SuperSummary™

Confessions

Saint Augustine

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Summary

Confessions, or *Confessiones* in the original Latin, is a book of spiritual reflection, philosophical commentary, and Biblical interpretation produced in the last century of the Western Roman Empire. Written around the year 400 CE by Saint Augustine of Hippo, a prominent Catholic bishop in the Roman province of Africa, the book is sometimes called the world's first autobiography. Although this claim is inaccurate, *Confessions* has nevertheless born enormous influence on personal narrative writing in the Western tradition, particularly during the Middle Ages. Augustine's primary purpose, though, was religious exploration, both internal and external, the autobiographical elements included only insofar as they served this goal. Indeed, ever since its publication, readers have found legitimate reason to doubt the accuracy of the portrait Augustine paints of himself in *Confessions*.

Although not much read upon its release, *Confessions*, buoyed by Augustine's elegant writing, candid self-examination, and religious passion, began to grow in popularity in the 12th century. Today, it ranks among the most important of all Christian texts, and the same can be said of its prominence in Roman literature.

This study guide refers to the 2002 New City Press paperback edition titled *The Confessions* and translated by Maria Boulding.

Summary

Augustine divided *Confessions* into 13 books, which would more appropriately be called chapters today. Book I begins with an extensive prayer in which Augustine contemplates God's inconceivable mystery. He then provides an overview of his infancy and boyhood, confessing the sins he inherited through his own nature and those he acquired as a result of misguided conditioning from home and school.

Book II chronicles the continued waywardness of Augustine's adolescence and the emergence of the lustful habits that will become his greatest obstacle to conversion. His pagan father, Patricius, emerges as a character opposing Augustine's salvation and his Christian mother, Monica, as one supporting it. Augustine also presents a famous episode involving pear theft, from which he articulates a theory of sin.

Book III tells of Augustine's arrival as a young man in the major African city of Carthage to continue his studies. There, his sinful ways persisted, but his discovery of Cicero's *Hortensius* made him hungry for wisdom. Unimpressed with the Bible, he converted to Manicheism, a popular religion of the day that was at odds with Christianity.

Book IV sees Augustine returned to his hometown as a teacher of rhetoric. There, he began living with an unnamed woman. Unmarried but sexually exclusive, the two had a son, Adeodatus, though this is not mentioned until later. After a friend's death, Augustine's grief was such that he fled back to Carthage, where he wrote a series of books rooted in Manichean ideas.

Book V presents Augustine's relocation from Carthage to Rome, then again from Rome to Milan, driven both times by disgust at student immorality. A disappointing meeting with a Manichean bishop, exposure to the philosophy of the Academics, and the compelling ministry of Ambrose, Catholic Bishop of Milan, resulted in his abandonment of Manicheism.

Book VI begins with Monica having followed Augustine to Milan. Thanks to her and Ambrose, Christianity slowly grew in appeal for Augustine. He did not convert yet, however, as he was still plagued by doubt and confusion. At Monica's urging, Augustine became engaged to marry. Consequently, he sent his lover back to Africa, though their son remained in Milan.

Book VII surveys the philosophical and spiritual journey that remained between Augustine and his conversion. Most significantly, he tells of his introduction to Neoplatonist teachings, which brought about an epiphany in which he experienced God, and to the writings of Paul the Apostle, which helped him to grasp Jesus.

Book VIII features two stories that contributed to Augustine's decision to convert. The second one affected him so greatly that it led directly to his conversion in a garden near his home. Alypius, his closest friend, was present for this experience and converted at the same time.

Book IX depicts the aftermath of Augustine's conversion: his resignation from his teaching post, baptism, and return to Africa. On the way, he shared a powerful religious vision with his mother, and she died very soon thereafter, a fact that occasions Augustine to share her life story.

Books X-XIII abandon autobiography in favor of philosophical and spiritual discourse. Book X focuses on memory and includes a rundown of the sins with which Augustine still struggles. Book XI investigates the nature of time and how it impedes our ability to know and love God. Books XII and XIII comprise detailed allegorical interpretations of God's creation as depicted in Genesis, leveraging this reading to advance Augustine's vision for a holy society.

That *Confessions* builds to and ends with an extensive articulation of Augustine's take on Christianity is emblematic of the influence the author himself would have on that religion. Ultimately, it would be not his life story but his teachings, which reconceptualized Christianity through the lens of Neoplatonism, that would bear the greatest impact on history. However, even if this had not been the case, *Confessions* would remain one of literature's most deeply relatable and stunningly sincere depictions of a human in pursuit of truth.

Chapter Summaries & Analyses

Book I

Book I, Chapters 1-5 Summary

Addressing God directly, Augustine begins by praising him, emphasizing the fundamental need humans have to worship him despite their sinfulness and pride, for "our heart is unquiet until it rests in you" (14).

Augustine then introduces and engages in a series of conundrums related to God's essence. Meditating on these and other contradictions but leaving them largely unresolved, Augustine emphasizes that God merits deep considerations despite the sublime confusion they create—that salvation requires acknowledgment and praise of God despite personal uncertainty and the possibility of redundancy due to God's omniscience, for "woe betide those who fail to speak" (16).

Augustine again invokes God's grace, emphasizing his need for salvation and stating his intention to confess the reasons behind that need.

Book I, Chapters 6-12 Summary

Augustine again asks permission to tell his story, confident God will grant it since he has loved and cared for Augustine—via his parents—from birth. Augustine relates his infancy, emphasizing the tension and tantrums that arose from the impossibility of conveying his needs. He celebrates the divine and inscrutable miracle of life, reveling in its unresolvable mysteries, certain they provide proof of and a pathway towards God. Praising God's forgiveness, Augustine asserts that even newborns need it, sinful as they are from greed for milk and wrath when made to wait for it.

Augustine marvels at his procession into boyhood, facilitated by the miraculous gift of speech, but his tone switches as he describes "wad[ing] deeper into the stormy world of human life" (21). He describes the joys he knew as a schoolboy but also the weariness of his studies and the beatings he received for neglecting them, bemoaning the hypocrisy of this system where educators abuse children for engaging in behaviors similar to those that are celebrated in the adult world for which those same educators are preparing them. Though his

awareness of Christianity was limited in childhood, Augustine recalls praying to God for relief from this violence. Still, Augustine is thankful for these experiences, "for I was later able to make good use of the lessons" (23).

Remembering a time during childhood when he became very sick, Augustine describes how his Christian mother, Monica (unnamed until Book IX), sought his baptism. Upon his recovery the baptism was deferred "on the pretext that [...] I would inevitably soil myself again" (24). Augustine laments this deferral, blaming it for his later sins. Augustine also notes that his pagan father, Patricius (unnamed until Book IX), though the only non-Christian in the home, did not stand in the way of the family's faith.

Book I, Chapters 13-30 Summary

As a schoolboy in his hometown of Thagaste, a village in the Roman province of Africa (modern Souk Ahras, Algeria), Augustine enjoyed Roman literature. While he credits these works with expanding his vocabulary, he expresses disappointment at having preferred pagan art and the sinful gods it glorifies over earlier lessons in which he learned to read and write. He faults the teaching of these texts for normalizing the sins with which he struggled in his youth. He lambasts the praise of superficial elements of language without consideration of the moral implications of what that language may be conveying. This logic, Augustine asserts, breeds sinful behavior such as the lying and cheating in which he pridefully engaged as a boy. Augustine maintains that these immoralities cannot simply be explained away as "boyhood innocence," for, "These same sins grow worse as we grow older" (31).

Despite how much he feels he still had to learn and grow as a boy, Augustine ends by thanking God, celebrating that there was good within the child version of himself even if he did not yet know enough to cultivate it.

Book I Analysis

Augustine's narrative, often considered an autobiography, is conspicuous from the very start for its focus not on himself but on another figure: God. Augustine writes in second person, placing his focus on God before himself, and certainly before any other potential audience. Considering that Augustine labeled this work as his confessions and that those confessions are religious in nature, it is natural that he would position God as his reader. Realistically, though, a God whom Augustine views as "fill[ing] heaven and earth" (15), "omnipotent," and "know[ing] everything" would not require sins to be written out, a contradiction that Augustine

addresses explicitly: “[H]ow can I […] ask you to come into me, when I would not exist at all unless you were already in me?” (14-15). Augustine discusses this redundancy more directly at several later points throughout the book, such as the beginning of Book V (76).

Then again, even if it is logistically redundant, Christianity places enormous value on the act of confessing, and Augustine suggests it is an inevitable consequence of faith: “I believe, and so I will speak” (16). Moreover, confession means more than simply admitting to sin. Catholic nun and translator Maria Boulding lists two other meanings in her introduction to this version: “confession of God’s glory” and “a creative process” by which Augustine “is at one with God who is creating him” (12). This first sense is made clear enough through Augustine’s regular interruptions of his story with eloquent praise of and awe at God. The second links back to the spiritual necessity of confessing one’s sins. Through writing out his story for God, constantly invoking and interweaving God into it, Augustine is seeking the divine power necessary not just to tell the story but to bring meaning and truth into life. As Boulding puts it, Augustine is “constituting himself in being by confession” (12).

Important though Augustine’s personal spiritual motivations for writing *Confessions* may have been, as a practical matter he never intended God to be his sole audience, as evidenced by his decision to publish. Even if personal religious convictions were Augustine’s main impetus, they were unlikely to have been his only considerations. Of course, many readers would find interest in and identify with Augustine’s journey from sin to salvation, a purpose Augustine acknowledges in Book II (35), but to grasp this and Constantine’s other motivations fully, one must consider the historical context.

Augustine was born and spent his entire life in the Western Roman Empire, the heir of Classical Rome’s legacy and power. Though the Rome Augustine knew had declined since the time of Julius and Augustus Caesar, the stabilizing regimes of Diocletian and Constantine, whose rules together comprised the majority of the century preceding Augustine’s birth, had restored faith in the empire’s potential. Diocletian is remembered for splitting the empire into east and west, ending the vast unity once associated with Rome yet making each half more manageable to rule, at least for the time being. Far more significantly for Augustine, Constantine’s legacies include the Edict of Milan, which declared tolerance for Christianity throughout the empire, and the emperor’s own conversion to the fledgling faith, a first among Roman emperors, who had previously been known for violent persecution of Christians.

Still, while Christianity's rise had been astounding, its path forward was not free of obstacles. The emperors who followed Constantine would fracture the faith by promoting paganism and heresies. By the time *Confessions* was published, Theodosius's promotion of Catholic orthodoxy provided the religion its most stable footing yet. Still, the future remained uncertain, not just for the religion but also for the empire. A decade later, Rome was sacked for the first time in eight centuries. Less than 50 years after Augustine's death, the Western Roman Empire dissolved.

Thus, Augustine's complicated relationship with both Rome and Christianity and his ultimate conversion can be viewed as a microcosm of the forces operating within the empire at the time. Of Rome, he attributes his youthful preference for Latin literature to his Roman identity while simultaneously rejecting this literature for what he views as pagan immoralities (27). Meanwhile, despite his father's paganism, his household was solidly Christian, and yet even in Book I it is clear that he will stray quite far from this faith before he consciously embraces it.

This brutal, humble sincerity would have been exactly what was needed to quell mistrust among Augustine's Catholic readers, many of whom, traumatized by and sensitive to the religion's tragic past, might have been skeptical of newcomers to the faith, especially someone like Augustine who had spent a decade as a prominent Manichee, following a religion that many Christians felt threatened their own. Conversely, non-Christians considering conversion would have found Constantine's journey a valuable resource in considering their religious prospects. Augustine hoped to win all these people over. By the end of *Confessions*, it becomes clear that these purposes were at the heart of Augustine's decision not just to publish the work but also to compose it.

In another historical parallel, Augustine's fruitful conversion correctly presaged Christianity's continued growth after his death. Symbolically, the decay of his affection for Rome holds up equally well as an analog for the dim prospects that awaited the empire, though the implications of his perspectives on Roman society reach far beyond. In Book I, when he criticizes Roman culture for "invest[ing] the disgraceful deeds of human beings with an aura of divinity, so that depraved actions should be reckoned depraved no longer" (28), he foreshadows an argument that is at the core of the final book of *Confessions* and that would become the focus of his later work *The City of God* (426 CE)—namely, that society must be redesigned according to Christian values.

Christian readers through the ages have also connected with Augustine's constant invocation of Biblical verse, what Boulding sees as evidence of Augustine's essential, confessional creative collaboration with God. There is scarcely a page in the entire text that does not directly reproduce some phrasing from the Bible, and Augustine often goes beyond this to draw explicit parallels between his narrative and Biblical stories. In Book I, he introduces one of the most prominent of these analogies by comparing himself to the Prodigal Son. This figure, introduced in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 15:11-32), is the focus of one of Jesus's most celebrated parables, a tale of a father and his two sons, the younger of whom requests his inheritance early only to lose it through prodigal behavior and return pleading for forgiveness and a second chance. Expecting anger, the Prodigal Son is surprised when his loving father not only forgives him but celebrates his return. The parallels with Augustine's spiritual journey are obvious. Although the personal comparison is brief and tacit here in Book I, the emotional depth Augustine conveys as he marvels at the father's love and grace despite his son's wastefulness is potent: "Gentle you were then [when the son was gone], but gentler still with him when he returned. No, to be estranged in a spirit of lust, and lost in its darkness, that is what it means to be far away from your face" (30). Augustine is conflating the father with God, and the sincerity of his sentiments suggest that he identifies with the Prodigal Son.

The father's forgiveness and the divine grace it represents are crucial to Augustine's understanding of Christianity and, in particular, to his conceptualization of original sin, a central Christian concept that Augustine is credited with establishing. To believe in original sin is to acknowledge that no human can be morally perfect and thus that sin is inherent within each of us, passed down from Adam's literal original sin. Therefore, since all humans are on some level sinners, salvation is impossible without God's compassion and grace.

The thematic centrality of original sin to *Confessions* is clear from the first paragraph when Augustine speaks of "we humans […] who carry our mortality with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you must thwart the proud" (14). Augustine applies the idea directly to himself when commenting on the pride and greed that plagued him as a boy: "Is this boyhood innocence? No, Lord, it is not; hear me, dear God, it is not" (31). Even newborns, Augustine argues, are afflicted by original sin from the very first moment of life, their sinfulness merely cloaked by their feebleness: "The only innocent feature in babies is the weakness of their frames; the minds of infants are far from innocent" (20).

While this might feel drastic to the modern reader, Augustine finds solace in the idea of original sin, for it makes attainable the standard a human must reach in order to be saved. Augustine's faith, "this faith which is your gift to me, which you have breathed into me through the humanity of your Son and the ministry of your preacher" (14), leaves him with the conviction that God will forgive his and all humanity's sins if sincerely asked, for, "You owe us nothing, yet you pay your debts" (16).

Book II

Book II, Chapters 1-3 Summary

Augustine prepares to tell God about the lustful promiscuity of his adolescence. Augustine regrets that his parents cared too much about Augustine's career prospects at this stage to marry him off, as he presumes matrimony would have prevented much sin. Still, he trusts these events were part of God's plan.

When Augustine was 16, Patricius, prioritizing ambition over Christian morals and the economic hardship his decision would bring about, prepared to send Augustine to study in Carthage, the most important city in Roman Africa at that time. Around that time Patricius proudly discovered his son's budding sexuality and shared the news with his wife. Horrified, Monica warned Augustine away from the sin of lust. In reflection, Augustine attributes this advice to God himself, but at the time he disregarded it. Instead, afraid to be more innocent than his peers, Augustine cultivated his lust and even fabricated stories of additional promiscuity to increase his reputation.

Book II, Chapters 4-10 Summary

One evening, Augustine and his friends stole pears from a nearby orchard not to eat them but simply out of "a greedy, full-fed love of sin" (37). Reflecting on this event, Augustine articulates a theory of sin. He notes that this world is filled with beautiful things—truly beautiful as is all of God's creation and yet lesser than God himself—that humans cannot help desiring, and yet to desire them immodestly results in sin since it precludes the proper appreciation and worship of God, the true source of everything good and beautiful. A sin, then, is an act of pride, an effort to declare independence from and perhaps even superiority to God and to disregard the balance required between God and the glory of his creation. Augustine is

grateful not only that God forgives any such sin, but also that through his grace God prevents people from sinning to begin with. Thus, all should be equally grateful to God, regardless of individual sinfulness.

Augustine notes that he would never have committed this act alone. This confuses him, for the joy he derived from the camaraderie complicates his earlier assertion that from the experience he "found nothing to love save the theft itself" (41).

Book II Analysis

Perhaps more than any other part of *Confessions,* the pear episode captivates readers, a fact Modern Library exploited it they put a pear on the cover of its 2018 edition. It certainly captivates Augustine himself, who spends more than half of Book II relating and reflecting on it. Some readers find it tragic that Augustine dwells so long on a relatively trivial transgression, even if he did commit it "simply because it was forbidden" (37). However, it is this aspect of the pear theft that results in such extensive meditation. While Augustine certainly feels shame for the wantonness of his act, he does not dwell on this scene out of guilt. Rather he recognizes in it a unique opportunity to study the true motivation for sin. Augustine's other transgressions generally fulfilled and so could be explained by some other purpose. He lusted, for instance, because he desired love and sex, while he fabricated exploits to inflate his vanity. With regard to the pears, though, Augustine confesses, "there was no motive for my malice except malice" (37). Closer examination led Augustine to a theory of why we sin, a theory that owes much to the Neoplatonists (see Book VII Analysis).

Augustine presents good and evil on a spectrum rather than as opposing forces. Thus, there is no inherently sinful act, nor is any act inherently virtuous. To navigate the path away from sin and toward virtue is to appreciate the beauty of God's creation and God himself in appropriate proportion, which will vary depending on context, for:

> Sin gains entrance through these and similar good things when we turn to them with immoderate desire, since they are the lowest kind of goods and we thereby turn away from the better and higher: from you yourself, O Lord our God, and your truth and your law (38).

