

Augustine's *Confessions*: Symbolism in Autobiography

Mike Smith

Abstract

*Some scholars have criticized Augustine's *Confessions* for lacking structure. In this paper scenes from Augustine's life depicted in *Confessions* are analyzed allegorically in order to better understand what his intention may have been as an author. Augustine was a talented writer and it is worth considering that he was aware that *Confessions* may have had less impact had it been written in a more straightforward autobiographical style.*

In *Confessions*, the narrator describes his secular journey towards a spiritual life, told from the point of view of a middle-aged Augustine. In his recollections, Augustine describes his past, having formerly embraced scholarly pursuits while mocking Christianity—which starkly contrasts his situation at the time of publication, when he was living as a Catholic bishop devoted to theology. Henry Chadwick discusses Augustine’s view of “the acquisition of mental skills” as toil worse than that of a manual laborer (69). At the same time, Peter Brown suggests that Augustine regarded his past “as a training for his present career” (162). Brown also discusses the appropriateness of Augustine’s travels as metaphors for his spiritual journey (38). This dualistic view of his life before his conversion to Christianity presents the idea that Augustine selected—and perhaps modified—aspects of his autobiography for literary effect.

Book II presents one of the most memorable scenes in *Confessions*, in which Augustine recounts an episode from his youth when he, with a group of friends, stole pears from a tree. He tells us that he did not steal the pears out of a desire for the pears themselves, as he had access to better pears at home and threw most of the stolen pears to pigs, but that he did so simply for the thrill of doing something he knew he should not. Later, Augustine writes that the motivation for the theft was a desire to commit the crime with a group—a need for companionship (34). James O’Donnell suggests that the analogy of comparing the theft of the pears with the fruit eaten by Adam in the Garden of Eden is intended by Augustine, to some degree (88). While Augustine would argue against the doctrine of an “age of accountability,” as he believed all people to be born into sin, Augustine’s age at the time of the crime—around sixteen years old—coincides with passages in which his father makes reference to Augustine reaching sexual maturity, suggesting that the pear tree incident signals Augustine’s entry into adulthood and the onset of his own manifestation of original sin (26).

Augustine also details his time with the Manicheans in *Confessions*. This passage was certainly included in response to contemporary critics accusing him of maintaining some Manichean doctrines in his personal beliefs and Christian writings (Wetzel 52). One would imagine that, in light of these attacks, Augustine would have preferred to minimize his discussion of his knowledge of Manichean beliefs and rituals, yet he demonstrates the same frankness and openness here as he does in the rest of his work. Augustine discusses the practices of the Hearers and the Elect. In Augustine’s account, the Hearers were responsible for picking fruit for the Elect, who were prohibited from doing so themselves. In doing so, the digestive processes of the Elect would permit bits of the divine to be freed from the fruit. This is a fairly specific description of a Manichean practice, which may be cause for consideration as to why Augustine would have included it. Rather than avoiding Manicheism, he discusses its mythology in detail—perhaps for literary effect.

If one accepts that Augustine employed a literary aspect in his writings, one may conclude that his intent was twofold. By speaking scornfully of the Manicheans, Augustine distanced himself from them, but this description of these practices is open to interpretation as symbolism. Consistent with his earlier use of the pear as a symbol for original sin, in

this scenario, one could interpret the events as the diet of the Elect consisting primarily of sin, gathered for them by their followers. This seems to be a staunch denunciation of the Manicheans as heretics who—by denying responsibility for sin—choose instead to gorge themselves with it.

The final mention of fruit comes during the climactic moments beneath the fig tree at the garden in Milan. This fig tree is thought by many to represent allegorically the Garden of Eden's Tree of Life—in contrast to the aforementioned pear tree's possible representation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Ferrari 240). This dual imagery creates a circuitous effect, reminding the reader of Augustine's beginnings at the pear tree and his journey back, and it further supports the notion of his use of symbolism and literary techniques, opening the door for the consideration of potential symbolism surrounding other events in his life.

In 372, Augustine's unnamed concubine bore him a son, Adeodatus. The Latin meaning of this name is "gift from God," which potentially holds significance. Brown summarizes Augustine's feelings about the boy by describing the awe which he felt regarding his son's intelligence as well as his sentiment following his son's death that he could take credit for no part of him but the sin that created him(61). It is possible that Augustine left the mother of his son unnamed because of the shame he felt in consorting with her, but the possibility also remains that he believed that naming her may have appeared to be an effort to share the blame for their shared lust. His son played little part in Augustine's biography, other than sharing in conversations Augustine had with his peers and having been baptized along with Augustine and Alypius. One could speculate that Adeodatus appears in *Confessions* only to symbolize the way in which Augustine felt trapped by his sexual desires. The boy and his mother travelled with Augustine from Carthage to Rome, and then to Milan—just as the burden of lust that Augustine came to recognize in Africa remained with him until his conversion in Milan.

