struggles throughout her life and has been hurt by people in the past. She has failed the societal rules and struggles to suppress her happiness to cut here and there in order to fit into the societal mold. Throughout the book, she eases up, then turns back in fear of the unknown and the uncomfortable, even though it is more uncomfortable to live in her current skin, than take a chance to find true happiness. When she finally eases up and opens her mind and her heart to God and the Virgin, or the feminine side of God, she is a transformed woman and is finally able to love and live the way she hopes to. The only problem is that her old friend, who has professed his love to her, and that she also loves, is still in seminary, and is a direct disciple of the Virgin. He must give up his direct communication with the Virgin, a virtuous gift that many people wished they had, in order to get another chance at being with Pilar. Pilar does not want him to give up this gift, but she wants to be with him. They find a way to be together, the best way they can figure out and the rest of the book explains just how important it is to believe in love and the virtue of the masculine and feminine side of God. Belief in the Immaculate Conception is the cornerstone to happiness. It is not enough to simply follow societal and religious rules, a person has to believe in them and want to be those things, or else they will never know spiritual happiness. Pilar's friend and a priest that has counseled her friend, help her discover who she is, and accept what she wants and how to get it.



Characters

Pilar

Pilar is the main character of the book. At first, she is a very closed-off person, who is obsessed with planning and trying to find love. She wants to marry a good man, have children, live in a nice house and have a good, stable life. She was born and raised in a small conservative town in Spain called Soria. She is a timid person, scared to branch out and learn new things because she fears change and rejection. She has strayed from the conservative Catholic life a few times by sleeping with other men before marriage, and has been hurt by them all. Because of this, she feels as though she is doomed in love, and thinks all relationships will end up the same. This adds to her fear of change. When she revisits with her friend from childhood, she learns to let herself go and trust in people and the power of love again. It takes her a while to admit she loves him again, and even more to accept his new philosophies on life, including the feminine side of God.

Once Pilar accepts the feminine side of God, she learns how to dispel the negativity that has hampered her spiritual growth for so long. She can accept that life is unpredictable and that love is the cornerstone of life. She had spent almost the entire time with her friend denying the idea that he loved her because she was scared of what would happen. She didn't want to lose control of herself, and knew that once she opened the floodgates of her heart, all her emotions would spill out in an uncontrollable rush. When she gives in to her desire to love freely and live happily, she is relieved and willing to go through social humiliation to be with her man. Believing in the feminine side of God is a very radical idea, but she is willing to be different because it equates to her happiness. She has never been happy before because she was a square peg being jammed into a cylindrical hole. Pilar simply did not fit into the perfect mold to which society expected her to adhere, and for years she did not know why. Once she found her friend again, she wanted to devote herself to him, her lost love, and help him be the person that God wants him to be. She wants to give up everything just to be with him. Towards the end of the book, Pilar is no longer afraid to seek out what makes her happy.

Pilar's Friend

Though the reader never learns his real name, Pilar's friend is a man with whom she grew up. They were children together in Soria, and he was in love with her from the time they were young. He told himself that he would tell her he loved her; when he went to seek a pendant she had lost, he mustered up the courage to tell her, only to lose that courage when he saw her again. He never gave her the pendant back, and vowed he would return it only when he could find the courage to tell her how he felt. He leaves Soria to travel the world and secretly enters seminary. He often writes to Pilar about his travels but never tells her he is a seminarian.



When he gives a lecture in Madrid, he invites Pilar to meet him. He has experienced many things and is ready to tell Pilar that he is and has always been in love with her. She thinks he is mad when he reveals his emotions, and thus his quest to convince her that he does is on. During his travels, he has learned much. He learned how to gather negativity and rid himself of it. Negativity is another person that lives inside of one's body, preaching bad thoughts, and convincing a person s/he is not capable of doing anything that will make the person happy if it goes against social and religious rules. He is also a believer of the feminine side of God and reveals to Pilar that he has the gift to converse with the Virgin. He has a great spiritual gift, but he is willing to give it all up so he can be with his one true love, Pilar.

Throughout the book, the reader sees he is a very strong person. He is very patient, confident, refined, and down to earth. He preaches to people about the feminine side of God and teaches Pilar to open up to her own desires, and allow herself to be enlightened by the Virgin so she can start living her life the way she wants. He is confident in himself and his beliefs. He knows that he has the strength to teach people about the feminine side of God, though he would rather do so as a normal person with Pilar by his side, than as a disciple the way the Virgin wanted.