Even in confessing the sin of his lust, Augustine condemns not sexuality itself as some stricter Christians have over the years, but just his inability to be temperate: “What was it that delighted me? Only loving and being loved. But there was no proper restraint [...]. I could not distinguish the calm light of love from the fog of lust” (33).

Augustine's reflections on the pear episode again convey the many senses in which he is confessing. Most obviously, he confesses to the theft, asking forgiveness for his misdeed, but as usual he also prominently confesses God’s greatness in celebrating not just his forgiveness of wrongdoings like these but especially the grace that has allowed Augustine and others to avoid countless other sins. He suggests that the awesomeness of God in this latter circumstance is often overlooked, and so he is particularly emphatic in confessing it: “Let such a person [who has avoided sin] therefore love you just as much, or even more, on seeing that the same physician who rescued me from sinful diseases of such gravity has kept him immune” (41).

This discourse also reinforces Augustine’s doctrine of original sin. In asking God, “Is there anyone who can take stock of his own weaknesses and still dare to credit his chastity and innocence to his own efforts?” (41), Augustine asserts that we all have sin within us, so it is simply a matter of whether God will exercise his forgiveness to help us overcome it or his grace to help us avoid it from the start.

The befuddlement Augustine experiences as he tries to account for the impact of peer pressure is stunning for its honesty. Up until this point, although Augustine has been vulnerable in discussing his shortcomings and explored his uncertainties about God, he has always expressed his moral convictions and conclusions with confidence. Here, however, recognizing that the feeling of fellowship was a significant motivator, he seems truly perplexed: “What kind of attitude was that? An extremely dishonorable one, certainly; [...] Yet what exactly was it? Who understands his faults?” (42). Perhaps what he is struggling with is the fact that an element otherwise virtuous, namely friendship, which he earlier characterizes as “sweet to us because out of many minds it forges a unity” (38), can bring about such a wholly sinful act. His humility allows him to move beyond this, though, and trust his recognition that the act was unquestionably sinful, even if he struggles to understand the mysterious ways in which God’s creation allowed for it.

Continuing a trend from Book I, Augustine expresses frequent regret at those circumstances of his life that facilitated sin. He blames his promiscuity on his parents' failure to arrange a marriage for him (33), his vanity on the premium his family and his society placed on eloquence and rhetoric (34), and his theft of pears on peer pressure (42). As with his delayed baptism, he wonders wistfully how much more meaningful his life might have been if circumstances had been different, and yet he praises God's greatness and wisdom as manifest in the specific lessons he learned from these mistakes. This contradiction does not seem to trouble Augustine, which makes sense given his belief in original sin and his embrace of the myriad paradoxes inherent in God's nature. Furthermore, it again reveals parallels between Augustine and the world he inhabited—a civilization with values that frequently transgressed the doctrines of Christianity and yet without which Christianity would never have spread with such rapidity and success.

One such battle between regret and gratitude emerges from his failure to heed his mother's warnings against giving into his lust. His decision is clearly rooted in sexism, for he viewed Monica's advice as "mere women's talk" (36), and yet he fails to identify sexism as an obstacle to his communion with God. Considering the misogyny of the era, this view is not so surprising, but his diminishment of Monica's importance for his life and especially his spirituality even while authoring his narrative is more conspicuous.

On one hand, he spares her the vitriol he hurls at his father and praises her devotion to Christianity, but only to a point. "My mother had by this time fled from the center of Babylon," Augustine writes, invoking Israel's ancient enemy as a stand-in for sin, "though she still lingered in its suburbs" (36). Even though Augustine acknowledges that his mother "regarded the customary course of studies as no hindrance, and even a considerable help, toward my gaining you eventually" (37), he faults her for prioritizing her son's career prospects over more serious efforts to preserve his chastity. It is unclear, however, how much power Monica would have had to redirect her son's future over Christian concerns, especially up against her domineering pagan husband and likely Augustine himself, who appears to have been quite content with his lot at the time. Without hearing her voice, we cannot know to what degree Augustine's accusations against Monica are fair. In Book IX, Augustine accords Monica more reverence, though somewhat problematically, and the Church would eventually see past her shortcomings sufficiently to canonize her.

Despite their enormous importance and readers' likely curiosity about them, Augustine generally does not give his parents much attention at this point in his narrative, a logical choice considering how much credit for his parenting he awards to God. This perspective plays into the Prodigal Son parallels, to which he returns to conclude Book II, ending with a phrase lifted directly from the parable: "I slid away from you and wandered away, my God; far from your steadfastness I strayed in adolescence, and I became to myself a land of famine" (42).

Book III

Book III, Chapters 1-9 Summary

In Carthage, Augustine persisted in promiscuity. He describes himself as having been "enamored with the idea of love" but sinfully indiscriminate in procuring it (43). He enjoyed watching popular plays, tragedies in which characters experience sorrow for impure reasons. Augustine proclaims that he enjoyed these shows for the distraction they provided from the sickness of his soul and argues that this sort of art exploits the selfish impulse toward passive pity and the charitable feeling it produces. Worthwhile sorrow, Augustine suggests, arises only as a byproduct of compassion for someone struggling with sin.

In his rhetorical studies, Augustine excelled, though he credits his moral bankruptcy. Even so, he is thankful that he did not sink as low as some of his peers, many of whom violently harassed younger students. At age 19, Augustine discovered Cicero's *Hortensius*, a lost dialogue that argues that philosophy is the most important of human pursuits. Cicero's ideas awakened in Augustine a hunger for wisdom, a desire to transcend earthly life and know God. Despite Augustine's sinful lifestyle at that time, he claims that the absence of Christianity from this text was his one misgiving. Thus, he turned to the Bible, but he found it wanting when compared with Cicero. Reflecting, he judges that the pride and arrogance of his youth obscured the meaning and beauty that he would later discover in scripture.

Parenthetically in discussing *Hortensius*, Augustine reveals that his father had died two years prior, leaving his mother financially responsible for her son's studies.

Book III, Chapters 10-12 Summary

Disenchanted by scripture, Augustine converted to Manicheism. In retrospect, this decision horrifies Augustine. He accuses the Manichees of appealing on excessively material grounds, of manipulating the beauty of God's creation to distract from God himself, a sin he views as far worse than that of pagan art and literature, for the promotion of non-Christian values therein is at least conveyed as diversion rather than doctrine. Augustine laments that he was at that time too impatient and naïve to appreciate the complex, differentiated wisdom of scripture, which might permit an action in one context yet prohibit it in another, and that he opted instead for the straightforward dualism of Manicheism.

Augustine then details the various implications of holy justice, comparing crimes against nature, crimes against human codes, and crimes against the person—all of which he attributes to discord with God, even if God remains above harm and the true victims are always sinners themselves. Acknowledging the sometimes-inscrutable implications of God's justice that eluded him at that age, Augustine ridicules the Manichean beliefs he once accepted.

Augustine thanks God for a dream Monica had that convinced her to maintain relations with her heathen son and that her prayers for his salvation would be answered. Although Augustine would remain a Manichee for eight more years, he credits the dream, the conviction and love it inspired in his mother, and the disturbing effect these had on him with his eventual return to Christianity. Monica requested that a priest attempt to persuade Augustine to abandon Manicheism. The man refused, deeming Augustine too arrogant to heed his influence but assuring Monica, "it is inconceivable that [Augustine] shall perish, a son of tears like yours" (57), words she interpreted as divine prophecy.

Book III Analysis

In converting to Manicheism, Augustine joined one of the largest religions of the time, and yet its influence was dwindling, especially in the Roman Empire. A few years after Augustine became a Manichee, Theodosius declared Christianity the only legitimate religion and issued a decree of death for Manichean monks (Melton, J. Gordon. *Faiths Across Time: 5,000 Years of Religious History*. Vol. 1, ABC-CLIO, 2014, p. 361), though if this trend concerned Augustine, he makes no note of it. In fact, the religion remained influential during this time, and

Augustine's choice to become a Manichee was likely at least in part one of political expediency, a benefit he continued to enjoy even after the time he claimed to have abandoned the religion (O'Donnell, James. "St. Augustine." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Nov. 2021).

Manichees followed Mani, a third-century Iranian prophet, who taught that life was a dualistic struggle between a good world of light and an evil world of darkness. They viewed Jesus as a prophet and incorporated some elements of his ministry, presenting them side-by-side with those of non-Christian holy figures such as Zoroaster, Buddha, and above all Mani himself.

For demoting Jesus and partitioning God's omnipotence as well as for their association with Rome's Persian adversaries, Manichees were targeted by Christians as a threat. This insecurity manifests in the horror and indignation with which Augustine reflects on his time under their sway, emotions he may have exaggerated to appease those who doubted he had truly left Manicheism behind. Although he lists several specific Manichean beliefs as evidence of the religion's absurdity, their unbalanced worldview, predicated more on material elements of creation than the God who created them, disturbs him most. Augustine compares Manichean teachings to "plates on which they served me not you but the sun and moon, which are your beautiful works, to be sure, but still your works, not yourself" (48).

This unbalanced focus plays right into the theory of sin Augustine articulates in reflecting on the pear episode. Indeed, he compares Manicheism itself to theft, invoking a Biblical proverb to suggest that such a belief system is a vain attempt to wrest power and greatness away from God: "But I stumbled upon that bold woman devoid of prudence […] sitting outside on her stool and inviting me: *Come and enjoy eating bread in secret, and drink sweet, stolen water*" (50).

Augustine's convictions regarding Manicheism's blindness and especially the righteousness of Christianity are stirringly articulated. He provides examples such as his mother's dream in an attempt to prove that the Christian God is real and works to move Augustine's heart. Readers of faith may view these arguments as convincing, and yet there is the distinct possibility that, had circumstances been different, Augustine might have stuck with Manicheism or perhaps found another faith, defended that creed just as vehemently, and made Christianity the subject of his ridicule. This question arises when Augustine, ever frank, confesses to once viewing the Bible as "unworthy" when compared with "Cicero's dignified

prose" (47). Augustine rationalizes this judgment by claiming he himself was then unworthy of the Bible's wisdom. Ultimately, these are unprovable value judgments on each side, which are all any believer can call on to justify one faith over another.

Augustine writes extensively of the flexibility of God's justice, the ability of Christian doctrine to persist in safeguarding central values while adapting to the specific needs of any given time and place, a versatility he asserts that Manicheism lacks. Of course, any set of values can be interpreted and enforced with excessive rigidity. Perhaps the Manicheism of Augustine's day was more susceptible to this sort of fundamentalism than Christianity at that time, but there are countless counterexamples from history of the teachings of Christianity being interpreted and implemented with excessive orthodoxy.

Augustine himself falls prey to this tendency when subdividing criminality. Despite acknowledging that justice fluctuates according to context, he writes of "vices contrary to nature [...] always to be detested and punished" (52), providing the example of "the sins of the Sodomites" (52). Certainly, the story in Genesis of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, with God's wrath written out as direct quotations, presents the sins of those cities' inhabitants as incontrovertible violations of divine law, and yet those very sins are never explicitly defined in scripture. Augustine labels them "perverted lust" and claims that men were not made "to have that kind of relationship with each other" (52), suggesting the common interpretation that the crime was homosexuality, or at least sexual in nature. However, religious scholars are divided on the matter, with many modern experts contending that the crime is not sexual at all but rather relates to inhospitality (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Sodom and Gomorrah." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 31 Aug. 2021). That Augustine presents a fairly specific interpretation of these sins as his sole example of the existence of allegedly incontrovertible crimes against nature calls into question his entire argument for the exceptionality of Christian justice.

Again, Augustine's narrative in Book III underscores the primacy of human relations and their power to effect both good and ill. He minimizes his lustfulness by placing it against "the din of scandalous affairs rag[ing] caudron-like around me" in Carthage (42), an influence that recalls the pear episode. More positively, Monica places enormous weight on the priest's labeling Augustine as "a son of tears like yours" (57), and, considering Augustine ends Book III with this detail, he found it important, too. Augustine, Monica, and the priest all seem to view compassion between humans as a uniquely potent manifestation of God's grace.

Book IV

Book IV, Chapters 1-9 Summary

Augustine remained a Manichee from ages 19 to 29. His schooling completed, he returned home to Thagaste to teach rhetoric. Although his students often used the skills of persuasion Augustine taught them for dishonest ends—as Augustine confesses he did, too—he credits himself for "try[ing] to teach them honestly" (59). Still, this was a period of great sin. Augustine had begun living and sleeping with a woman whose name he never reveals. Though they were loyal to each other, the fact that they remained unwed keeps Augustine from viewing this arrangement as any more virtuous than the promiscuity that preceded it.

Augustine pursued astrology and poetry as hobbies. He tells of "some sorcerer fellow" who offered to make animal sacrifices to secure Augustine's victory in a poetry contest (59), an offer that Augustine rejected, though he regrets that his rejection was not rooted in Christianity. When he won the contest anyway, the man who crowned him, a doctor of some sort, learned of Augustine's interest in astrology and warned him away from it, advice Augustine attributes to God even if he remained unpersuaded.

Augustine's dearest friend fell ill and died. The friend had been Christian until Augustine lured him to Manicheism. Insensible on his deathbed, he was baptized back into Christianity. Upon awaking, he repudiated Augustine and Manicheism. This death devastated Augustine. He regrets that he could not take refuge in God's love. Instead, his only consolation was crying, and he spends some time wondering why such an act should bring comfort. Although he ridicules what he now considers excessive attachment to another imperfect mortal, his depression drove him from Thagaste back to Carthage. There, he distracted himself from his sorrows by cultivating new friendships of a similar sort.

Book IV, Chapters 10-16 Summary

Again, Augustine meditates on the importance of modesty when valuing the beauty of the material world and of never forgetting that it would not exist without God. He argues that these things are pleasing only because they are temporary and that to wish they were eternal not only is vain but, if realized, would actually mar the glory and balance of creation. Augustine emphasizes that there is nothing wrong with appreciating material beauty or cultivating camaraderie, so long as "you [...] channel the love you feel for them onto their

creator" and "carry off to God as many of [your friends] as possible" (68). Recalling that Jesus descended to Earth and died to ascend to heaven and live forever, Augustine asserts the necessity of humility to reach salvation.

Around age 26, Augustine wrote a series of books exploring the nature of beauty. The text was lost even before the writing of *Confessions*, and Augustine repudiates its Manicheism-inspired conjectures. He dedicated the books to Hierius, a Roman orator he had never met, motivated by envy for the praise he had heard others heap on the man. Though Augustine recognizes this, he marvels at the mysteries of praise, regretting that he craved approval from people rather than from God.

Augustine ends by reflecting on Aristotle's *The Ten Categories*, which he encountered at age 20. Aristotle's work claims everything fits somewhere within 10 categories. Augustine then believed God, too, could be categorized in this way, a perspective he now considers supremely sinful as it negates the oneness of God. He reminds himself that intelligence is nothing compared to communion with God.

Book IV Analysis

Frequently in Book IV, Augustine directs his writing toward human readers rather than to God. He has done this occasionally before this point, even acknowledging it directly in Book II: "But to whom am I telling this story? Not to you, my God; rather in your presence I am relating these events to my own kin, the human race" (35). Here, Augustine's hope that people would read his book takes on a fundamentally religious dimension. After an extended discussion of God's greatness and a poem honoring Jesus's sacrifice, Augustine writes, "This is what you must tell [other souls], to move them to tears in this valley of weeping, and by this means carry them off with you to God" (69). Throughout Christianity's history, many of its practitioners have felt called to bring others to the faith. Augustine clearly shares this perspective, and, in writing this book, he is fulfilling that responsibility.

That prayerful poem is not the first one Augustine composes for *Confessions*. He ended Book I with a poem of thanksgiving. While Books II or III include none, Book IV boasts three—one calling for the strength to remember that God is the source of all transient beauty, the aforementioned one about Jesus, and a final one that ends Book IV by asking for God's protection of his followers and forgiveness of those who have gone astray. Each poem is focused on a central element of Augustine's text. He never introduces them but simply breaks right from prose into these poetic appeals. They present their author in raw, heartfelt passion

for his God, something God as supposed reader would likely appreciate. For human readers, these poetic prayers legitimize his faith while also availing themselves to be prayed again by those who agree with Augustine.

More frequently, Augustine appeals to his readers' logic. A particularly powerful example arises in his discussion of transient things of beauty. To illustrate the vanity and irrationality of wishing these things would last forever, Augustine proposes an analogy: "When [...] you listen to human speech, you do not want to halt the succession of syllables: you want them to fly on their way and make room for others, so that you may hear the whole" (67). While Augustine's condemnations of eloquence and rhetoric might seem to cast his narrative's reliance on them as hypocritical, it is important to remember that he only condemns them when they are valued independently of the truthfulness of what they convey. For instance, he approves of eulogy "as long as [...] the one who proclaims [the eulogized person's] merits is not doing so with intent to deceive" (70). Thus, as Augustine certainly feels his purposes in writing *Confessions* are virtuous, fluent persuasiveness in their service is justifiable.

Augustine's discussion of eulogy comes as he is marveling at the impacts of his admiration and envy of Hierius. Similar to his wonderment at the role camaraderie played in the pear episode, Augustine finds himself struggling to articulate the nature and value of praise. He recognizes that it was shallow of him to consider others' opinions of Hierius so highly, regardless of how viscerally powerful that impulse was, for he perceived in Hierius that which he wanted for himself. What confuses him, then, is his tendency to admire those whom he does not envy. He speaks of his respect and love for actors but is perplexed that "I would have preferred obscurity to notoriety like theirs, and would rather have been hated than loved in that manner" (70). In the end, he gives up, concluding, "A human being is an immense abyss, but you, Lord, keep count even of his hairs, and not one of them is lost in you; yet even his hairs are easier to number than the affections and movements of his heart" (70). Referring to an assurance Jesus makes of God's care in the Gospel according to Matthew (10:30), Augustine here takes refuge in God's inscrutable mystery, and yet, by ending with an observation of how much vaster than our physical forms are our emotional and mental realities, he emphasizes the doubt he struggles with all the same.