Shortly after arriving in Milan, Augustine dismissed the woman in order to pursue an arranged marriage, which he hoped would help him to achieve an appointment to public office. The boy stayed in Milan with his father. If viewing Augustine's life from a literary standpoint, his decision to discuss these details may suggest that although he has rid himself of the object of his lust, his urges remain, immediately finding a new mistress; furthermore, the consequence of his sin is still present—Adeodatus. In describing his love for his son, Augustine could be speaking in the same vein in which he does when discussing how his secular life has been a gift from God, preparing him for his ascetic life. When discussing the spiritual issues preceding his conversion in Milan with his friends Alypius and Nebridius, Augustine often notes that his son is present. This may represent that Augustine is weighed down not only by his continuing physical lusts, but also by the awareness of his past transgressions, which pose an obstacle for him when he tries to achieve the level of purity that he believes to be a prerequisite for his conversion.

In 390—within three years of the baptism Augustine shared with his son and friend—Adeodatus died. The death of his son may have seemed significant to Augustine not only

in the way it would be significant to any father, but also as a representation of how he had begun shedding the artifacts of his secular life. Adeodatus's age in 390 would have been nearly eighteen—close to the age at which Augustine and his mother conceived him. Augustine may have seen the death of his son as a representation of the death of his own, former self. This idea brings us back to the argument that Augustine felt that his secular years acted as training for his life in the church.

If Augustine used both fruit and his son as metaphors for his own spiritual journey, it is possible that his actual physical journey served as an analogy in this same fashion. Augustine was born in 354 in Thagaste to Patricius—a pagan—and Monica—a Catholic. Already, we see a choice laid out before him. Thagaste itself may hold symbolism, as well, given that citizens of the European regions viewed northern Africa as remote, backwards, and unsophisticated—as an empire might view a remote colony (Brown 24). These views suggest a physical distance from the Italian cities of wealth, scholarship, and philosophy. By corollary, this simpler region might be more amenable to the ascetic life Augustine would eventually adopt. Thagaste as the scene of the pear tree theft and the death of a close childhood friend whose baptism he mocks can be seen to represent his origins. The events that led Augustine to leave Thagaste might be viewed as the debased triggers which launched his sinful life.

Augustine's mother was a virtuous Catholic woman, a point which Augustine acknowledges throughout the work. A recurring theme in *Confessions* is Monica's desire to see her son converted and baptized. Augustine himself begged for this baptism at an early age when he fell sick, though Monica hesitated as she feared that if he were to live through the illness that the baptism would be for nothing, as the sins of adolescence and later life would be inevitable. If Augustine's mother represents piety and the Catholic Church to him, this attitude regarding baptism—although common at the time—may be seen as foreshadowing his secular lifestyle.

Augustine left Thagaste, his birthplace and home of his mother, to travel to Carthage in order to study and, eventually, to teach rhetoric. The students here were wild and undisciplined, vandalizing the campus at which Augustine taught. He might have seen some of himself in this unrestrained youth. He described his ambitions in this regard to have been fuelled primarily by greed and a desire for recognition. His research brought him to read Cicero's *Hortensius*, which instilled in him a desire to study rhetoric. Augustine says that he “wanted to distinguish [him]self as an orator for a damnable and conceited purpose, namely delight in human vanity” (38). These ambitions and studies would plot the course of his secular life until his conversion.

This city is also where he met the mother of his son and where Adeodatus was born. This union represents not a commitment to the woman but a commitment to his lustful urges. The benefit of her companionship is only described by Augustine as having been an outlet for his carnal desires. Augustine would cultivate this vice throughout his travels. Similarly, Adeodatus and his mother accompanied Augustine in these same travels to Rome and Milan, as previously mentioned.

While in Carthage, Augustine also developed an interest in theater, which he might later believe to epitomize the path away from truth. He said that his favorite indulgence was tragedy, and that the sadder a production could make him feel, the more he loved it. He confesses that he loved suffering and sought out opportunities for suffering in his own life. He was “glad to be in bondage, tied with troublesome chains, and with the result that [he] was flogged with the red-hot iron rods of jealousy, suspicion, fear, anger, and contention” (35). He describes this in contrast to an inner longing to seek the truth, which fits with his eventual theories of predestination, in that as a sinner, he was free only to sin (Wetzel 55).