Monastery Superior

This man was one of Pilar's friend's closest mentors at the seminary. He knew about Pilar's friend's gift of being able to converse with the Virgin and knew how important it was for the world to have someone like him to realize his gift. At the same time, he knew how much Pilar and her friend loved each other so advises Pilar's friend to leave the seminary and be with her. He does this so that Pilar's friend won't lose out on true love; even though he has found love in the seminary, it is not the same. He encourages Pilar to get her friend out of the seminary and into secular life, where he can still serve the goddess and have a marriage at the same time. The Superior tells them he is simply looking out for their best interest, and they will be happier together, than apart. The priest is a wise and caring man, and though he seems as though he is doing the church a disfavor, he is actually giving two people a chance at love. The superior could also perform miracles, and had the gift of reading people's minds.

Brida

Brida is a woman that Pilar meets in Madrid. She attended the meeting that Pilar's friend held. Once Brida sees that Pilar knows the man that gave the lecture Brida heard, she immediately goes to her. At first Pilar thinks Brida is odd. She openly prays to a statue, ignoring the people around her that point and laugh. She is very spiritual and understands and accepts the idea of the feminine side of God. She is a devout Virgin follower. Towards the end of the book, the reader realizes that Brida is not strange, but, rather, confident and unafraid of professing to the world about her beliefs. She tries to get Pilar to feel what she (Brida) does, assuming that Pilar was at the meeting because



she, too, was already a follower of the Virgin. Brida simply wants to share and spread her happiness.

Bernadette

Bernadette was a young girl that lived in France, near Saint-Savin. She came from a poor family and worked as a hay bailer to help out with the finances. She worked near a grotto in her town and one day is faced with having to cross a cold stream on a winter day. Because she was an asthmatic, she was scared to do so. At this time, the Virgin appeared and spoke to her. Eventually the Virgin tells her to dig inside the grotto, where Bernadette uncovers a holy spring that can miraculously cures people. The Virgin tells Bernadette that she (the one talking to Bernadette) is the Immaculate Conception. Nobody believes the shy girl, and she eventually joins a convent, where she spends the rest of her life devoted to God. She had no idea what she really uncovered and dies before realizing her huge impact to the small town, about the idea that God has a feminine side.

Virgin

The Virgin, while not a character that is ever physically in the narrative, is the representation of the Immaculate Conception and the feminine face of God.

Woman in the house

This is the woman that rents a room to Pilar and her friend. She bestows wisdom on Pilar, and gives her the courage to go to the house about which her friend had talked.

Nun that saves Pilar

This is the nun that saves Pilar when she finds her lying on the ground outside, after leaving her friend behind. The nun gives Pilar the courage to write down all her feelings and to toss them in the river to get rid of her pain. She also tells her that love is like a soul; it never dies.

Charismatics

People that accept the fire of the Holy Spirit. They are Christians, many of whom are able to perform miracles because of their faith.



Maria de Jesus Yepes

She was a Carmelite woman from Granada that walked barefoot to Rome from her convent. The pilgrimage lasted two years, and the entire time she slept outdoors, living on the charity of other people. She is an example of what happens when people are called to do something that is spiritually great.



Objects/Places

Soria

This is the town that Pilar and her friend are from. It is a small conservative town in Spain.

Zaragoza

Zaragoza is where Pilar attends school. She has a whole life there that she is willing to give up to find true love.

Piedra River

It is believed that the river can rid a person of pain and suffering. Anything that is thrown into the river is cleansed and eaten up, never to return. At the beginning, a nun advises Pilar to write down all her feelings and throw the pages into the river to cleanse her soul.

Madrid

The city where Pilar is reunited with her friend. Here she is introduced to the idea of the feminine side of God.

Plaza de Cibeles

A fountain in Spain, of a woman in a carriage being drawn by lions. It is a representation of feminine spirituality and strength.

Saint-Sevin

A small town in France where Pilar and her friend stay. It is the town where Pilar's friend has lived for a few years, studying in the monastery and where the miracle of the holy spring was found by Bernadette.

Monastery

When Pilar's friend decides to go into a monastery, he finds one in Saint-Sevin, France. Here he studies theology and is introduced to the feminine side of God, not through classes and teaching, but through meditation and speaking directly to her.