Again, Augustine himself and many readers who share similar beliefs might not be bothered by these mysteries since mystery is itself inherent in most conceptions of the divine. However, it is curious that Augustine invokes the irrational elements of other faiths as

evidence of their falsity yet shrugs off those that remain within his own worldview despite his religious framework. This tension is especially clear in the explanation the doctor gives him of how astrologists manage some accurate predictions if their methods are fraudulent:

> Think how frequently it happens, he said, that a person looks for guidance in the pages of some poet who was singing of an unrelated matter and had something quite different in mind, yet a line stands out which is wonderfully apposite to the question in hand (61).

Later, Augustine would recognize the truth of this perspective regarding astrology, but at the time he remained unconvinced "because the authority of the writers weighed with me too heavily" (61). Beyond personal preference and unverifiable spiritual intuitions, it is not clear how Augustine can accept the doctor's logic as it applies to one of these belief systems and not another. Even astrology's emphasis on predicting the future cannot be cited as the crucial difference given that Augustine indicates belief in soothsaying in Book XI (235-36).

Still, Augustine's Christianity is the core of *Confessions*, and it continues to lead him to structure his narrative in a way that might frustrate those expecting a more conventional autobiography. Here, this amounts to his choice to devote a single paragraph to the only extended romantic relationship of his life. Although this woman will reappear nearly as briefly later, all we learn about her now is that Augustine was committed to her but that he views their relationship as sinful when compared with "a marriage contracted for the purpose of founding a family" (59). This contention is slightly ironic given that he will father a child with this woman, although admittedly their relationship was likely not initiated with that goal. Again, the potent complexity of relationships with other humans presents challenges to Augustine's worldview, some he acknowledges head on but others he seems scarcely aware of.

Augustine remains steadfast in his conceptualization of sin, though, repeating his belief that evil is not some external force but instead arises from a lack of proper relationship with God. This comes up as he reflects on and condemns the books he wrote. In those books, Augustine proposed that beauty arises in an object from some quality inherent to the object as well as resulting from its harmony with its environment, a notion he now considers inaccurate since "the whole vast question hinged on your artistry, almighty God, who alone work wonders" (71). From his misconceptions and influenced by Manichean dualism, he

concluded at that time that evil is a force that promotes fragmentation among the good and beautiful in the world, later changing his perspective: “But I did not understand what I was talking about,” Augustine reflects. “I did not know, never having learned, that evil is no substance at all” (72).

Book V

Book V, Chapters 1-7 Summary

Augustine again asks God to accept his confession, clarifying that he confesses not because God is unaware of his sins but because doing so gives God glory.

Faustus, a famous Manichean bishop, arrived in Carthage when Augustine was 29. Influenced by philosophy and astronomy, Augustine was beginning to have doubts about Manicheism, but still he had long awaited Faustus, hopeful he would quell Augustine’s doubts and eager to discover the immense knowledge the bishop reportedly possessed. In retrospect, Augustine condemns knowledge for its own sake, denouncing scientists who study the marvels of creation without giving God his due. Still, even then he recognized the validity of their calculations, and the undeniable contradictions between these findings and Manichean doctrine threatened his faith.

Though his eloquence and charisma impressed Augustine, Faustus proved unable to resolve Augustine’s doubts, nor did Augustine feel the reports about Faustus’s intelligence had been founded. The bishop politely declined to engage with Augustine’s questions, “for he knew that he did not know about these matters, and was not ashamed to admit it” (83). Faustus’s humility endeared him to Augustine, and, ultimately, Augustine is grateful to this figure for his inadvertent role in Augustine’s slow progression toward Christianity.

Book V, Chapters 8-14 Summary

Augustine moved to Rome. Although increased salary and prestige were part of the allure, the promise of better-behaved students constituted Augustine’s primary motivation, for in Carthage it was normal for students to burst into classes and disrupt them with acts of vandalism and violence. He pities these misguided students yet credits them as part of God’s plan for him. Unaware that her son’s departure would lead to his conversion, Monica tearfully begged him to stay. To facilitate his escape, he lied to her. Because these actions led him to God, Augustine rationalizes his dishonesty and criticizes his mother’s loving entreaties.

In Rome, Augustine fell ill and nearly died. He credits his survival to Monica's ceaseless prayers and to God's inability to deny such a faithful servant her wish. Upon recovery, Augustine joined up with the local Manichees, clinging to their conception that sin was external because it spared his pride and he had yet to find a more compelling explanation, though he was tempted by the philosophy of the Academics, who "recommended universal doubt, announcing that no part of the truth could be understood by the human mind" (89). Unable to conceive of evil in a world with only one infinite, omnipotent God as well as to imagine that such a God could take human form without being degraded, Augustine continued to discard Christianity.

Augustine met success teaching in Rome, but many students there shirked their tuition fees. Again disgusted, Augustine secured a teaching post in Milan. There, he met Ambrose, a Catholic bishop whose eloquence, though less impressive than Faustus's, drew Augustine to his sermons. Eventually, the substance of Ambrose's ministry affected Augustine enough for him to abandon Manicheism, though at heart he agreed only with the Academics.

Book V Analysis

Book V begins with another extended prayer to God similar to that which begins Book I. As Augustine's narrative nears his conversion, he finds it necessary to reiterate the awe and love he feels for God, the gratitude he has for God's forgiveness, and the rationale for setting all this out in writing. More clearly than before, Augustine acknowledges the apparent redundancy of his efforts: "A person who confesses to you is not informing you about what goes on within him, for a closed heart does not shut you out" (76). Still, Augustine confesses, valuing the massive spiritual benefit it holds for both God and human:

> But allow my soul to give you glory that it may love you the more, and let it confess to you your own merciful dealings, that it may give you glory. [...] [L]et the human soul rise [...] to you. There it will find its refreshment, there its true strength (77).

From the beginning of *Confessions*, Augustine has made clear his belief that his life has played out according to God's plan, but here in Book V his conviction takes on a prominent dimension of personal importance. As he nears his conversion to Christianity and his influential ministry, he constantly speaks of events as essential steps guiding him toward his

fate. When he lists his reasons for going to Rome, he asserts that his perceived motivations were an illusion, for "in truth it was you [...] who for my soul's salvation prompted me to change my country, and to this end you provided both the goads at Carthage that dislodged me from there and the allurements at Rome that attracted me" (85). Similarly does he rationalize the lies he told his mother to ease his departure, suggesting that his deception was necessary as part of God's "deep wisdom [...] act[ing] in her truest interests [...] for you meant to make me into what she was asking for all the time" (86). Finally, regarding his nearly fatal illness, Augustine insists that saving his life was a foregone conclusion given Monica's piety and Augustine's own role in divine destiny: "This is why you restored me from my sickness: you saved your handmaid's son and gave me back my bodily health for the time being, preserving me so that you might endow me with better and more dependable health later" (88).

Augustine's self-importance here is reasonable given his conviction that he is now doing God's work and the importance of establishing his religious authority for his audience. However, when examined, these claims raise questions. Firstly, while Augustine's inability to imagine any other path that might have led him toward Christianity is a convincing show of his faith in God's plan, it is reasonable to imagine that he might have come around even had he stayed in Africa. The apparent forces that drove him out of both Carthage and Rome had nothing to do with religion, and the fact that he does not leave Milan for similar reasons suggests his true struggle was indeed internal, which he acknowledges when he speaks of "crav[ing] spurious happiness" in Rome (85). Indeed, the primary work of dislodging Augustine's Manichean faith was done via his experiences with Faustus before he left Carthage. He makes this point more clearly in Book VIII when he speaks of his impending conversion as "a journey not to be undertaken by ship or carriage or on foot, nor need it take me even that short distance I had walked from the house to the place where we were sitting" (150). Therefore, it is completely within the realm of possibility that he might have come to Christianity even had he stayed in Africa.

Moreover, his conviction that Monica's piety caused God to protect him and bring him to Christianity seems odd considering how many other pious mothers have nevertheless lived through the deaths of their children, failed to convert them to their religions, or both. The mother of Augustine's friend whose death was detailed in Book IV may be one such example. Similarly, Augustine reveals in Book IX that Monica prayed fiercely for Patricius as well (170), yet his untimely death was not averted, and the fact that Patricius's baptism occurred on his deathbed, a common practice at the time for those hoping to wash away a life of reckless sin,

suggests this conversion may have been insincere (172). Perhaps Augustine did not consider these contradictions, or maybe he felt that the connections to God in these situations were not sufficient to merit salvation. Either way, his analysis of these events suggests that he viewed the part he would play in divine destiny as particularly important and that he wanted readers to share that view.

This sense of exceptionalism becomes still clearer upon considering the wider impact of some of Augustine's actions and judgments in Book IV. He is grateful to Faustus for the role he played in fracturing his own belief in Manicheism, but his acknowledgment that Faustus "was a death-trap for many" complicates the value of this figure in God's plan (84). Even if Faustus inadvertently pushed others away to Christianity, it is highly likely that this charismatic bishop drew a far greater number to Manicheism. The role Augustine's students play in driving him from Carthage and Rome raises similar concerns, for he seemed to make no effort to ameliorate their negative behaviors, admitting that he left because of "what I might suffer" but thinking nothing of whichever unlucky teachers replaced him and suffered in his place (91).

In discussing his trajectory, Augustine demonstrates a belief that the ends justify the means—that whatever harm came to others as a result of his actions and inactions regarding Faustus and his students is immaterial when compared with his far more important personal journey toward God. In Books I and II, he repudiates the lies he told in his youth and adolescence, but here he defends his deception of his mother as a necessary evil, even if he almost certainly could have left without tricking her. This seems especially odd considering his repudiation of Monica back in Book II for prioritizing his studies over marriage, regardless of the fact that she did so believing the ends she sought would justify those particular means (37).

Augustine demonstrates further hypocrisy in his condemnation of the beliefs of Mani, the central figure of Manicheism, for making claims that ran counter to scientific discoveries, for the Bible also makes claims that have not held up—some of which, such as the implication that pi is equal to three (1 Kings 7:23-26), were known to be inaccurate even in Augustine's day. While these discrepancies do not invalidate Christianity as a whole for Augustine, they do for Manicheism: "If ever such a man [as Mani] were proved to have spoken untruly, could anyone doubt that he must have been grossly deranged, and that his ideas were abhorrent, and to be rejected outright?" (81).

Many believers view religious texts and teachings as vessels of metaphorical rather than literal truth and are therefore unbothered by these sorts of contradictions and inaccuracies. Even Augustine reveals this perspective to be a necessary lens for his eventual conversion to Christianity:

> I realized that the Catholic faith [...] was in fact intellectually respectable. This realization was particularly keen when once, and again, and indeed frequently, I heard some difficult passage of the Old Testament explained figuratively; such passages had been death to me because I had been taking them literally (92).

Although Augustine appears unwilling to employ figurative interpretations to Manicheism and even predicates much of his Christian thinking on literal interpretation of the Bible, as evidenced by his discussion of "the sins of the Sodomites" in Book III (52), his willingness to leave literal meaning behind when he feels it is appropriate constitutes an essential part of his transition to Christianity. Indeed, figurative readings of scripture will constitute the foundation of Books XII and XIII, the culmination of Augustine's efforts in *Confessions*.

Conversely, considering the often-fraught relationship Christianity has had with science over the centuries, Augustine's discourse on this topic is quite open-minded. While he makes clear his belief that scientists, like everyone else, should put God first, he acknowledges "many true conclusions which [scientists] had drawn from creation itself" (79). Although he feels these observations are irreconcilable with Manicheism, evidently he finds them more compatible with Christianity. Although it is unclear how Augustine would have responded to the leaps in scientific knowledge that have come since his death, many of which quite directly contradict Biblical teachings, his liberality is a powerful tool in the hands of those who seek to reconcile Christianity and science.

Book VI

Book VI, Chapters 1-6 Summary

To be near her son, Monica moved to Milan. The news that Augustine had left Manicheism pleased but did not surprise her, and she redoubled her prayers on his behalf since he had yet to commit meaningfully to Christianity. Monica took a liking to Ambrose, thankful for his

positive influence on her son, and he was fond of her in return. Eager to learn more from Ambrose, Augustine visited him frequently hoping for an audience, but the bishop was too busy preaching and reading. Still, his teachings slowly brought Augustine closer to Christianity, especially as Ambrose cultivated his conception of God as an endless spiritual essence rather than a flesh-bound entity.

However, insecure about his doubts and defensive about the years he had wasted away from God, Augustine found himself ridiculing Christianity for superficial inconsistencies. Still, he continued to find new reasons to reconsider Christianity: It seemed to him more moderate in its unprovable claims, he recognized many nonreligious truths are also a matter of faith, he was impressed by its widespread popularity, it did not contradict philosophy, and he came to view many elements of scripture that he had once thought ridiculous "as holy and profound mysteries" (100).

Augustine continued vainly seeking happiness through reputation and material gain. One day, upon passing a joyously drunken beggar, Augustine realized that, even if the beggar's happiness may have been ill-gotten, the man was better off than Augustine, who had nothing to show for his own waywardness.

Book VI, Chapters 7-16 Summary

In Milan Augustine lived with two friends from Africa: Alypius and Nebridius. Also raised in Thagaste though younger than Augustine, Alypius boasted great character and promise, but he struggled with an addiction to circus and gladiator games. Some of Alypius's friends encouraged this behavior, while Augustine, who was once Alypius's teacher, helped him break the habit temporarily. Having come to Rome earlier, Alypius reconnected with Augustine there, then with Nebridius followed him to Milan, where the three lived together and "shared in [...] fiercely burning zeal for truth and wisdom" (108), though their search was long unfruitful.

Augustine's sexual habits remained a serious obstacle to conversion. He began to consider marriage, urged on by his mother and fearful Christianity's prohibition on premarital sex would prove unmanageable. Conversely, he and his friends had been considering establishing a commune, which would not be conducive to marriage, and Alypius disliked the idea since it would end their cohabitation. Alypius himself abstained from sex, traumatized by an early sexual encounter.

Nevertheless, a bride was found for Augustine, and he consented. The marriage had to wait, though, since Augustine's fiancée was too young. In preparation, Augustine's lover "was ripped from my side" (113). She returned to Africa, but their son, Adeodatus (never mentioned previously and unnamed until Book IX), stayed. Augustine was devastated but began another affair to manage his lust.

Book VI Analysis

In Book VI Augustine provides a host of new reasons for his preference of Christianity over Manicheism and other belief systems. Augustine emphasizes the power of Ambrose's assertions that certain passages of the Bible, including many that had previously troubled Augustine, were meant to be taken figuratively, "a principle on which [Ambrose] must insist emphatically, *The letter is death-dealing, but the spirit gives life*" (99). This principle, based on a line from Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians (2 Cor 3:6), establishes the power of those who are possessed by the Holy Spirit to interpret scripture.

This idea of possession by the Holy Spirit is a compelling one, even if it defies logic. Like Ambrose, Monica seems to have had some sense of this. When agitating for the marriage of her son, she had some suggestive dreams, but, unlike the dream from Book III that had convinced her to maintain relationships with Augustine after he became a Manichee, Monica confidently classified these as "the activity of her own human spirit" (112). Augustine relates, "She claimed that by something akin to the sense of taste, a faculty she could not explain in words, she was able to distinguish between your revelations to her and the fantasies of her own dreaming soul" (112). While Augustine never speaks of harboring such a power himself, the passion and sincerity of his writing suggest that he may have felt such a force working within him. Consequently, it is his confessions themselves that constitute the most satisfactory evidence of his genuine belief in and relationship with God.

Still, he does provide a few reasons for his softening toward Christianity that may be more satisfactory even for the skeptical reader, chief among which is his recognition that many secular matters require some level of faith as well. He credits God for making him:

> [...] reflect on how innumerable were the things I believed and held to be true, though I had neither seen them nor been present when they happened. How many truths there were of this kind, such as events of world history, or facts about places and cities I had never seen (99-100).

Of course, these sorts of beliefs are generally more verifiable than religious convictions, or they can at least be shown to be within the realm of scientific possibility, but Augustine's recognition that "unless we did believe them we should be unable to do anything in this life" establishes a powerful parallel with the utility of becoming a Christian at this stage of history (100). With Theodosius recently having banned all other religions and Christianity spreading like wildfire, becoming a Christian was becoming a sure way of increasing one's social standing and mobility. This is not to suggest that Augustine converted simply out of convenience, but it is noteworthy how deeply impressed he was that Christianity had been "established with such authority throughout almost all nations" (100).

Loopholes like these are invariable in any attempt to rationalize religious preference since religion is fundamentally a matter of faith despite logic. Modern readers who find themselves particularly beholden to logic and the scientific method may find this period of Augustine's life, after Manicheism but before Christianity, as the one with which they can best identify. After all, the philosophy with which Augustine most identifies here, that of the Academics, is strikingly similar to agnosticism, the idea that humans are incapable of understanding anything beyond their personal experiences. While this idea is increasingly satisfactory for many in the modern age, it was not enough for Augustine, his departure from this mindset made clear in a conversation he presents with himself: "Fine fellows, you Academics! So nothing that we need for living our lives can be known with certainty? Nonsense! Let us seek energetically and not give up hope" (108). Despite his love of reason and rhetoric, a life without spiritual truth and belonging is not a life worth living for Augustine.

