Freshman Year

E-cem biography

Augustine paper

due 11/12/09

Augustine as an Author: His Early Life in *Confessions*

In recounting the story of his life, Augustine chose to begin with the event of his birth in A.D. 354. The following story of his youth and adolescence is given in detail as a first-hand account. Although this may seem an appropriate and thorough procedure when putting a life story on paper to be read and performed for years to come, Augustine recorded his story in the latter years of his life, making himself a source made remote by time. However, as this is a great weakness of this section of the *Confessions*, it is also one of its greatest strengths because the generalizations made about infants, youth, and adolescents are reflective of all people's pasts. This creates a sense of unity between Augustine and his audience, making him more believable as a person and creating between himself and his audience shared emotions through memories. Other strengths and weaknesses in his writing include the believability he creates with anecdotes and common sentiments, the prayer style in which it is written, and the fact that *Confessions* was intended to be performed as well as read. These are the issues I will address.

Augustine's analysis of emotion through the stages of life begin with the very moments of his birth in Thagaste, which he is "remembering" as an old man past the prime of his life (I-III). He does this by observing infants and making generalizations about their behavior, methods of learning, and natures. He then applies these observations to himself and adopts them as his own experiences, methods of learning, nature, and behavior. He makes this known to his audience by following the story of his birth with the statement, "though of myself I remember it not," and "whereof I remember nothing, " made in reference to learning to speak (I-V,VI). While this may strike the modern reader as an odd approach to writing, it succeeds in creating common memories with the audience. This is a very powerful tool because it creates in the audience a sense of possession -- that this story of Augustine's is also their own.

On the other hand, this method of observation is not entirely advantageous. Augustine is forced to recreate the first years of his life from the lives of others, meaning the first part of the *Confessions* is not the story of Augustine himself. If fact, it is the story of all people and the generalizations he made are not from experiences he can remember, but observations made much later in life. It is not until the beginning of his schooling that Augustine brings the focus of the story back on himself and reminds the audience that this is his own life story (I-XIV).

In recounting his days as a schoolboy, Augustine merges his own memories with sentiments common to all youth. This is a strength in his writing because it once again makes the audience feel included. It also make the story believable since people don't question generally accepted knowledge or stereotypes (i.e. the sentiments of adolescent boys). He depicts himself as a very believable youth through anecdotes. He speaks of his elders and parents "who yet wished me no ill, mocked my stripes, my then great and grievous ill" (I-XIV). In section XV, book I, he bluntly says that he was a trouble maker at school and that he "sinned in transgressing the commands of my parents and those of my masters" (I-XV). These memories are generic enough to be held in common with many of his male audience members, yet personalized enough to remain his story. He does this again in writing that "the rein [on me] was laid loose" and that he "loved not study, and hated to be force to it" (I-XV).

He also describes his need for social acceptance and his less than praise-worthy group of friends (I-XX). This need is universal and ageless, that is, the young and old alike feel the need for social acceptance. Here he begins to transcend the limits of common childhood memories, and begins to draw upon adult sentiments . This anecdote of social acceptance is perhaps the most universal and important in creating a connection with his audience; soon after this episode of his life, Augustine becomes more of an individual, reading Cicero's *Hortensius* and taking a keen interest in philosophy (III-IV). Therefore, these early anecdotes and memories are crucial in establishing a relationship with the audience and establishing himself as a believable character and living human being.

The prayer style in which Augustine chose to write can be viewed as both a strength and weakness. To audiences at the time *Confessions* was written, the invocation to a deity at the beginning, as well as the constant addressing of God, would not have seemed to be as irregular a writing style as it may to a modern audience. Michael P. Foley describes this style in the introduction, writing that Augustine:

"[broke] down the boundary between prayer and literature. He brought to a Latin world, used to compositions modelled on the great speeches of Cicero, the new, sweet sound of a sacred language that had long echoed in the Christian churches" (Foley, xviii).

This would have had a profound effect on his audience. This audience was not only reading this work, but watching it be performed, and so would have experienced its prayer-like qualities orally and been affected by it differently than modern readers. This would have made more obvious that fact that Augustine "is speaking with his God" throughout the story: his "back is turned to us" (Foley, xviii). This narrative style is, to modern readers, difficult to follow and not engaging. Thus, Augustine's style has become a weakness over time, resulting in a much smaller audience. However, in the years after its completion, this oratory style would have been a powerful means to reach a much greater audience, not limited by education (and by extension, literacy).

This aspect of performance is a weakness in the *Confessions*; Augustine wrote a philosophical journey and analyzed the stages of life, but he was at the same time trying to appeal to his audience and further his career ambitions. This is a conflict of interest -- appealing to the judgments of men and professing devotion to God are professional contradictions. Consequently, Augustine is forced to walk the line between theatre and prayer, sometimes coalescing the two. His prayers are often flamboyant, perhaps too gaudy to be sincere: "Oh! that I might repose on Thee! Oh! that Thou wouldest enter into my heart, and inebriate it, that I may forget my ills, and embrace Thee, my sole good!" (I-V). How to appear devout and worthy of attention is thus Augustine's predicament: how not to lose the integrity of a work intended for the judgment of God and man alike.

Augustine wrote his early life in the *Confessions* in a literary style now extinct, based not on memories, but on observations, and in an effort to appease both men and God. This resulted in a work with both strengths and weaknesses: a modern reader feels removed by the prayer-like style of writing, whereas the audience of Augustine's time were entertained and perhaps spiritually persuaded by its oral presentation. He is forced to base his life from birth to adolescents on observations of others because he is writing as an old man. These observations unite himself and the audience, while simultaneously impersonalizing this period of his life. His anecdotes of boyhood make his character believable, while his professions of devoutness sometimes border on excessive, reminding the audience that the *Confessions* are an effort to forward his career through popularity and its acceptance by men.

Saint Augustine. (A.D. 401). The Confessions of Saint Augustine. Translated Pusey,

Edward Bouverie. Oxford, MA: Project Gutenburg Literary Archive

Foundation. Retrieved November 1, 2009, from ManyBooks:

http://manybooks.net/titles/augustinetext02tcosa10.html