Religious Pendant

A pendant with the Immaculate Conception on one side, and the heart of God on the other. It belonged to Pilar when she was young. She loses it during a religious festival and sends her friend to retrieve it. He finds it, but doesn't give it back until he finds the courage to tell Pilar he loves her.

Bilbao

The first city that Pilar and her friend travel to where he reveals he is in love with her.

Lourdes

A small town with a yearly pilgrimage that passes through. It is filled with shops, hotels, and bars that all open during the pilgrimage, but are closed in the off season.

Themes

The Other

One of the main themes in the book is that of letting go of "the Other," which is a negative voice in a person's head that makes them question their desires and ambitions and compare them to what society considers acceptable. Pilar is a deeply-conflicted person and is constantly being controlled by the Other. Her friend gives her an exercise to do in order to rid herself of the societal and religious hampers and burdens that control her life. The exercise teaches her to be aware of when the Other is trying to control her by questioning every action that she makes and comparing it to the action that the person she wants to be would have made. For example, if the person she wants to be would jump in a puddle, but the person she has been for a while tells her not to because she will be made fun of for having dirty shoes, and the costs of jumping in the puddle outweigh the benefits of the fun she will have, then she knows that she is still under control of the Other. The interesting thing about the Other is that this being, or feeling is something that has been implanted into the minds of many people through religion or cultural teachings. People are taught not to question their faith, to obey priests, and to live their lives according to a set of rules that someone else has established. They are taught that if they follow all these rules, they will be happier, more spiritual people. However, when a person detaches him or herself from the Other, they are able to see more clearly, more freely, and can actually find their spiritual destiny more quickly than if they followed societal rules. When Pilar freed herself from the Other, she was able to connect directly with the Virgin and saw how beautiful life and love could be. Because the Catholic church does not believe that the Virgin is more than just the carrier for Christ, i.e., the Immaculate Conception, Pilar never opened herself up to the possibility of the Virgin being more.

Breaking the Glass

In the pages where Pilar asks her friend to knock a wine glass off the table, she is trying to get her friend to make the symbolic gesture to show that he is ready to change his life and be with her. Though a glass is inexpensive, it has enormous symbolic value. People are taught as children to be careful with glass, not intentionally breaking it. The glass is representative of the Catholic church, of the priests, and every other body of authority that controls masses. Parents teach their children to obey, that people cannot perform miracles, and that everything should be well thought out and planned. Breaking a glass is going against everything that has been drilled in a person's head. It releases a person to experience something that they have been consistently told to beware of, to be cautious of, and avoid. People are taught that certain things are bad or taboo, and to beware those things. However, what Pilar wants to show her friend is that even though he is a revolutionary, he is still holding onto a few societal rules that burden his freedom. By breaking the glass, she knows he is really ready to be with her. This action goes hand in hand with the Other, and ridding oneself of the negative societal rules that have



been handed down from family to family. Pilar's friend was the one that was getting her to let go of her other, and in the process, she helped him rid himself completely of his Other. Breaking that small glass was the push that he needed to devote himself to her, and for her to believe she could be with him after all.

Faith

Faith is a main theme in the book. Without it, a person cannot do anything. Pilar admitted to having lost her faith in anything at an early age, which is why her life has been so wrong. She is trying to follow in the path of other people, but walking on the trodden path without faith does not lead anywhere. Pilar's friend tells her that faith the size of a grain of sand can move a mountain. But having faith, true faith, is hard to achieve. This is because a person has to be willing to be ridiculed, to be judged and not care about the social consequences. At the beginning, Pilar was scared, though she walked behind a mask of independence, pretending to know what she wanted. She admits that she lost her faith in the church and in God, yet thought she could have faith in herself. This was an absurd idea, because a person either has faith, or they don't. Eventually, Pilar realizes that the faith she had before did not exist because even though she believed she wanted an ordinary, stable life, she knew she would never get it. What she really wanted, she could never have until she had faith that she could get it. Therefore, without faith, she had nothing and she would always have nothing. Her friend had also given up on faith at one point in his life and masked it by going into seminary. He had lost his faith in loving Pilar. He originally knew that he was in love with her, but he never told her, and therefore believed that he had lost his chance. He thought he had lost her forever, until he saw a house that reminded him of that life that he once wanted. Seeing the house gave him the courage to believe in his love again, and his faith to have Pilar again was strong enough for him to turn down a magnificent spiritual gift. In the end, love is all that matters, and without faith, it can never exist.