Similarly important to Augustine are the bonds of friendship and romance between human beings, but the mystery of these only increases in Book VI. Augustine spends much time talking about his friends, especially Alypius. Generally, they seem to be good influences on one another, working together to pursue truth and meaning. These friendships stand in stark contrast to those that led him to steal pears in his adolescence and are a model of camaraderie being used for good instead of ill. However, they are complex and certainly not perfect. Alypius's childhood sexual trauma prevented him from experiencing the romantic dimension of life. Likely, this was an experience he needed to work through, but instead Augustine brashly encouraged his friend to seek marriage, advice Augustine characterizes as "the serpent [...] speaking through me" (111). Even the role Augustine played in releasing Alypius from his addiction to circus games was unintentional. Augustine knew he should help his friend but never did "because it slipped my memory" (103). Instead, Alypius happened to

stop in to one of Augustine's lectures in which he made an analogy to the circus, and Alypius "took the illustration to himself" (111). These experiences raise the question of whether even the good influences these men had on one another were intentional and thus praiseworthy. Perhaps they, too, were little more than accidents arising from fondness for one another and the mutual pursuit of self-interest.

Alypius's romantic problems probably would not have been solved by marriage, and the same may well be true of Augustine's. As far as can be ascertained, the extramarital affair he maintained for over a decade with an unnamed woman was a loving, gratifying relationship. It even produced a child, therefore satisfying the goal of Christian marriage as Augustine earlier defined it (59). If there were other issues, Augustine certainly does not mention them. However, because their love was not sanctified by the Christian church, Augustine ended it. Although there can be no question that he is satisfied with the direction his life took, this satisfaction is in spite of the heartbreak he experienced when he sent her away: "The wound inflicted on me [...] did not heal [...]. After the fever and the acute pain had dulled, it putrefied, and the pain became a cold despair" (113). In the end, neither Alypius nor Augustine married as they became monks and then clergymen, a move that might be interpreted as a retreat from sexual troubles.

Again, the mysteries of love and friendship seem to transcend the boundaries of Augustine's conception of Christian doctrine. Despite the central role friendship played in his life and his high esteem for it, the moral implications of his relationships are never clear. On the romantic side, Augustine presents sinful extramarital relationships, like his promiscuous behavior in adolescence, and allegedly sinful ones that seem in fact to bring great joy and meaning, such as his relationship with the mother of his son. As far as marriage is concerned, the only relationship he discusses is that of his mother and father, a relationship with no evidence of affection and positive evidence of abuse (171). Furthermore, it is overwhelming a marriage between a devout Christian and an arrogant pagan, which can hardly be said to serve Augustine's idea of divine purpose.

Conspicuously, Augustine speaks passively of the events that led up to his planned marriage. Rather than identify the person who arranged his marriage, he writes, "the pressure on me was kept up, and an offer for a certain girl was made on my behalf" (112). Instead of naming the person who forced his lover to leave, he writes that she "was ripped from my side, being regarded as an obstacle to my marriage" (113). Since Augustine makes it clear that his mother did not approve of his extramarital affair and that she was agitating for his marriage,

it is reasonable to infer that she was the unnamed agent, an inference that Boulding speaks of as a certainty in her introduction (11). Augustine's failure to attribute these acts to Monica may be a manifestation, conscious or not, of the fact that his heart remained broken—that even if Monica was acting in the supposed interests of God and her son's salvation, something within Augustine never believed that the love he felt for this unnamed woman was wrong.

One final note of interest from Book VI concerns Ambrose's reading habit. Augustine describes how Ambrose's "eyes would travel across the pages and his mind would explore the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent" (97). To a modern reader, this manner of reading is completely unremarkable, so unremarkable in fact that to take such specific note of it seems odd. Many critics and historians over the years have taken this as an indication that silent reading was a novelty for Augustine, something that may not have existed prior to his time. While it is true that most early writing was meant to be read aloud, there is evidence that silent reading existed long before Augustine described it in *Confessions*, although it may have been uncommon (Fenton, James. "Read My Lips." *The Guardian*, 29 Jul. 2006). Even if the academic community is far from consensus on the matter, Augustine's description positions Ambrose as an uncommonly sedate and contemplative scholar.

Book VII

Book VII, Chapters 1-8 Summary

Although Augustine had begun to accept that God must by definition be "imperishable, inviolable and unchangeable" (115), he continued to struggle to conceive of how that might be, unable to imagine anything so great yet immaterial. The nature of evil continued to trouble him as well. Though slowly his conception of human will brought him to an understanding that sin arises solely within humans, independent of God's infinite goodness, he could not fathom why an all-powerful, benevolent God would have allowed this to be. Still, fearful of an early death and an eternity of damnation, Augustine increasingly trusted in this conception of God.

Augustine at last abandoned astrology when his friend Firminus told him how he had been born at the exact same time as an enslaved child of a neighboring household. Astrology dictated they be assigned the same horoscope predicting the same future, and yet the enslaved boy had remained deeply disadvantaged while Firminus flourished. This

inconsistency was irreconcilable for Augustine, who used Firminus's story to dissuade others from astrology. Grateful at his release from these beliefs, Augustine regrets that his pride, though decreasing, still made him unready for full Christian enlightenment.

Book VII, Chapters 9-17 Summary

Encountering Neoplatonist texts, Augustine was struck by their similarities with Biblical teachings. Despite many differences as well, such as their failure to acknowledge Jesus as God, this philosophy inspired Augustine to meditate. Consequently, he experienced a powerful vision of otherworldly, immaterial light, which he identified as God and as evidence of God's truth, an experience after which "no possibility of doubt remained to me" (128).

Augustine's epiphany brought him to understand that, to make his life worthwhile, he must strive above all to live as one with God. It also shed light on his questions about evil. Prizing existence as inherently good yet recognizing that all material existence is of a lesser good than God, Augustine conceptualized his theory of sin, that evil arises from unbalanced appreciation of the material world, which is doomed for destruction and thus away from good. He also recognized that, despite the variation of goodness throughout the material world, the whole of God's creation is better than its best components would be on their own, and that to be virtuous is to appreciate everything in its proper measure.

Although Augustine credited his ability to appreciate the material world as further evidence of God's power, he found himself "not yet capable of clinging" to God due to persistent sinful habits (131). A path forward would not emerge until he "embraced the mediator between God and humankind, Jesus" (132), whom he still struggled to conceptualize in the way needed, confounded by competing claims. Still, Augustine began proclaiming the truths of Christianity out of pride. Finally, the writings of Paul began to resolve Augustine's remaining hesitations.

Book VII Analysis

Book VII contains far fewer biographical details than any other up until this point. With Manicheism and the philosophy of the Academics abandoned, Augustine spends most of Book VII explaining the steps that remained on his path toward conversion, of which there are essentially four: an ontological argument for God's existence, Neoplatonism, the writings of Paul the Apostle, and the mediation of Jesus.

An ontological argument is one grounded in the nature of existence. The first Christian ontological argument is credited to Anselm of Canterbury, an 11th-century monk and saint. Anselm's proposition holds that, since it is greater to exist than not to exist, and since God is defined as that entity greater than which nothing can be conceived, God must exist, for if God, the greatest thing conceivable, did not exist, then whatever happened to be the greatest thing in existence would be inferior to God even though he did not exist, and yet this cannot be since his non-existence would make him inferior, which would then contradict his essence as the greatest thing conceivable. While many over the years have discounted Anselm's argument as a tautology—an argument that must be true simply by virtue of the definitions of its constituent terms and that therefore really proves nothing—their apparent logic has allowed them to endure and persuade for centuries (Oppy, Graham. "Ontological Arguments." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 2019).

As Augustine discounted the skepticism of the Academics, his ontological intuitions about God became a necessary step toward his acceptance of Christianity, even if he did not articulate them as a full argument for God's existence the way Anselm would:

> From the core of my being I believed you to be imperishable, inviolable and unchangeable, because although I did not understand why or how this could be, I saw quite plainly and with full conviction that anything perishable is inferior to what is imperishable, and I unhesitatingly reckoned the inviolable higher than anything subject to violation, and what is constant and unchanging better than what can be changed (115).

Although Augustine now accepted that the Christian God must by definition be real, he did not understand what form such a God could take and remained troubled that this God would have created a universe that included sin. The ideas of the Neoplatonists provided him what he needed to move forward.

At the core of Neoplatonist philosophy are the teachings of Plato, in particular his theory of forms. Plato posited that everything that we can perceive is in fact an imperfect manifestation of that thing's immaterial form, its flawless essence, which exists in some realm we cannot reach or perceive directly. Plato believed that our souls have some memory of these forms from a time when they, too, existed within that realm, and so we are able to judge how good or bad something is by recalling its form and determining how closely that form is

approximated. A circle is commonly used to demonstrate this. To draw a perfect circle is impossible, and yet the fact that we can all attempt to draw a perfect circle demonstrates that we can conceive of a perfect circle, which Plato would say is evidence that we have some memory of the form of circularity. Instinctively, this form allows us to judge a good circle from a bad one. To misjudge not only would be evidence of insufficient time devoted to remembering the forms, but would hamper any utility we hoped to obtain from that circle, as a circular wheel, for instance, will be more useful the more perfectly circular it is (Silverman, Allan. "Plato's Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 2014).

Although these ideas were spiritual even for Plato, they took on a more fully religious dimension in the writings of third-century Egyptian philosopher Plotinus, the father of Neoplatonism. Plotinus proposed that the entire spiritual nature of the universe functions in the same manner, that everything we perceive was created as a consequence of the excessive spiritual excellence of "the One," a sort of fundamental form of everything, and that our intellect, which allows us to perceive these things and appreciate their divine origin, is proof of the One. Thus, failure to root existence in the One is akin to misjudging the quality of a circle, and that failure prevents one from living a virtuous, rational life (Silverman, Allan. "Plato's Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 2014). These ideas allowed Augustine for the first time to understand that "evil has no being at all" (129), instead arising out of disproportionate valuation of God's perfect goodness, which must be valued above all, and the ranging levels of goodness throughout creation, each element of which must be valued according to the degree to which it is in fact good.

While this conceptualization would have enormous implications not just for Augustine but for Christianity as a whole, he was at that point unable to "continue steadfastly in the enjoyment of my God" (130). Even after his Neoplatonist vision, the One, or God in Augustine's conception, felt too distant and intangible to give Augustine the strength he needed to put his "carnal habit" behind him and live a Christian life (130). The answer lay in the final two steps awaiting Augustine on his journey toward conversion: Jesus was the mediating figure Augustine needed, but he would require the writings of Paul the Apostle to reach a useful and accessible conception of Jesus.

That Jesus should function as the necessary steppingstone between an imperfect human such as Augustine and a perfect God comes as no surprise. This aspect of Christianity has long been one of its greatest appeals. Augustine provides an eloquent explanation of Jesus's allure for a sinner like him:

> Jesus [...] raises up to himself those creatures who bow before him; but in these lower regions he has built himself a humble dwelling from our clay, and used it to cast down from their pretentious selves those who do not bow before him, and make a bridge to bring them to himself (132).

For many like Augustine, the divine feels far more attainable when it takes human form, and especially when that human form has made the ultimate sacrifice so that our inevitable and original sins will be forgiven.

Naturally, Augustine had long been aware of Jesus. The issue, then, was that Augustine's conception of Jesus was hazy, muddled by competing viewpoints on who and what Jesus was, most of which the Catholics Church recently had or soon would declare heresies. Tellingly, even his recollections are inconsistent. Here in Book VII his primary struggle was that he thought of Jesus as "no more than a man, though a man of excellent wisdom and without peer" (132), yet back in Book V he describes his issue as just the opposite, that he had been unable to conceive of a Jesus who was "born in the flesh" (90). Clearly, Augustine was in need of some credible source to facilitate a functional understanding of Jesus as both man and god, which was exactly what he found in Paul the Apostle.

That Paul was critical for Augustine is no surprise either. Without the writings of Paul, Christianity would be unrecognizable. Born Jewish and originally known as Saul of Tarsus, Paul never actually met Jesus. On the contrary, he actively persecuted early Christians after Jesus's crucifixion, angry that they were perverting his Jewish faith. A few years later, Paul claimed he had been visited by Jesus, an experience that resulted in his conversion to Christianity and a radical reframing of the religion. Paul took the teachings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, teachings that primarily depict Jesus as human and, despite some variations, were firmly rooted in Jewish doctrine, and reinterpreted them to emphasize Jesus's divinity, his sacrifice, the salvation that sacrifice promised, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Most significantly, he universalized Christianity, overriding the assertions attributed to Jesus in the Gospels that instructed his followers to adhere to Jewish laws, such as

mandated circumcision (Sanders, E.P. "St. Paul the Apostle." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 30 Apr. 2020). Truly, an understanding of Christ and Christianity in the form that had become dominant and that Augustine himself would reaffirm and expand is impossible without a deep familiarity with the works of Paul. It naturally follows, then, that upon studying these writings, Augustine's "problems melted away [and] your chaste words presented a single face to me, and I learned to rejoice with reverence" (134).

At least as important to this spiritual progress was the epiphany Augustine experienced as a result of his Neoplatonist meditation. In the end, most believers do not reach their faith via logic and argumentation, even if, for someone like Augustine, these approaches are necessary as well. Still, most people require a so-called religious experience, and this appears to be exactly what Augustine underwent when he "entered under your guidance the innermost places of my being" (127). The manner in which he describes the "incommutable light" he encountered is highly reminiscent of the equally inexplicable "faculty [Monica] could not explain in words" by which his mother claimed to be able to identify God (112). Augustine's light was "far above my spiritual ken, transcending my mind: not this common light which every carnal eye can see" (127). Augustine further claims that, in this same experience, he heard God's voice, but that he "heard it as one hears a word in the heart" (128). This experience, more singly formative for his conversion than any philosophical realization, reached Augustine in no verifiable manner, via none of the five senses. Much like Paul's visitation from Jesus, Augustine's experience was an irrational, inexplicable communion with the divine. Afterwards, conversion was only a matter of time.

For modern readers, both Christian and non-Christian, slavery's matter-of-fact appearance may be concerning. While the practice is universally decried nowadays and every mainstream branch of Christianity invokes scripture to condemn it, in Augustine's time and long after, slavery was a fact of life ordained by the Bible, a fact that may explain why the only thing he finds worthy of objection in Firminus's story is its reliance on astrology, not the owning of a human being. With other moral positions that have changed drastically over the history of Christianity, how Augustine's perspectives may or may not have shifted remains a matter for speculation. However, with slavery Augustine eventually proved to be far ahead of his time. About 25 years later, Augustine wrote in *The City of God*, "[God] did not intend that His rational creature, who was made in His image, should have dominion over anything but the irrational creation,—not man over man, but man over the beasts. [...] The prime cause, then, of slavery is sin" (Aurelius Augustine of Hippo. *The City of God.* Translated by Marcus Dods, T. & T. Clark, 1871, p. 324. *Project Gutenberg,* 8 Apr. 2014).

Book VIII

Book VIII, Chapters 1-5 Summary

To overcome his hesitation to convert, Augustine sought help from Simplicianus, another bishop in Milan. Augustine shared his struggles and was relieved to learn that the bishop approved of Neoplatonism. Simplicianus then told Augustine the story of Victorinus, an elderly teacher he had known in Rome. Victorinus had been a prominent pagan, but, after taking an interest in the Bible, he overcame his fear of social ostracism and converted to Christianity, proclaiming his faith before a large and supportive audience.

Augustine marvels that the heart "rejoice[s] more intensely over the salvation of a soul which is despaired of but then freed from great danger" (141), recalling the parable of the Prodigal Son as well as several other relevant situations from scripture and from life in general. He generalizes this principle considerably, even tracing it through Jesus's resurrection. Augustine also wonders that the conversion of famous people like Victorinus is so much greater a cause for joy, satisfying himself that "whenever joy is shared among many, even the gladness of individuals is increased" (143). Finally, he notes that, even if God gives preference to the poor and lowly, the conversion of a person of prestige like Victorinus merits greater celebration since it demonstrates more fully the influence of God.

Having heard Simplicianus's story, Augustine longed to follow Victorinus's model, but still he struggled to overcome his compulsion for lust.

Book VIII, Chapters 6-12 Summary

Augustine and Alypius met a state employee and Christian named Ponticianus, who shared the story of a trip he had taken with three colleagues, two of whom happened upon a book about Antony, an Egyptian monk. Inspired by Antony's story, the two men became monks themselves. Ponticianus's story was transformative for Augustine, who perceived God behind it "forcing me to mark how despicable I was" (148). Ashamed, Augustine realized that he had accepted the truth of God for over a decade but had avoided reforming out of cowardice.

Greatly agitated, Augustine raved to Alypius and fled to an adjacent garden. Followed by his friend, Augustine processed his crisis, which was manifesting itself in frenzied movements and flushed face. Amazed at the control he maintained over his body, Augustine wondered why he could not control his mind so successfully, blaming internal division resulting from

his inability to own and conquer his original sin rather than good and evil forces competing within him. Overcome, Augustine rushed away from Alypius and burst into tears. Just then, he heard a child singing, "Pick it up and read, pick it up and read" (156), and he took it as divine instruction. He returned to Alypius and picked up the writings of Paul he had left there. Opening the text, he read, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires" (157). Augustine's struggle ended, and he not only converted but committed to celibacy. His composure regained, he explained everything to Alypius, who confessed to experiencing something similar. Opening Paul again, Alypius read, "Make room for the person who is weak in faith" (157), and so he also converted. The two immediately informed Monica, who rejoiced.

Book VIII Analysis

In Book VIII Augustine presents a very brief period of his life, its central story covering a single day, and yet the transformation he underwent is so enormous that it would be no understatement to call that day the single most important of his life. That morning, although his "perception of [Christianity's] truth […] was certain" (144), he continued to be "weighed down by the pleasant burden of the world […] succumbing to my lust" (144-45), and so he remained no closer to conversion. The advice he sought from Simplicianus, while helpful, had ultimately been fruitless. The push he needed would instead come by surprise, a fact that falls neatly in line with his conviction that God was at work to bring about his conversion.