Style

Point of View

The book is written in the first person through the point of view of Pilar. Throughout the book, the reader knows what she is feeling, thinking, and how she is blind to her own logic. She contradicts herself many times, showing the reader that she is going through a lot of turmoil and does not know how to handle herself. This is a very successful method for viewing the evolution of the character. Whenever Pilar faces a new challenge, she approaches it very cautiously at first. She teeters back and forth, showing how she is fighting her heart and her mind. Then, as the book progresses and she is getting better and suppressing her negativity, the reader can see her flourish.

Setting

The book starts in Madrid at a conference where Pilar's friend lectures about the feminine side of God. After Pilar meets up with her friend again, they agree to travel to Bilbao together, then they head further north to France to a town called Saint-Savin. After crossing the Pyrenees, the characters spend a few days learning about one another, and Pilar learns to appreciate her friend's beliefs. After the holidays are over, they go back to Spain and end up at the Piedra Monastery, where they spent time as children. There they are separated, then reunited after Pilar almost dies from the cold. The story takes place during the winter of 1993, and spans just a few days during the holiday of the Immaculate Conception.

Language and Meaning

The language is very informal and flows as if it were one continuous thought. The readers feels as though they are in Pilar's head, though at the same time hovered over her, trying to get her to stay strong through her struggles, and veer her towards the right direction and decisions. The only problem with this method is that the reader does not understand any of the other characters' feelings, and sees things through only one perspective. Also, it is hard to follow who is speaking at times because the writer fails to mention who is speaking first, leading to a few confusing passages.

Structure

The span of the book is five days, and the book is divided into five chapters and an epilogue, which detail what happened during each given day. Some of the days are extremely long, though they are broken up into sub chapters. The plot of the book is very simple—the story stays focused on Pilar and her view of the world and her own growth. The pace of the novel is very fast because it reads like one long thought. This is

an advantage because it gets to the point fairly quickly; once the reader knows what to expect, it is exciting to read on and see how Pilar will get from point A to B.



Quotes

"Life in the country many not make a woman elegant or worldly, but it still teaches her how to listen to her heart and to trust her instincts." Pg.19

"The wise are wise only because they love, And the foolish are foolish only because they think they can understand love." Pg. 28

"Love is a trap. When it appears we see only its light, not its shadows." Pg. 33

"A divided Kingdom cannot defend itself from its adversaries. A divided person cannot face life in a dignified way." Pg. 93

"Waiting is painful. Forgetting is painful. But not knowing which to do is the worse kind of suffering." Pg. 95

"Fortunate are those who take the first steps." Pg. 158

"Break the glass please, and free us from all these damned rules, from needing to find an explanation for everything, from doing only what others approve of." Pg. 148

"Follow your dreams, transform your life, take the path that leads to God. Perform your miracles. Cure. Make prophecies, Listen to your guardian angel. Transform yourself. Be a warrior, and be happy as you wage a good fight. Take risks." Pg. 132

"In order to have a spiritual life, you need not enter a seminary, or fast, or abstain, or take a vow of chastity. All you have to do is have faith and accept God. From then on each of us becomes a part of His path. We become a vehicle for His miracles." Pg.120

"A city can be moved but not a well. It's around the well that lovers find each other, satisfy their thirst, build their homes, and raise their children. But if one of them decides to leave, the well cannot go with them. Love remains there abandoned—even though it is filled with the same pure water as before." Pg. 113

"How wonderful that God may be a woman...If that's true, then it is certainly God's feminine face that taught us how to love." Pg. 103

"This gift is there for anyone who will accept it. One has only to believe, accept, and be willing to make mistakes." Pg. 83



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the Other and strategies for a person to rid oneself of it.

Why did Pilar's friend apologize to her at the end of the book? For what did he have to be sorry?

Why would Pilar be upset that her friend gave everything up to be with her?

To what societal pressures do you feel you succumb? Are they positive or negative? Can you see yourself changing anything about your life?

Is there anything you can think of that is representative of modern human evolution? What ideals do people have today that they did not have ten or twenty years ago?

Faith is a major theme in this book, and knowing how to use faith is very important. Can someone have a little faith in something, or is it really all or nothing?

Pilar is constantly negative, bitter, and upset with life and obsessed with finding love. What is the main emotion that drives all this, and how was it eradicated throughout the book?