On first glance it may seem strange that Ponticianus's story succeeded where others had failed. As a story of conversion, it is not remarkably different from what Simplicianus told of Victorinus. Both concern people of importance who are exposed to Christian doctrine and then undergo remarkable conversions. On its surface, Victorinus's story seems the more relevant of the two for Augustine since both figures had committed themselves to other religions and were known for their haughtiness. What Ponticianus's story includes that Simplicianus's does not, though, is a deeper commitment by its converts. While Victorinus proudly became a Christian, Ponticianus's colleagues went a step further and became monks. That this possibility had never occurred to Augustine previously is suggested when he writes of his surprise in learning about Antony that same day: "[Ponticianus's] discourse led on […] to the proliferation of monasteries […]. We had known nothing of all this. There was even a monastery full of good brothers at Milan, outside the city walls, under Ambrose's care, yet we were unaware of it" (147). In light of this, the reasonable conclusion is that Ponticianus' story brought about Augustine's conversion because it highlighted the possibility of absolute devotion to God, which is precisely the direction Augustine would take. In characterizing his

conversion, Augustine notes specifically that he was “no longer seeking a wife” (157). Together, these facts suggest that Augustine may have been uneasy about the prospect of the sexual moderation entailed by marriage, preferring instead the simplicity of celibacy, an interpretation further supported in Book X: “I struggle every day against gluttony, for eating and drinking are not something I can decide to cut away once and for all, and never touch again, as I have been able to do with sexual indulgence” (208).

Even if Simplicianus’s story was less formative, reflecting on it does provide Augustine his greatest opportunity yet to explore the themes of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Augustine is at his most candidly uncertain in musing on why it is that even God in his infinite wisdom prefers "one repentant sinner over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance” (141). He expands this question to other realms, wondering, “What is going on in our minds, then, that we should be more highly delighted at finding cherished objects, or having them restored to us, than if we had always kept them safe?” (141), and noting, “There is no pleasure in eating and drinking unless the discomfort of hunger and thirst have preceded them” (142). Augustine even traces the curiosity to the story of Jesus, “that young man who had died but come back to life, had perished but was found” (142), amazed that, despite God’s pure and boundless goodness, “In every case greater sorrow issues in greater joy” (142).

Augustine might be unable to explain the parable’s mystery, but the manner in which he presents his own story indicates a deeply intuitive understanding of its logic. It is not hard to imagine how much less engaging *Confessions* would be if its protagonist were virtuous throughout or his sins were glossed over. Love of the underdog and the redemption arc are at the heart of the timeless popularity of the story of this particular prodigal son.

Augustine’s painfully frank depiction of the extensive hesitation before his conversion may be the deepest of those sinful depths that have helped *Confessions* endure. His desperate prayer that God “Grant me chastity and self-control, but please not yet” is one of the most famous lines from all his writings (149). It is at once remarkable and relatable that Augustine had enough faith in God to pray to him for help yet enough pride that he would request God delay his salvation that he might maintain “the morbid lust which I was more anxious to satisfy than to snuff out” (149). Better than any other, this line reveals the foolish tendency we have to put off that which is good for us even when we know it is good for us, for "ingrained evil [is] more powerful [...] than new-grafted good” (154).

From this same episode comes Augustine's surprisingly extreme assertion that he then felt the previous twelve years of his life "had gone to waste, and I with them" (149). While this evaluation is not terribly unexpected in and of itself, its noteworthiness comes from his connection of Ponticianus' two converts' reading about Antony with his discovery of Cicero's *Hortensius,* the text that convinced Augustine that wisdom was worth seeking. In the moments preceding his conversion, he characterizes the meandering path that had led him to this point as year of blatant disregard for that call: "I had been putting off the moment when by spurning earthly happiness I would clear space in my life to search for wisdom" (149). This perspective implies that, at his core, Augustine never believed in Manicheism and always recognized the truth of Christianity but simply avoided confronting these facts to enable him to persist in his lustful ways. If there is any truth to this, either it must have been deeply subconscious or he must have later abandoned this perspective since such a reality starkly negates the enormous amount of time and effort he had in fact expended in reading, discussing, and considering various philosophical and religious outlooks over this time period, as well as the painstaking thoughtfulness with which he relates these experiences in *Confessions*.

Book IX

Book IX, Chapters 1-6 Summary

Augustine thanks God for liberating him from his sinful inclinations, then tells of his decision to resign from the work he now viewed as empowering sinners. He had developed lung problems that teaching aggravated and, not wanting to be boastful in his conversion, was grateful that this health issue provided an unrelated excuse for resigning, but still he resolved to wait until a holiday break. He acknowledges this delay was sinful but trusts in God's forgiveness.

Following the leads of Alypius and Augustine, Nebridius began to consider conversion. Another friend, Verecundus, would eventually convert as well, though he remained skeptical at that time. Still, Verecundus offered up his villa outside Milan as a place for Alypius and Augustine to spend the holiday break. There, Augustine studied and wrote, conceptualizing his new faith in writings he concedes contain "a whiff of scholastic pride" (162). The Psalms of David captivated and impassioned him, increasing through their wisdom his ability to resist sin and put God first, and he wished Manichees and other non-Christians could experience them through him and so be saved.

The holidays over, Augustine announced his retirement, returned to Milan, and was baptized alongside Alypius and Adeodatus (here naming his son for the first time). He thanks God that, despite being born of sin, Adeodatus was fair and wise, so wise that his ideas became the source for one of Augustine's books. Augustine shares that Adeodatus died not long thereafter.

Book IX, Chapters 7-9 Summary

Augustine tells how, a year earlier, the empress Justina had persecuted Ambrose's congregation for their disagreement with her heretical beliefs, resulting in a sit-in at Ambrose's church to protest her policies. Having taken part, Augustine claims this event established the practice of singing hymns to inspire courage. Augustine alleges that Ambrose then had a vision that led him to discover the bodies of two saints and that, upon their recovery, several people were healed, miracles that caused Justina to relent.

Augustine met a fellow African and Christian named Evodius. Together, they resolved to return to Africa with any who would join them and serve God there. On the way, in the Italian seaport of Ostia, Monica died. Augustine shares her life story.

Monica grew up in a Christian family, though she credited a strictly virtuous servant as the primary source of her own piety. Still, Monica developed an intemperate taste for wine, which Augustine fears would have ruined her had not a maid "call[ed] her in the most bitterly insulting language a wine-swiller" (170), thereby ending the habit. When she came of age, she was married off to Patricius. She prayed for him to find God, and her moral rectitude "made her beautiful in her husband's eyes" (170). Still, he cheated on her frequently, though she obeyed him without question regardless, her servility preventing beatings. Disdainful of gossip and gifted in mediation, she succeeded in converting her husband just before his death. Augustine suggests that, in serving his own faith community, Monica rounded out a life lived in accord with God.

Book IX, Chapters 10-12 Summary

In Ostia, just before Monica's unexpected death, Monica and Augustine stood overlooking a garden and shared an intimate conversation in which they speculated on "what the eternal life of the saints would be like" (173). Together, their meditations soared higher and higher, joining son and mother in divine bliss and a vision of God, which Augustine relates as a poem. Following this, Monica said there was nothing left for her on Earth. Humbled that all her

prayers had been answered and asserting, “Nothing is far from God” (176), no longer did Monica request that her body be brought back to Africa and buried next to Patricius as she had long desired.

When she died, Adeodatus sobbed, but Augustine suppressed all outward grief out of conviction that she lived on with God. Still, he missed her and felt immense pain and sadness. The next day, he did allow himself to cry alone, though this excessive affection shames him. Looking back, he cries again for her sins, acknowledging that neither he nor she would pretend that her life had been free of evil, regardless of how virtuous she was. Augustine ends by praising her and asking God to preserve the memory of both of his parents among Christians.

Book IX Analysis

Book IX concludes the autobiographical portion of *Confessions*, the remaining pages committed to philosophical exploration and Biblical commentary. Moving no further than Monica’s death in 387 CE, Augustine leaves unexplained the 13 or so years that passed between that event and the writing of this book. As this was the period in which Augustine became a bishop and began his influential ministry in Hippo Regius (modern Annaba, Algeria), Roman Africa’s second most important city, Augustine may have left out these years under the presumption that most readers of the day would already have been familiar with his doings of that period (O'Donnell, James. “St. Augustine.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Nov. 2021).

Still, Augustine did not actually become a bishop until eight or nine years after Monica’s death, nor did he even move to Hippo or become a clergyman until 391 CE. Until that point, he had lived as a monk in Thagaste, raising Adeodatus on his family’s estate until the boy’s untimely death just a year after their return. In 391 CE, Augustine went to Hippo to establish a monastery. Instead, he found himself forced by a crowd into joining the clergy to replace an outgoing bishop (“Saint Augustine Never Thought of Becoming a Priest.” *Agustino Recoletos*, The Order of Augustinian Recollects, 2019). Thus, Augustine’s meteoric rise, impressive even in his lifetime and which would end with him as one of the most influential thinkers in the history of Christianity, began against his will. Perhaps this fact contributed to his decision to end his narrative with his mother’s death. Although throughout *Confessions* Augustine often thanks God for influencing his future through others against his will, perhaps he saw this explanation as less appropriate post-conversion, when he ought to have been better attuned to God’s plan for him.

Whatever Augustine's reasons may have been for ending his narrative where he does, the story of Monica's life and the religious experience they shared just before her death serve as powerful thematic capstones. An autobiography by its very nature cannot pass judgment on its subject's entire life, but, while Augustine could not say with any certainty—not to mention humility—whether he was heaven-bound, his prominent inclusion of Monica's life story and his confidence in asserting that "she neither died in misery nor died altogether" allow him to suggest the way his life might one day be remembered (176), or at least the way he hopes it will. The parallels between Monica's drinking and his pear theft emphasize the similarity of their journeys. When he describes her motivations as deriving "not from any real craving for drink, but from a certain exuberance of youthful naughtiness" (169), he sounds as if he could be narrating his own rationale back in Book II.

Perhaps even more significant is the experience Augustine and Monica share overlooking the garden in Ostia, which constitutes the culmination of Augustine's religious enlightenment. Reminiscent of the Neoplatonism-inspired vision he describes in Book VII, this epiphany goes even further: "And as we talked and panted for [the land of God], we just touched the edge of it by the utmost leap of our hearts; then, sighing and unsatisfied, we left the first-fruits of our spirits captive there, and returned" (173). While before, Augustine had only seen a light and heard a voice, here he asserts that he and his mother actually reached God's realm and left parts of themselves there. It is hard to imagine how any mortal could experience the Christian divine more closely than this without dying, and it is fitting that Augustine should not have reached this point alone. Throughout *Confessions*, he has marveled at the mystery of human relationships, their power and allure often equaling and eluding that of God. The experience he has with Monica, then, suggests that the greatest joy and truth may only be accessible when love of the divine and love for other humans are wed.

Nevertheless, Augustine makes it clear which of these loves he values most when discussing the grief he felt following his mother's death. The pain he speaks of is reminiscent of that which plagued him after his friend's death in Book IV, and yet his conversion has granted him incredible mastery over outward manifestation of sadness. When he does cry, even though it is all alone, he deems it a sin that must be confessed, viewing his grief as a reminder that "any sort of habit is bondage" (177), unacceptable given his belief that no soul should be bound to anything other than God. To modern readers, this denial of basic human emotions may seem severe and even unhealthy, and it is conspicuous given his recognition of the value of love

between humans, so recently made clear by the story of the garden in Ostia. This contradiction is yet another example of the complexity of Augustine's life experiences transcending the framework of his faith.

Modern readers may also be troubled by Monica's perspectives on the role of the wife, grounded though they may be in scripture. Augustine reports that, in order to avoid confrontation, Monica overlooked Patricius's infidelities, and she managed his excessive anger by "learn[ing] to offer him no resistance, by deed or even by word" (171). Furthermore, she chastised her friends when they complained about their physically abusive husbands, reminding them "with serious import that from the time they had heard their marriage contracts read out they had been in duty bound to consider these as legal documents which made slaves of them" (171). Augustine makes no objection to this state of affairs. Rather, he approves of his mother for having silenced her own agency and humanity in service of his father. This is tragically ironic given his condemnation of slavery, although the profound sexism of the world Augustine lived in almost certainly prevented him from realizing it.

One final concern for modern readers is Augustine's vague depiction of the actions of Empress Justina, accusing her of simply "persecuting your faithful Ambrose, in the interest of the Arian heresy by which she had been led astray" (167). Though Augustine implies that Ambrose's life was at risk, he does not explain how exactly this necessitates the sit-in. Augustine returns once more to the political context when he claims that, following the alleged miracles, "although [Justina] was not brought to the healthy state of believing, her persecuting fury was curbed" (168). These characterizations are conspicuously reductive, and indeed the historical record reveals Augustine's account to be oversimplification and exaggeration at once:

> The Arian Court of Valentinian II, urged on by Valentinian's Arian mother Justina, brought about the conflict by demanding one of the basilicas in Milan for Arian worship. Ambrose not surprisingly refused this request, whereupon the Court passed a law granting freedom of worship to Arians and threatening with the death penalty anyone—like Ambrose—who interfered with this freedom. The Court also made two attempts to seize a basilica—one of the attempts consisting of a siege of several days and nights. Ambrose's uncompromising stand was supported by the citizens of

Milan and was finally successful (Lenox-Conyngham, Andrew. "The Topography of the Basilica Conflict of A.D. 385/6 in Milan." *Historia*, vol. 31, no. 3, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982, p. 353. *JSTOR*, 2022)

Although the full story by no means vindicates Justina, it is inaccurate to describe her actions as persecution. Firstly, it is impossible to tell to what degree Justina was to blame for these occurrences as they came not from her but from the Court. Furthermore, her efforts to secure a site of worship for Arianism, a popular creed at the time, might well be praised, and the government seizure of property remains somewhat commonplace today, even if it is often condemned. Finally, there is no evidence that the alleged miracles had any impact on the Court's decision to stand down. Rather, Ambrose's sit-in seems to have been the determining factor. As for Ambrose himself, it appears he would only have risked execution had he prevented Arians from worshipping. Of course, considering how much more challenging it would have been in that time to research and fact-check an event like this as well as the likelihood that his sources were biased, Augustine's inaccuracies are understandable.

While Book IX may finally satisfy the reader's curiosity about Monica and, to a lesser extent, Patricius, Augustine reveals tantalizingly little about Adeodatus. All that Augustine shares about his son in *Confessions* can be summed up in a short list: He was born out of wedlock, he was left with Augustine when his parents separated, he was good-looking and clever, he was baptized alongside his father, he cried when his grandmother died, and he himself died not so long thereafter.

That there is more to Adeodatus's story and Augustine's feelings about him is suggested by his name alone, which is Latin for "godsend." Augustine was 18 when Adeodatus was born, a year away from becoming a Manichee. For Augustine and his unnamed lover to name their son this even though the child's very existence would have been viewed as immoral in both the pagan context of his father and the Christian context of his mother suggests that Augustine may have felt in his heart that his family was meant to be, regardless of societal judgments (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Illegitimacy." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Jul. 1998). If this were the case, it makes sense that a post-conversion Augustine might not want to dig too deeply into the moral quagmire at the heart of the matter.

One final reason why Augustine may have ended his personal narrative here is that by this point he had not only arrived at Christianity but also internalized a desire to spread his religion to others, thereby justifying the publication of *Confessions*. Immediately after converting, the previously vain Augustine passed up the opportunity to draw attention to himself by announcing his conversion and consequent retirement right away, choosing instead to take some time to regroup. Likely he chose to do so because he wanted to make sure that, when he did reveal the truth, he would be able to direct the attention toward persuasive elements of Christianity rather than toward himself. During the interim, he thought extensively on how best to save others, even the Manichees, against whom he still bore some resentment:

Oh, that they could have heard me, those who still love emptiness and chase falsehood! They might perhaps be so shaken as to spew it out, and then you would hear them when they cried to you, because he who for us died a true death in the flesh now intercedes on their behalf (164).

Not long thereafter, Augustine seized an opportunity to return to Thagaste, identifying it as the "place where we could best serve you" (168). Ending Book IX, Augustine calls on God to preserve the memory of his parents in order to "inspire your servants who are my brethren, your children who are my masters, whom I now serve with heart and voice and pen" (180). Even if Augustine failed to include, or in some cases even anticipate, the steps that awaited him between the end of his narrative and the writing of this evangelical book, the foundation of his proselytism was firmly laid, allowing him to use Books IX-XIII to flesh out his vision of and for Christianity.

Books X-XIII

Book X, Chapters 1-17 Summary

Citing divine intimacy as motivation and discounting "life's experiences," Augustine commits to "do[ing] truth [...] in my heart by confession in your presence, and with my pen before many witnesses" (181). Augustine then goes over the reasons why he is confessing: to condemn sin, to glorify God, to bring joy to loving, charitable readers, and to let them know his heart. He hopes that wayward readers will not read his words and judge him, "For it is you, Lord, who judge me" (184).

Augustine wonders what he is loving when he loves God. He experiences and appreciates the

beauty of the world and all its creatures through his senses, but he knows this is only evidence of God, not God himself, though he asserts that he has corresponding spiritual senses within that allow him to know God.

He begins to explore memory, marveling at its enormous capacity and concluding that, while material things exist as sensory images in his mind, skills and ideas exist as themselves, suggesting they are already in our minds but are unremembered and that thinking is in fact a process of collecting forgotten memories. Emotions he views similarly in that they have no sensory correlate, and yet Augustine is amazed that an emotion can be recalled without being experienced. He wonders doubtfully whether this recall indicates that our memory preserves emotions via some manner of non-sensory image. Finally, he investigates forgetfulness, which he feels cannot be truly present in our memories, the chaos of his questions suggesting this is the greatest perplexity. Contradictions aside, Augustine reaffirms the majesty of memory but suggests we must transcend it to know God, but then reverses course, realizing God must be somewhere in our minds or we could have no conception of him whatsoever.

Book X, Chapters 18-27 Summary

Augustine suggests that we can only remember that which was forgotten if some part of it remains unforgotten. True happiness, then, derived by knowing God, must be in our memories, or we would neither know what it is nor attempt to find it. Desired by all, happiness functions uniquely in our minds in Augustine's conception. He notes that happiness takes many forms and is reached by many avenues, but God is the only path to pure happiness, which is "joy in the truth" (200), though those who are deceived may shun the truth to protect their sinful happiness.

Augustine cannot determine how or where God resides in the memory and concludes he transcends it entirely, for God is everywhere. Exalted, Augustine celebrates God with one of his most famous poems, which begins, "Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new" (203).

Noting that his hardships endure and necessitate God's mercy, Augustine takes inventory of his sins.

Book X, Chapters 28-42 Summary

Categorizing his temptations by sense, Augustine begins with touch. He regrets that he still remembers his sexual exploits and is especially disturbed that he dreams of sex and cannot prevent unconscious arousal. He prays for total extinguishment of his lusts. Proceeding to taste, Augustine prays for relief from gluttony, which he finds particularly vexing since he cannot abstain from eating. He cautiously suggests that smell and sound do not trouble him, though he acknowledges his understanding is limited and worries that singing may be a trap, even when the lyrics are holy. He concedes that he struggles to avoid becoming captivated by beautiful sights and criticizes artisans who add to this challenge by creating unnecessarily beautiful works. Still, he credits himself for generally remembering to look through them to their source and thanks God for forgiving him when he fails.

Augustine additionally chastises himself for "concupiscence of the eyes" (214), which he defines as desire for unnecessary experiences and knowledge. Though he transcends these experiences to praise God's creation, he blames himself that his initial interest arises out of base curiosity.

The problem of pride particularly confounds Augustine, even if he struggles less with it than he used to. To minister well inevitably brings praise, which he confesses he still enjoys, and he knows he should be glad on behalf of those who praise him since to praise is a virtue, but still he is unable to discern to what degree he is successful in preventing praise from motivating him and thus cannot fathom his pridefulness. Again acknowledging his limited understanding, he thanks God for healing him regardless.

Augustine states the need for mediation between humanity and God, condemning the Devil as a false mediator, praising Jesus as the true mediator, and thanking God for sacrificing his son for this purpose.

Book XI, Chapters 1-13 Summary

After reiterating the value of confession, Augustine prays for truthful understanding of scripture that he might not mislead his followers.

Augustine wonders how God made heaven and earth, wishing he could speak to Moses, whom tradition credits as author of Genesis, about the matter. He concludes that creation resulted from a mysterious, eternal, sublime command uttered by God, "that Word who is God" (228), a term associated with Jesus. He wonders further how this eternal Word could have brought about a world in which nothing lasts, though he notes that Jesus can be seen as the beginning not just in a temporal sense but also in a spiritual sense, as in the source of goodness from which everything emanates and to which all must return.

Augustine criticizes the shallow understanding of those who would ask what God was doing before creation, claiming the question is illogical since time is part of God's creation and God himself does not experience the passage of time.

Book XI, Chapters 14-31 Summary

He then explores the concept of time itself, proposing that the idea, however familiar, has no true essence with the possible exception of the present moment. Probing further though wondering if to do so is sacrilegious, Augustine asserts that even judgments about time have no basis in truth. Augustine then reverses course and concedes that practical experience indicates that time must be real, regardless of its inability to hold up to logical scrutiny. He reasons that future and past events must exist yet be hidden and that, wherever they are, they must actually exist in the present or they could not exist at all. Confessing that his intellect is overwhelmed, Augustine nevertheless proceeds, determining that all memories of the past and predictions of the future are rooted firmly in the present. Conceding the utility of past and future as concepts despite their nonexistence, Augustine marvels that it is possible to measure time, begging God for help understanding these mysteries.

Augustine writes of a man who told him that the movements of astronomical objects constitute time, a perspective Augustine rejects, asserting that they do not constitute time but merely mark its passage. Wondering if his certainty despite confusion indicates that "I simply do not know how to articulate what I know" (241), Augustine trusts that God will show him more. Sensing God's guidance, Augustine suggests that what we perceive as time is in fact "tension of consciousness" (242), that to conceive of time is a testament to the power of the mind, which can produce moments as images and thereby expect the future, attend the present, and remember the past. Augustine ends by praying for relief from this illusion so that he may anchor himself in God's calm eternity.

Book XII Summary

Augustine begins exploring creation as described in Genesis. He establishes his interpretation that the heaven of the first verse is not the sky or cosmos but "heaven's heaven," (248), the imperceptible realm of God. He asserts that that verse's earth, described as formless and invisible, was a primordial "nothing-something" (250), the furthest from God that material creation can be and yet the essential foundation of all that followed. Augustine notes that time is not accounted for in this primal stage, for the formless earth was empty of occurrence and heaven's heaven so tightly bound to God that it "participates in your eternity" (252). Augustine exalts God for his eternity and creation and venerates heaven's heaven, "that mind of all the citizens of your holy city" (253) where Augustine longs to be, for existing at the highest possible material state, the other end of the spectrum from formless earth.

Augustine praises scripture for being accessible yet profound and expresses hatred for those who denigrate it. Invoking a host of Biblical minutiae and repeatedly shifting perspectives, Augustine spends the remainder of Book XII cycling between the following ideas. He speaks of people who challenge his interpretations while admitting the truths they reveal. Detailing several other common interpretations of Genesis's opening verse, Augustine further justifies his own while asserting the impossibility of knowing which, if any, was in the mind of the author. He defends all interpretations so long as they presume honest intent and reveal some element of God's truth, on which he lays several specific limits. Prizing interpretability over specificity, he celebrates scripture's capacity to nourish with such versatility.

Augustine ends by confessing he feels limited to advancing the interpretation that feels truest to him, hoping it will be the best possible.

Book XIII, Chapters 1-16 Summary

Augustine calls God into his soul, humbled at his creator who calls to him without need. Augustine then returns to creation, which God similarly bestowed out of supreme goodness rather than necessity, suggesting all of creation should cling to God in gratitude. Discussing creation's first light, Augustine asserts this too was unnecessary but was made to allow greater closeness to the divine. Realizing the first verse of Genesis contains the Holy Trinity—Father as creator, Son as beginning and source of creation, and Holy Spirit that "hung poised over the waters" (277)—Augustine rejoices. The later arrival of the Holy Spirit gives Augustine pause, but he finds answers by drawing metaphorical connections with the Holy Spirit's

power for lifting the human soul. He proposes that through this same power the Holy Spirit created the first light. The Trinity, he asserts, is particularly challenging to understand, so he cautiously draws an analogy to a far inferior trinity within each of us: being, knowledge, and will—distinct yet intrinsic parts of each individual.

Beginning an allegorical survey of each day of creation that establishes his vision of holy society, he returns to the light of the first day, seeing in it God's power to turn us back toward him. The sky, created on day two, becomes the scroll of scripture, spread across the world to enlighten humanity below. The third day saw the gathering of waters to make the seas, whose clashing currents represent people wrongly pursuing happiness. Land was formed, too, and on it, vegetation grew. In this process Augustine sees our souls as soil, watered by acts of mercy from God and one another.

Book XIII, Chapters 17-38 Summary

Augustine asserts that the sun, moon, and stars, which God created on the fourth day, signify the wisdom of the virtuous lighting up the sky's scripture to provide further guidance. The birds and fish of day five become signs and sacraments, earthly manifestations of divine law.

On the sixth day, God created animals on land, and Augustine imagines also a living soul produced, pure and in need of neither baptism nor conversion, the obedient animals within it like temptations to sin held at bay. The humans created that day constitute God's faithful. Made in God's image, they should aspire to him, not imitate each other, and their judgment over living creatures signifies their authority to guide the lost toward salvation. Augustine sees God's command to increase and multiply as justification of abundant interpretations of scripture and pathways toward faith, while he views the food God provided as the joy that results from godly actions. Resolving the contradiction implied by a timeless God looking on his works at multiple specific times, Augustine concludes that God's actions must be made intelligible in human terms and renounces those who fail to recognize God's goodness as the source of everything, tacitly criticizing the Manichees.

Augustine reviews creation literally and asserts that women are rationally equal but physically and sexually subordinate to men. He then reviews his figurative interpretation, naming it as a vision for church-led society. He exalts both readings, then speaks of the seventh day as the rest promised to God's followers. Augustine thanks God for answering his calls and concludes with an amen.

Books X-XIII Analysis

The final four books of *Confessions* perplex many modern readers who come looking for autobiography, and so they are a powerful reminder that autobiography is a label that others applied over a thousand years after Augustine's death. Even in the books that do chronicle Augustine's life, the author's choices, such as the inclusion of his infancy despite the impossibility of remembering it and the omission of many of the most basic details about his lover and son, make it clear that what personal details he does include are incidental, working to support just one aspect of his multifaceted goal of confession. These last four books, then, constitute the necessary endpoint of Augustine's ambitious undertaking, their importance underscored by their significantly greater lengths. Even if it is the first nine books that draw most modern readers in, it is they that are ancillary, nothing more than a useful framework for the central argument of the final books to rest upon.

After all, Augustine makes clear in Books X and XI, which focus on memory and time respectively, his belief that time is effectively unreal. Worse yet, our internal fabrication of time, made possible through the astounding powers of mind and memory, is a distraction from Augustine's eternal God, whose understanding operates independent of time, shown through Augustine's regretful confession that "I have leapt down into the flux of time where all is confusion to me" (246). Despite this belief, Augustine spends nine books willingly relating his life story, engaging heavily in the illusion of time. Even if he threads Christian doctrine throughout his narrative, surely it would be nobler for him to speak solely of God.

Here it is useful to remember Augustine's training in rhetoric. Although he came to view that work as hollow, *Confessions* is proof positive that he did not abandon its lessons. Augustine's stunningly candid story draws readers in so that they will stick around for the argument he actually wants to make, which is in the end an argument about how the church should function, a justification of the role he wanted holy leaders like himself to play. His life story illustrates that argument to help readers grasp it. By disparaging the Manichees, defending Catholicism, and positioning himself as a figure of redemption, it assuages the concerns of Christians who might not otherwise have trusted the opinions of a once-antagonistic outsider. None of this is lessened by the possibility that some of Augustine's stories were likely to have been exaggerated if not fabricated altogether. As he explains when considering the intents of the authors of scripture, "I would rather write it in such a way that my words would reinforce for each reader whatever truth he was able to grasp" (273). Under this logic, anything Augustine could do to broaden his story's appeal without diminishing its allegiance to holy

truthfulness would have been justifiable. In this sense, the value of the first nine books relative to the final four bears resemblance to Augustine's cautious approval of the singing of hymns: "[o]ur minds are more deeply moved to devotion by those holy words when they are sung, and more ardently inflamed to piety, than would be the case without singing" (209).

The first nine books also serve as tangible evidence of the power of memory and mind, which Augustine probes deeply in Book X. Once Augustine has brought this power to the fore through a dizzying series of investigations, questions, and reflections that turn on his understanding of Neoplatonist ideas on the topic (see Book VII Analysis), he can comfortably assert that the mind's majesty is sufficient to allow God to "dwel[l] in my memory" (200), a tricky, borderline blasphemous notion given the excessive greatness that is so fundamental to Christian understanding of the divine. Augustine's main purpose in this book emerges from this complexity: Even if the human intellect is vast enough to contain God, it requires a truly disciplined soul to be "full of [God]" (203).

With this established, Augustine has a framework to provide guidance to readers seeking salvation as long as he can demonstrate he himself possesses the proper discipline—the crucial implication being that Augustine's insight may, if followed, bring all of creation back to God. He has been previewing this guidance every step of the way, but he immediately takes on this task more directly with the remainder of Book X, which provides an inventory of those sins that continue to plague him.

The distillation of Augustine's vision arrives in Books XII and XIII. In Book XII Augustine establishes the power of his interpretative capacities through his detailed dissection of the first verse of Genesis. While this interpretation itself has significant implications for Catholic theology arising from Augustine's conceptualization of heaven's heaven and the formless earth in Neoplatonic terms, Book XII's greatest function within *Confessions* is its defense of the interpretability of scripture itself, which he analogizes as a spring, calling differing interpretations "its branching streams [which make] it a source of richer fertility, and waters wider tracts of countryside, than can any one of the derivative streams alone, far though this may flow from its parent fount" (268). In an instance of refreshing liberality considering the repressive interpretation of Christian doctrine that has characterized much of world history, Augustine asserts that all interpretations are valuable and valid so long as they faithfully manifest God's truth and presume honesty in the authors of scripture. Still, he devotes

enormous effort to drawing the boundaries of possible interpretations (undoing some of the aforementioned liberality) and to justifying his own specific reading as "one that is inspired by you as true, certain and good" (273).

Readers persuaded by Augustine's humble confidence are then ready for *Confessions*' ambitious resolution, the complexly cross-referenced and heavily figurative reading of the full seven days of God's creation as recorded in Genesis and the allegory it provides for a holy society. Once Augustine has tied this all together in the book's final pages, having made clear his consequent belief that in Genesis "the Head and the body of the Church" were "predestined before time began" (305), the reader is left to decide whether they accept Augustine's argument and thus his authority as part of that church's "Head." As the historical record shows, Augustine's persuasive capacities paid off, many of his doctrines and teachings so neatly folded into Catholic theology that they now seem indivisible from it. In these final books, Augustine's confession fully realizes the third sense Boulding listed in her introduction, that which is "not simply a statement of what is" but is "a creative process" in which Augustine "is at one with God who is creating him; he becomes co-creator of himself, constituting himself in being by confession" (12). The digressions that are frequent throughout Books X-XIII, moments in which he pauses to re-invoke God's support and guidance along his complex metaphysical and spiritual journey, are evidence that he perceives divine cooperation with his efforts. Since Augustine is also in a position of religious leadership, this collaborative self-creation proves to be nothing less than Augustine channeling his sacredly ordained understanding of scripture to bring about a world that might, like him, be redeemed from sin and return to God.

Key Figures

Augustine

Born Augustinus Aurelius in 354 CE in Roman Africa and known to history as Saint Augustine of Hippo, Augustine is the narrator and protagonist of *Confessions*. Augustine grew up in a noble but financially unstable family in the small town of Thagaste (modern Souk Ahras, Algeria). He began to struggle with lust and pride as he matured, and he found himself involved in some petty crime. A student of considerable academic promise, his parents sent him away to school, where his habits heightened. In Carthage, he entered a committed relationship with a woman whose name his writings do not preserve. Although they never married, she would bear Augustine a son, Adeodatus, when he was 18 years old. Around this time, Augustine came home to Thagaste to begin his career as an instructor of rhetoric but soon returned to Carthage to escape his depression following a friend's death.

After reading *Hortensius*, a book by Cicero that praises philosophy, Augustine began his search for truth, which led him to the controversial teachings of Manicheism. He converted and, though it greatly distressed his Christian mother and brought him little contentment, remained a Manichee for about a decade. By the time Augustine abandoned that faith, his career had brought him to Milan. There, the ministry of Ambrose, the Catholic Bishop of Milan, helped Augustine to overcome his misgivings about Christianity. Eventually, this led to the dismissal of his lover, and in 387 CE Augustine converted. He resigned his teaching post and returned to Thagaste to become a monk.

When he wrote *Confessions* about 13 years later, he was several years into his tenure as bishop of the major city of Hippo Regius (modern Annaba, Algeria). Given his past, many of his followers were skeptical of his credentials and authenticity. Out of remorse over his years of sin and his passion to glorify God, Augustine responded with these confessions of his life story and interpretations of Christianity, hoping to strengthen his relationship with the divine and to share the ideas that brought him to God and which he hoped would do the same for his readers.

Following Augustine's death in 430 CE at age 75, the Catholic Church canonized him and in 1298 CE named him one of the Four Great Latin Fathers, a Doctor of the Church. He is venerated similarly by many Protestant sects, and, though his legacy has been the subject of

debate within the Eastern Orthodox tradition, he is a saint in that church as well.

Monica

Augustine's mother, Monica (c. 332-387 CE), is the single most influential person in her son's life as depicted in *Confessions*. Raised in a Christian family, Monica was a lifelong Catholic whose only significant struggle with sin was a brief period of overdrinking in her youth. Married off to the much older Patricius around age 22, she submitted completely to her hot-tempered, unfaithful husband, regarding unconditional servitude to him as her duty. Together, Monica and Patricius had at least three children, including Augustine. Monica prayed for Patricius to find God and was satisfied to see him baptized on his deathbed.

Long horrified by her son's sinful, wayward habits, Monica labored tirelessly to make a Catholic out of Augustine. Augustine credits her daily prayers on his behalf and the support she provided after following him from Africa to Milan as crucial contributing factors to his eventual conversion and ministry. Just before her death en route back to Africa, she and Augustine shared a powerful and formative religious experience.

Following her death, Monica too was canonized by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches and is similarly venerated among many Protestant sects.

Patricius

Augustine describes his father, Patricius Aurelius (c. 314-371 CE), as "no more than a fairly obscure town councillor at Thagaste" (35). Though a member of the upper class, Patricius struggled financially and saw Augustine as the family's ticket to a more prosperous future. Augustine reveals little about his father beyond the man's paganism and obsessive commitment to Augustine's career prospects, though he does reveal that Patricius encouraged his son's sexual promiscuity and was himself frequently unfaithful to Augustine's mother. Monica achieved her longtime goal of baptizing Patricius on his deathbed, but Augustine nevertheless has few positive words to say about his father.

Ambrose

Ambrose (c. 339-397 CE) was the bishop of Milan from 374 CE until his death. When Augustine arrived in Milan, he was immediately captivated by Ambrose's sermons and began to seek private audiences with the bishop to talk through his curiosities and doubts about

Christianity. Although Ambrose was too busy and distant for such an audience, his interpretations of the Bible, particularly the figurative meanings he extracted from verses that had troubled Augustine, had immense influence on Augustine's decision to become a Catholic and also provided a model for Augustine's eventual role in the clergy. In 387 CE Ambrose baptized Augustine.

A prominent figure of his time, Ambrose was victorious in a religious standoff, in which Augustine took part, with the Roman Empire. Ambrose is further remembered for his contributions to Catholic hymns and chanting. Like Augustine, Ambrose was canonized and named one of the Four Great Latin Fathers of the Catholic Church, and he, too, is a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church and is venerated similarly by many Protestant sects.

Alypius

Friends form a significant part of Augustine's life story in *Confessions*, but Alypius (c. 360-430 CE) is the most consequential. Also born in Thagaste, Alypius grew up with Augustine, though Augustine was about six years older and was at one time Alypius's teacher. Though Alypius was principled and came from a noble family, he had a weakness for circus and gladiator games. Augustine partially helped him to overcome this problem, although this assistance was inadvertent. Alypius went to Rome before Augustine where he studied law. The friends reconnected there, and Alypius followed Augustine to Milan.

There, the two friends considered questions of philosophy and religion together. Traumatized by an early sexual experience, Alypius had mixed feelings about marriage, which manifested as insecurities when Augustine prepared to marry leading up to his conversion. In the end Alypius, who was present in the garden during Augustine's famous conversion episode, became a Christian alongside his friend, and both men would commit to lives of celibacy. They were baptized together as well, and Alypius returned to Thagaste with Augustine to help him found a monastery there. Alypius was a supportive and loving force in Augustine's adult life whose friendship was a critical part of Augustine's spiritual path.

When Augustine left for Hippo, Alypius stayed in Thagaste and became its bishop. He, too, rose to prominence in the Catholic Church, and after his death he was canonized in both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Themes

Confession as a Fundamental Act of Faith

In naming this work *Confessions*, Augustine extolled the act that is unquestionably the central force behind his text. The confessions that comprise *Confessions* come in a variety of forms, all serving Augustine's overall purpose in confessing: to "give [God] glory" and "let the human soul rise" to God (76).

Most apparent is the common sense of the word as declaration of sin, and, at least on the surface, this sort of confession seems to be the most central as well. From the first moment of his narrative, when relating an infancy he cannot remember, he nevertheless confesses that he "cried greedily for those breasts" (19), asserting that babies only appear free from sin because they are too weak to do much harm. In sharing the rest of his life, which he does remember, Augustine sees sin everywhere, often dwelling extensively and unforgivingly on it, such as with the pear episode, in which he characterizes himself as "in love with my own ruin, […] for I was depraved in soul" (37), or with the onset of his lustful habits, which he describes as "a time […] when I was afire to take my fill of hell" (33). Even after his conversion, Augustine is exhaustive in listing the sins that persist, lambasting himself for having "dreams with power to arouse me" (204). Such a degree of honesty and self-criticism may be alarming, but he perseveres in total admission of sin because God's greatness merits his apology, confident that in giving it God "may grow ever sweeter to me" (33).

Still, even before Augustine admits that he was an evil baby, he confesses in a different sense, exalting God's excellence in the very opening line: "Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise" (14). Together with confession of sin, this more positive sense of the word drives the nine autobiographical books of *Confessions*. Frequently, Augustine interrupts his story to remark on God's excellence or to praise him for his charity, often erupting into poetry to capture his passion. He ends Book I with just such a poetic confession, celebrating that "everything is wonderful and worthy of praise, / but all these things are gifts from my God" (32). Few episodes pass without an exultant admission of God's glory, such as the one that accompanies the story of Victorinus in Book VIII: "Ah, how high you are in the heights of heaven, how deep in the depths!" (142). This sort of confession,

Augustine asserts, is often overlooked but is just as important for the glory of God, as it recognizes that all that is good has its origin in God, so that "confession to [God] consists in not attributing my goodness to myself" (181).

In close relation to this last point is a third sense of confession, least conventional yet perhaps most crucial for *Confessions*. As Augustine holds that everything, and especially everything good, has its source in God, sharing his story and his interpretations of Christianity is, in effect, an act of confessing that the good that emerges through him is in fact a product of God. This collaborative and creative sense pervades the text in the form of his incessant entreaties to God to permit and empower his confessions, such as at the beginning of Book V: "Accept the sacrifice of my confessions, offered to you by the power of this tongue of mine which you have fashioned and aroused to confess your name" (76). Through this partnership with God, a conduit that he feels he must constantly tend to keep it open, Augustine is able to tell his story in a way that feels meaningful to him, to take the lessons he has learned and the interpretations he has gathered and forward them to his reader. Thus may Augustine fulfill what he perceives to be his duty: the realization of his vision of a world where all "creation sings praise to [God] so that we may love [him]" through recognition of the transformative power of confession in all its senses (305).

Augustine views virtue as the recognition that God is the ultimate source of all goodness, and he views evil as the disproportionate valuation of God's creation over or instead of its creator. Confession, then, in all its forms is for Augustine a vitally essential rite. His emphasis on its value would contribute to the establishment of confession as one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. In composing this text, then, Augustine confessed to God that his heart was with him, and in publishing it Augustine held that confession up as a model for the rest of the world to see.

Sin and Redemption

Sin is an obsession for Augustine in *Confessions*. The confession of it drives the autobiographical portions of the book, the understanding of it was crucial to his conversion to Christianity, and the promise of redemption from it is the basis for the authority he wields to compose the work, especially those portions that provide Biblical commentary. As is the case with the Parable of the Prodigal Son to which Augustine returns repeatedly, sin and redemption are a major source of Augustine's influence and the power of *Confessions*.

Augustine's sinful past, or at least the picture he paints of himself as a hopeless sinner, is the

vessel by which he makes this work compelling and accessible. He explains early on, "I call to mind the foul deeds I committed [...] not in order to love them, but to love you, my God" (33). Since he views loving God as his most central calling, he can justify committing the details of his shameful past to paper. Of course, Augustine wrote for a human audience as well, "So that whoever reads [these writings] may reflect with me on the depths from which we must cry to you" (35). Augustine understood that a focus on sin and redemption would increase the appeal of his publication, for he recognizes that there is something "in the human heart that makes us rejoice more intensely over the salvation of a soul which is despaired of" (141). Moreover, though conceptions of sin vary, it is an aspect of life with which everyone struggles. Indeed, in Augustine's view this struggle is inevitable because of "the original sin which binds all of us who die in Adam" (86). Therefore, by grounding his story in sin and redemption, Augustine not only serves God but also makes *Confessions* relatable and engaging.

The concept of original sin, which entails redemption solely from God's mercy, is but one aspect of the complex understanding Augustine reached regarding sin and redemption, an understanding that paved the way for his conversion. Augustine long struggled to comprehend how evil could exist in a world created by an infinitely good and all-powerful God, and this perplexity may have been the greatest obstacle to his conversion to Christianity. The explanation offered by Manicheism, which rejected any god's omnipotence and attested to the existence of an evil deity whose interference brought about sin, satisfied Augustine, vindicating his hunch that "it is not we who sin, but some other nature within us that is responsible" (88). Problematically, this perspective did not encourage Augustine's redemption, for "I liked to excuse myself and lay the blame on some other force" (88), and so as a Manichee he glossed over his flaws, accounting them beyond his control. Thanks to Neoplatonism, Augustine reached the conclusion that "evil is nothing but the diminishment of good to the point where nothing at all is left" (50), an understanding that provided him an effective framework for seeking redemption while also reconciling sin with the Christian God, thus enabling his conversion.

At the end of Book IX, the autobiographical elements of *Confessions* behind him, Augustine begins an extensive philosophical and religious commentary, ending with an elaborate allegorical reading of scripture that justifies a society led by the church. As he was writing this, the Catholic Church was well on its way to becoming the most powerful institution in the Western world, and Augustine, then a prominent bishop, approved of this development and yet wanted to influence it to ensure that power was used to bring about a society with a

"heart conceived by [God's] spirit," and from which its people could look back and know that "we made a fresh start and began to act well, though at an earlier stage we had been impelled to wrongdoing and abandoned [God]" (307). In these ways Augustine presented his own personal journey from sin to redemption to establish his authority to call for the redemption of the entire world from sin.

The Role of Human Relations for the Devout

While Augustine purports to value his relationship with God above all else, there is strong evidence that his human relations made a far greater impact on his life. Of course, it would be impossible for any organized religion to spread without human relationships, and yet when it comes to intimacy and close friendships, many of which facilitated his faith, Augustine begs God to "cleanse me from the uncleanness of such affections" (64). His vision of proper human coexistence is one of all people turned toward God rather than one another, only pivoting to help maintain communal focus on the divine. It is conspicuous, then, how often Augustine is unable to pass judgment on his relationships with other humans, or even to account for their power over him. Most perplexingly, these intensely loving relationships are essential to the development of Augustine's relationship with God.

In his earlier years, Augustine's friendships often led him to sin and misery. Reflecting on the pear episode, he professes repeatedly and with complete confidence, "I would not have done that deed alone" (42). This fact troubles him, as the allure of friendship and its undeniable impact complicate the passion for sin in and of itself that he views as the root of the transgression: "It follows, then, that I also loved the camaraderie with my fellow-thieves. So it is not true to say that I loved nothing other than the theft?" (41). Augustine provides some possible answers to this quandary but does not seem satisfied by them, ending his reflection by asking, "Who can unravel this most snarled, knotty tangle?" (42).

The death of his friend in Thagaste confronts Augustine with similarly befuddling aspects of human relationships. Following the tragedy, Augustine was unable to fathom his anguished soul, "which had become a great enigma" (62), and he found himself incapable of finding solace in God. He was years from becoming a Christian, but, amazingly, even though elsewhere in his writings he repeatedly makes clear his disdain for excessive attachment to humans, he appears to feel his immense grief was appropriate: "If I bade [my soul], 'Trust in God,' it rightly disobeyed me, for the man it had held so dear and lost was more real and more loveable than the fantasy in which it was bidden to trust" (63).

While Augustine engages with and acknowledges his confusion directly in these instances, trusting to God despite his uncertainty, he refrains from commenting at all on his reaction to what may have been the greatest interpersonal calamity of his life: the dismissal of his longtime lover. In tragically poetic terms, he speaks of her as "[s]o deeply [...] engrafted into my heart that it was left torn and wounded and trailing blood" (113), and he describes the grief that followed as having "putrefied, and the pain became a cold despair" (113). These are his final words on the subject. Unlike with so many other allegedly sinful events regarding which he reframes his reaction in terms of spiritual immaturity, Augustine simply moves on from this trauma. In general he spends very little time talking about this woman, presumably because of the sinfulness of their relationship, but it may well be in this instance that the depth of his heartache revealed something so sacrilegious in Augustine's attachment to this particular person that he dared not confront it more fully.

Finally, the two most important religious moments of his life—his conversion in the garden alongside Alypius and the transcendent meditation he experiences with Monica—not only occur in the company of other people but indeed hinge on their presence. Taken together, these experiences and Augustine's treatment of them make it clear that even if Augustine preaches the need to avoid "carnal affection" and instead focus as much love as possible directly toward God (178), the experiences he relates in *Confessions* reveal a struggle not just to live in this manner but even to accept its wisdom.

Index of Terms

The Academics

The Academics (also known as Skeptics or Academic Skeptics) were a group of philosophers who believed that humans are incapable of knowing anything for certain. The philosophy, which traces its roots back to Ancient Greece, received its clearest articulation through the writings of Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero, its most notable adherent. Augustine encountered the Academics when he lived in Rome, a time of great personal uncertainty that made their ideas attractive to him. However, he ultimately abandoned this philosophy, certain that there were spiritual truths to be found if pursued with sufficient time and effort.

Manicheism

Manicheism (also written as Manichaeism) was a major religion that emerged out of the Sasanian Empire (modern Iran) in the third century CE. Following the ministry of an Iranian prophet named Mani, Manichees (also referred to as Manicheans or Manichaeans) believed in a dualistic universe in which a good, spiritual god of light battled against an evil, material god of darkness. Manicheism incorporated the teachings of figures as diverse as Buddha and Jesus and was viewed as a major threat by much of the Roman world, because of both the ways Manichean teachings challenged mainstream religious values and the religion's association with Persia, Rome's longtime rival. However, their teachings, especially their explanation of evil, appealed to Augustine, who spent about a decade as a Manichee. Because of their negative reputation among Christians, this part of Augustine's past was a source of unease for many of his Christian followers, and he likely wrote *Confessions* in part to quell their suspicions. In the century following Augustine's death, Manicheism all but disappeared from the Roman Empire, though it lasted in China nearly a thousand years longer.

Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism was a school of thinking developed by Egyptian philosopher Plotinus in the third century CE. Inspired by the ideas of Plato, in particular his theory of forms, Plotinus believed that all reality traces its source to "the One," a unity of spiritual essence that created everything else through an overflow of perfection. The remainder of creation, Neoplatonists asserted, was divided between soul, the lowest tier of existence, and intellect, which stands in the middle. Humans naturally regard and value the soul, which includes everything perceivable with the senses, but through intellect humans can come to recognize and unite

with the One. Success in this endeavor allows for a rational and meaningful life. Augustine found in Neoplatonism the framework he needed to conceptualize how sin could exist in a universe created by an all-powerful, infinitely good God, and his articulation of these ideas in texts like *Confessions* would have lasting and permanent influence over Christian theology.

Original Sin

Original sin, a concept that is central to Christianity for many of its followers, is the idea that human beings are morally flawed from birth, having inherited their sin from the first man, Adam, as a result of his original sin of disobeying God in the Garden of Eden. Though the roots of original sin go back to the third century, Augustine is credited with naming and articulating it for the first time in *Confessions*. Augustine's conceptualization of original sin constitutes a fundamental aspect of his understanding of Christianity, accounting for his belief in complete human dependence on God's forgiveness and mercy.

Important Quotes

1. “How shall I call upon my God, my God and my Lord, when by the very act of calling upon him I would be calling him into myself? Is there any place within me into which my God might come?”
(Book I, Chapter 2, Page 14)

This is one of the first questions Augustine poses to God in the prayer that opens Book I of Confessions*. His confusion about how to call to God becomes one of his greatest anxieties throughout the entire work. Here, he is perplexed about how an infinite God could find space within human form.*

2. “Matters are so arranged at your command that every disordered soul is its own punishment.”
(Book I, Chapter 12, Page 25)

This quotation provides the first look at Augustine’s conception of God’s justice, which Augustine asserts is perfect and dynamic, capable of immense adaptation depending on the circumstances. While elsewhere Augustine describes God’s justice in more familiar and tangible terms, here he speaks specifically of spiritual justice, asserting that there is no greater punishment for sin than the miserable, disfiguring separation from God that accompanies it, something he knows from personal experience.

3. “The beautiful form of material things attracts our eyes, so we are drawn to gold, silver and the like. […] We may seek all these things, but in seeking them we must not deviate from your law. The life we live here is open to temptation by reason of a certain measure and harmony between its own splendor and all these beautiful things of low degree. […] Sin gains entrance through these and similar good things when we turn to them with immoderate desire, since they are the lowest kind of goods and we thereby turn away from the better and higher: from you yourself, O Lord our God, and your truth and your law.”
(Book II, Chapter 5, Page 38)

This passage comes near the beginning of Augustine’s extensive reflection on the pear episode and is his first articulation of his theory of sin. After Augustine discovered Neoplatonism, his perspectives on sin shifted so significantly that for the first time he was able to make sense of the moral framework of Christianity and its all-powerful, infinitely good

God. That perspective, encapsulated here, holds that sin is a sort of sickness that affects the soul when one values God's creations over God himself. Using this explanation, Augustine reaches an explanation of his seemingly senseless theft of pears, asserting that these sorts of transgressions, crimes for the sake of crime, are in fact prideful attempts to break free of the need for a balanced appreciation of God and God's creation, to wrest control over all of creation and our own destinies by treasuring things according to our own whims and predilections.

4. "If there is anyone whom you have called, who by responding to your summons has avoided these sins which he finds me remembering and confessing in my own life as he reads this, let him not mock me; for I have been healed by the same doctor who has granted him the grace not to fall ill."
(Book II, Chapter 7, Page 41)

Here Augustine lays out one implication of his faith in God's infinite goodness and the doctrine of original sin. Since Augustine believes that God is the source of everything good in the world and that, thanks to Adam, humans are inevitably stained by sin, it follows that salvation only occurs because God ordains it, either by forgiving the sins of those who err or by imbuing sufficient virtue into a person that sin can be avoided to begin with. Thus, Augustine preaches the importance of humility and warns those who credit themselves for their own goodness that they are thereby sinfully ignoring God's gifts.

5. "The theft gave us a thrill, and we laughed to think we were outwitting people who had no idea what we were doing, and would angrily stop us if they knew. Why could I not have derived the same pleasure from doing it alone? Perhaps because it is not easy to enjoy a joke by oneself?"
(Book II, Chapter 7, Page 42)

After drawing lessons about the nature of sin from his theft of pears in his adolescence, Augustine finds himself befuddled by the role camaraderie played in that sin. Having thought he committed the act only out of a misguided hunger to sin, his realization that he would never have done it alone complicates that conclusion, for he must have been motivated not just by the desire to sin but also out of a craving for the joys of kinship. In considering the issue from the angle of his and his friends' derisive laughter, he captures some of the mystery

of this conundrum. Just as it is hard to understand why jokes are less funny when we are alone, it is hard to apprehend the mysterious ways in which companionship affects everything we do in life.

6. "We must conclude that, while some sorrow is commendable, no sorrow is to be valued for its own sake."
(Book III, Chapter 2, Page 45)

Augustine draws this conclusion after reflecting on the plays he eagerly attended while studying in Carthage. Having criticized their frivolously tragic plots, he then calls out those who seek out such art to arouse in themselves feelings of pity. Sorrow is one of the emotions that most perplexes Augustine, though here he confidently resolves that it has no value in and of itself and should only be tolerated when it emerges naturally alongside the effort to love and follow God. In this sense, his conclusion about sorrow can be applied to pretty much everything else in life. For Augustine, God absolutely comes first. What remains should only be let into one's life insofar as it accompanies the pursuit of divine truth and love.

7. "[E]vil is nothing but the diminishment of good to the point where nothing at all is left."
(Book III, Chapter 7, Page 50)

Augustine includes this observation, fundamental to his understanding of morality, as a juxtaposition to the Manichean perspective on good and evil when discussing his conversion to that faith. The Manichees taught that good and evil were opposing forces, each with its own god who battled the other for control of each individual and for all of existence. This explanation made sense to young Augustine, especially when compared with the Christian notion that an omnipotent, infinitely good God had created a cosmology in which sin thrives. Thanks to the ideas of the Neoplatonists, Augustine was able to reconceptualize evil as an absence of good that is born out of the foolish human tendency to turn away from the greatness of God, an idea that had enormous consequences for Augustine as well as for Christianity as a whole.

8. "I lacked the insight to understand that justice, of which good and holy people are the servants, contains in itself, in a far more excellent and sublime way, the principles of all it prescribes, and is unvaryingly self-consistent, yet does not impose all its demands at once, but adjusts and allots to different periods the provisions most apt for them."
(Book III, Chapter 7, Page 52)

One of Christianity's greatest allures for Augustine is what he perceived to be its adaptability when compared with Manicheism and other worldviews he had encountered. While he was underwhelmed by scripture when he first encountered it, disappointed that it lacked the rhetorical complexity of Cicero and the precision of the Manichean texts, later he came to see these as marks of its superiority. The ministry of Ambrose in particular helped him to appreciate the interpretability of the Bible, which he here notes as it pertains to Biblical justice. In truth, all texts are subject to interpretation and non-literal readings, and so perhaps Augustine would have found more satisfaction in Manicheism had there been a Manichean Ambrose to reframe those teachings in a comparable manner.

9. "[F]riendship is genuine only when you bind fast together people who cleave to you through the charity poured abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us."
(Book IV, Chapter 4, Page 61)

In probing friendship and the value of human relations, Augustine asserts with confidence that friendship ought to arise out of a mutual devotion to God among its parties. Following this, he relates the story of the death of his friend in Thagaste, denigrating that friendship because God had no part in it, at least not on Augustine's end. Ironically, the friend was a Christian until Augustine convinced him to become a Manichee, though the friend's family baptized him back into Christianity on his deathbed, much to Augustine's horror at the time. Regardless of the conviction suggested by this statement, Augustine's inconclusive meditations on human relationships elsewhere in Confessions *seem to suggest that their complex value does not fit neatly into these parameters.*

10. "You have endowed [beautiful things] so richly because they belong to a society of things that do not all exist at once, but in their passing away and succession together form a whole, of which the several creatures are parts."
(Book IV, Chapter 10, Page 66)

In this passage Augustine accounts for the grand design behind creation, which explains the greater beauty and goodness some elements possess over others. In Augustine's conception, everything exists along a gradation of quality that correlates to proximity to God's essence. In Book XII, Augustine asserts that the formless creation that predated the world as we know it is at the lowest level of this spectrum while heaven's heaven, the spiritual realm of God which Christians strive to reach in the afterlife, is at the highest level. Everything else, then, is somewhere between. Collectively, all these things are greater and more beautiful than even

their greatest and most beautiful elements would be on their own, and it is through proportionate valuation of each element, recognition of the supreme beauty of the whole, and adoration of God first and foremost that salvation can be achieved.

11. "[N]othing should be regarded as true because it is eloquently stated, nor false because the words sound clumsy."
(Book V, Chapter 10, Page 82)

Augustine expresses this insight in reflecting on the visit of the Manichean bishop Faustus to Carthage. He had eagerly awaited this man's arrival, hoping that through his wisdom he would be able to repair the cracks that had begun to emerge in Augustine's faith in Manicheism. However, Faustus's eloquence and passion proved to be hollow, as the man lacked the knowledge necessary to resolve Augustine's doubts. Augustine, who himself was an impressive speaker and rhetorician, became very wary of anything that appears polished on the surface, as experiences such as these drove home how much more important it is that the message being conveyed is truthful. Nevertheless, his writing in Confessions *is elegant and compelling, though he of course believed that the messages his words communicate are truthful enough to merit this lovely phrasing.*

12. "I came to see that in commanding that certain things must be believed without demonstration the Church was a good deal more moderate and very much less deceitful than those parties who rashly promised knowledge and derided credulity, but then went on to demand belief in a whole host of fabulous and absurd myths which certainly could not be demonstrated."
(Book VI, Chapter 5, Page 99)

In the end it was the demonstrably inaccurate claims of Mani, the founder of Manicheism, concerning astronomy that caused Augustine to leave that faith, and so he became very cautious around any religions that expected similar suspensions of disbelief. Thus, Augustine's view that Catholicism was more moderate in this regard became an important factor in his conversion. It bears noting that his conversion was also contingent on figurative interpretations of certain passages of scripture, passages that other Catholics and Christians over the years have taken literally. Similar, it would have been possible for him to regard Mani's astronomical beliefs through a figurative lens, though perhaps this perspective would

have brought him into conflict with Manichean clergy. Either way, all religions by their very nature require faith in the unprovable, and so this passage demonstrates the bias that Augustine adopted in favor of the religion that would define his life and legacy.

13. "The authority of the sacred writings seemed to me all the more deserving of reverence and divine faith in that scripture was easily accessible to every reader, while yet guarding a mysterious dignity in its deeper sense."
(Book VI, Chapter 5, Page 100)

Again, Augustine is developing his argument for the interpretability of the Bible. Earlier in life, his literal readings of scripture had driven him away from Christianity, as he initially saw only simplicity in the text, which he then perceived as crudity. Later, the figurative readings of scripture that Augustine heard from Ambrose revealed a depth he had not recognized before, and Augustine would make interpretation of this sort a cornerstone of his own ministry, as evidenced by the final two books of Confessions*. While this perspective may seem open-minded by comparison to some of the fundamentalist manifestations Christianity has taken on throughout history, it is important to note that Augustine did place certain limits on what might and might not be viable interpretations of scripture, some of which might seem inhumane by modern standards.*

14. "So deeply was she engrafted into my heart that it was left torn and wounded and trailing blood."
(Book VI, Chapter 15, Page 113)

Augustine's description of his emotional state following the dismissal of his unnamed lover is tragically evocative. The emotional power of what little he shares here begs the questions of whether he ever got over this heartbreak, how he felt about Monica for forcing his lover to leave, how he ultimately regarded this woman and the powerful love he felt for her, and to what degree his mind, his heart, and his soul remained in discord over this relationship.

15. "What need is there to prove at any length why that substance which is God cannot be corruptible? If it were, it would not be God."
(Book VII, Chapter 4, Page 119)

Having left Manicheism and its flawed deities behind, Augustine found himself contemplating the Christian notion of an all-powerful God. He had no certainty that this God existed until he began to believe that by the very definition of God he had to exist. Known as an ontological proof, this sort of argument would become popular about six centuries later after Saint Anselm of Canterbury articulated it with greater force and clarity. Based as it is on an acceptance of words and their definitions on the most literal level, this argument may not be terribly convincing to more skeptical readers, but the logic of it was an important part of Augustine's approach to Christianity.

16. "It was further made clear to me that things prone to destruction are good, since this destructibility would be out of the question if they were either supremely good or not good at all; because if they were supremely good they would be indestructible, whereas if they were not good a tall there would be nothing in them that could be destroyed."
(Book VII, Chapter 12, Page 128)

After Augustine encountered Neoplatonism, he came to understand evil in a way that made sense to him despite God's omnipotence and infinite goodness. This passage reveals an illuminating stage in that logical process. Whereas before he had viewed certain elements of creation as bad or evil, he now recognized that their very transience and destructibility were proof of their goodness. Similar to the ontological proof of God, this argument hinges on an acceptance of very strict relationships between semantics and reality, but once again the logic here was key to Augustine as well as to many who followed him in facilitating a functional understanding of Christian cosmology.

17. "[A]s I prayed to you for the gift of chastity I had even pleaded, 'Grant me chastity and self-control, but please not yet.' I was afraid you might hear me immediately and heal me forthwith of the morbid lust which I was more anxious to satisfy than to snuff out."
(Book VIII, Chapter 7, Page 149)

This passage, which contains one of Augustine's most memorable lines, reveals the author at the depth of his dependence on sin, struggling against what ultimately proved to be the greatest obstacle to his conversion. It suggests that he believed very deeply that God was rea and that his own life was subject to God's power and yet that, despite this conviction, he had the hubris to request his salvation be delayed so that he could continue to enjoy the carnal

transience of sex in place of the spiritual eternity of God. While many appreciate this prayer for tongue-in-cheek reasons, this passage provides a stunningly candid look into the internal turmoil that plagued Augustine leading up to his conversion.

18. "When I was making up my mind to serve the Lord my God at last, as I had long since purposed, I was the one who wanted to follow that course, and I was the one who wanted not to. I was the only one involved. I neither wanted it wholeheartedly nor turned from it wholeheartedly. I was at odds with myself, and fragmenting myself. This disintegration was occurring without my consent, but what it indicated was not the presence in me of a mind belonging to some alien nature but the punishment undergone by my own. In this sense, and this sense only, it was not I who brought it about, but the sin that dwelt within me as penalty for that other sin committed with greater freedom; for I was a son of Adam."
(Book VIII, Chapter 10, Page 152)

Generally, Augustine blames no one but himself for his sins, but here, reflecting on the anguished equivocation he experienced in the garden near his home in Milan just before he converted, Augustine takes the doctrine of original sin to a new level. He marvels at his inability to bring his will to bear over his base impulses toward sin, which as a Manichee he would have attributed to the material force of evil working through him. Having abandoned that conception in favor of his Neoplatonist perspective, he finds this struggle hard to fathom until he determines that it must be evidence of the original sin all humans inherit from Adam, the first man, who, in violating God's specific injunction against eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, committed the true original sin.

19. "If the tumult of flesh fell silent for someone,
[…] and then he alone were to speak,
not through the things that are made, but of himself,
that we might hear his Word,
not through fleshly tongue nor angel's voice,
nor thundercloud,
nor any riddling parable,
hear him unmediated, […]
would not *Enter into the joy of your Lord*
be this, and this alone?"
(Book IX, Chapter 10, Page 174)

This poem, which Augustine attributes jointly to himself and his mother, though he acknowledges that neither of them spoke in these terms, is a poetic representation of the religious experience Augustine and Monica shared in Ostia just before her unexpected death. Following their exultant, sublime joint meditation, which Augustine asserts brought them into actual contact with God's realm, he concludes that it might be possible to experience unity with God in this lifetime if only the distractions of the world could be blocked out. This is the goal of mysticism and meditation in a great many traditions, and his desire to recreate this experience provides some insight into his attraction to monastic life, which he pursued after leaving Milan. Moreover, that he not only underwent this experience alongside his mother but also related it as a joint poetic utterance is an enormous testament to crucial role affection for other humans played in his spiritual journey.

20. "It is cheering to good people to hear about the past evil deeds of those who are now freed from them: cheering not because the deeds were evil but because they existed once but exist no more."
(Book X, Chapter 3, Page 182)

This assertion provides some explanation of a mystery that Augustine explores a few times throughout Confessions*: namely, that of the appeal of stories of sin and redemption such as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Augustine's logic here positions the holy members of the audience of such stories as cheerleaders in a battle of virtue against sin. Thus, Augustine suggests that the righteous enjoy these stories in the same way a crowd at a sports game cheers wildly when their team comes back from behind. What this explanation does not account for is why the righteous do not feel nearly as invested in people who have always been good, people whose goodness may in fact have done far more for God's glory, and this remains a logical quandary for which Augustine is never able to find satisfactory resolution.*

21. "To the sky I put my question, to sun, moon, stars,
but they denied me: 'We are not the God you seek.'
And to all things which stood around the portals of my flesh I said,
'Tell me of my God.
You are not he, but tell me something of him.'
Then they lifted up their mighty voices and cried,
'He made us.'
My questioning was my attentive spirit,

and their reply, their beauty."
(Book X, Chapter 3, Pages 185 - 186)

As Augustine begins the four non-autobiographical books that conclude Confessions*, the first question he asks is what he is loving when he loves God. He discusses the instinct to identify the beauty of creation with God, which would mean that to love the beauty of the world is to love God. However, insistent that God's immaculate spiritual essence is imperceptible by any normal human faculty, Augustine asserts that this is not the answer. This idea becomes the inspiration of the most playful poem in* Confessions*, which presents a conversation between Augustine and the beautiful elements of creation. Through this poem, he conveys his Neoplatonist-influenced belief that, although loving beauty may not be the same as loving God, recognizing God as the source of beauty provides the intellect an opportunity to perceive God via internal spiritual senses and to love him thereby.*

22. "Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new,
late have I loved you!
Lo, you were within,
but I outside, seeking there for you,
and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong,
I, misshapen.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
They held me back far from you,
those things which would have no being
were they not in you.
You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;
you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;
you lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you;
I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst;
you touched me, and I burned for your peace."
(Book X, Chapter 27, Page 203)

This poem, sometimes referred to as the Prayer of St. Augustine, is one of the most enduring and beloved legacies of Confessions*. Augustine includes it following the extensive investigation of the workings of memory and mind that comprise a major portion of Book X. The investigation ends with the conviction that God does in fact reside within the human mind and can be accessed by anyone attentive and loving enough to seek him there. The poem, then, presents in some of Augustine's most elegant language his realization not only*

that God is within him but that God has been calling to Augustine his whole life. Furthermore, this poem conveys Augustine's awareness that, now that he has heard that call, he cannot get enough.

23. "To get up without delay is one thing, not to fall in the first place is another."
(Book X, Chapter 35, Page 214)

In Book X Augustine presents an exhaustive rundown of every category of sin. With each category, he examines his own predilections and chastises himself for his perceived failings. At this point in his life, he seems to have developed impressive self-control, and yet he still reprimands himself for appreciating beauty for its own sake or for getting distracted by unimportant events that simply satisfy his curiosity. These sorts of behaviors deflect his attention and love away from God, and so, even though he is able to redirect his attention back to God once he realizes what has happened, he considers them sins. His ambition to overcome even these knee-jerk impulses is a testament to the incredibly high standard he has come to set for himself and again provides some insight into why the monastic lifestyle appealed to him.

24. "[A]nyone who lacks the insight to be certain whether he can despise wealth while still possessing it can test himself by getting rid of it. But what of praise? Are we to lead evil lives in order to be rid of it and so test our ability? Should we live in such an abandoned and brutal fashion that everyone who knows us will hate us? Can one imagine a crazier idea than this? If a good life characterized by noble works inevitably and rightly entails being commended, neither the good life, nor the resultant commendation can be renounced."
(Book X, Chapter 37, Page 216)

Augustine is greatly disconcerted by the problem of pridefulness. Reflecting on his life before his conversion to Christianity, he recognizes his vanity and ambition as two of the greatest sources of his sin. By putting an end to his career and removing himself from the limelight for a time, his conversion mitigated these tendencies significantly. However, his meditation on pride in Book X reveals his remaining conundrum: Just as was the case with lust, he cannot help that he enjoys that which leads to pride, but, since the proper fulfilment of his duties invariably results in praise, he is unable to cut it out of his life like he could with sex. Thus, he can never know to what degree his virtuous actions are attributable to his love of praise rather than to his love of God. Given that he was essentially forced away from monastic life and into

the clergy, this begs the question of whether part of the appeal of life as a monk was his ability to live in a low-praise environment and thereby eliminate from his life the temptations that fed his pride.

25. "Provided, therefore, that each person tries to ascertain in the holy scriptures the meaning the author intended, what harm is there if a reader holds an opinion which you, the light of all truthful minds, show to be true, even though it is not what was intended by the author, who himself meant something true, but not exactly that?"
(Part XII, Chapter 18, Page 261)

As Augustine prepares to end Confessions *with Book XIII's allegorical rendering of the first chapter of Genesis, he first establishes in the clearest terms yet his assertion that scripture is meant to be interpreted in a variety of ways, and that, so long as those interpretations reflect God's truth and do not presume bad faith on the part of the author, they are fair game. While this perspective allows for the leniency he will require to advance his belief that Genesis presages a Church-led society, it also permits a host of other interpretations, some of which may even contradict Augustine's vision. This double-edged sword is part of the reason many societies throughout history choose either to separate church and state or, on the other extreme, enact a fundamentalist take on religion.*

Essay Topics

1. The impact of history and geography on the trajectory of Augustine's life cannot be overstated. How might Augustine's life—and, consequently, Christianity—have been affected had he lived at another time or place within the Roman Empire?

2. Augustine draws many parallels between his story and the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Select another Bible story with themes similar to those of *Confessions,* and compare and contrast the two.

3. Why does Augustine spend so much time on the pear episode over other instances of his sinfulness? Consider literary devices such as symbolism and allusion in your response.

4. Augustine begins many but not all of the 13 books of *Confessions* with a discrete prayer to God. Pick three of the books and analyze the degree to which his choice to begin in this way or to jump right into his story serves each.

5. Despite the wariness with which Augustine came to view rhetoric and eloquence, *Confessions* is a tour de force as far as both are concerned. To what degree is his emphasis on rhetoric and eloquence excessive or even counterproductive to his goals?

6. Why was Augustine's discovery of Neoplatonism so important for his journey toward Christianity? Also, how do Neoplatonist ideas manifest in his perspectives on Christianity?

7. The years Augustine spent as a Manichee impacted the remainder of his life in many ways. Trace their influence on his conception of Christianity in particular.

8. Augustine is both selective and deliberate in what he does and does not choose to share about his life, and many historians believe that significant elements of his story are exaggerated if not totally made up. How do these realities both contribute to and detract from his goals in *Confessions*?

9. Although some view the concept of original sin as an unhelpful or unnecessary agent of shame, Augustine exudes a sense of relief when discussing it. Using examples from the text, examine the ways in which belief in original sin can be both liberating and restrictive.

10. How do the final four books of *Confessions* complement the nine that precede them, and how do they serve the work as a whole?