Additionally, Carthage served as the scene of Augustine's introduction and conversion to the Manichean faith. When Monica heard about his conversion, she told Augustine that he was no longer welcome in her home, until a later vision prompted her to reconcile with her son. The pursuit of Manichean studies represents Augustine's embarkation into a lifestyle that would pull him away from the truth he will eventually find in the Catholic Church, as it also initially caused him to be pulled away from the Catholic faith of his mother. In seeking truth and understanding, Augustine also began to study astrology around this time, a practice he would later denounce. These false spiritual pursuits not only represent a lack of movement towards God but also a movement away from the Catholic Church.

The sum of his time in Carthage, where he spent nine years, ignited the interests that drove him to strive for empty goals and to sate material and physical desires. In this way, Augustine changes from the young boy begging his mother for baptismal rites to a young man interested only in the fulfillment of earthly desires and ambitions. At this point, Augustine's frustration with his Carthaginian students led him to leave for Rome. He did not tell his mother, but, following the death of his father, she found out and followed him, still anxious to aid his spiritual health. The secrecy surrounding his journey suggests not only a lack of willingness to accept the Catholic faith but also a willful escape from it.

In Rome, Augustine hoped to find more civilized students, but he had difficulty collecting the fees for his classes. His secular pursuits were not providing him with an adequate means to support himself—a parallel to the lack of provision for his spiritual well-being. Additionally, shortly after arriving in Rome, he fell ill, mirroring the spiritual sickness he would soon feel as a result of the Roman climate. Augustine personally linked the illness that befell him in Rome with what he perceived as a desertion of Monica (Brown 69). He felt disappointed by the manners of the Romans and the way in which his students avoided paying him. Rome came to symbolize the less virtuous aspects of his profession. The application of skill as a rhetor in Rome was primarily to win cases in a court of law, with no care paid to whether one was espousing fact or fiction. In this way, Augustine describes in *Confessions* that he feels that he is not only guilty of dishonesty through his own actions but also through aiding others to perpetrate it. “Overcome by greed [him]self, [he] used to sell the eloquence that would overcome an opponent” (53).

Spiritually, Augustine had all but abandoned his interest in Manicheism by this point, but he had not yet replaced it with anything better. Socially, he had attracted the attention of Symmachus, prefect of Rome and prominent pagan; he was also the cousin of

Ambrose, who would be central to Augustine's future conversion. Symmachus eventually helped Augustine to secure a prestigious teaching position in Milan. In this way, Rome marked a milestone in the life of Augustine. At this time, he was in the middle of drifting away from his Manichean faith as well as his profession as a simple professor, as the new appointment in Milan would come with many of the responsibilities and benefits of a public office. It is clear, in retrospect, that Augustine would have recognized the irony in being helped to the position from which he eventually would find his way to Christianity through the inadvertent aid of a pagan, namely Symmachus (Brown 70). After Augustine had left for Milan, Monica arrived in Rome to discover that her son was already gone, and she continued on to Milan after him.

In Milan, Augustine had the dubious honor of preparing a panegyric publicly to praise the emperor, Valentinian II. This opportunity represented his success in his profession and the promise of future rewards, such as social connections that would further his career ambitions. Despite these reasons for happiness, Augustine found himself embroiled in inner turmoil, troubled by the knowledge that his "mendacity would win the good opinion of people who knew it to be untrue." Augustine identifies an episode in which he encountered a beggar in the street, through which was "made . . . conscious of [his] misery." He questioned how much happiness the grandeur of public office could bring him compared to the simple pleasures enjoyed by a drunken man offering well-wishes to passersby. He lamented to his friends that "what [the beggar] had gained with a few coins, obtained by begging . . . is the cheerfulness of temporal felicity [which Augustine] was going about to reach by painfully twisted and roundabout ways" (97). As the pear tree incident marked Augustine's descent into sin, the internal struggle brought about by the brush with the beggar denotes his departure from secular ambitions.

Augustine eventually left the Manichean faith and began to associate with the Academics. While he spent some time dabbling in their skepticism, he also pursued Neo-Platonism, the principles of which would ease his transition into Christianity. These Neo-Platonic texts described many of the tenets of Christianity, except for the death of Christ (122). During his time in Milan, he came to know Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. Augustine was initially drawn to Ambrose because of his skill as an orator; however, Ambrose would become instrumental in assisting Augustine to understand the Old Testament in an allegorical sense. Augustine's acceptance of Christianity hinging on the use of allegory and symbolism suggests that the importance placed on these tools might have led to his own adoption of them in his own writings. Augustine speaks earlier in *Confessions*—while he is pursuing scholarly understanding of the truth—of his envy of the man who can blindly accept the Faith. He comes to justify faith, comfort and acceptance in the absence of knowledge, in saying "I realized how unmoveably sure I was about the identity of my parents from whom I came, which I could not know unless I believed what I had heard" (95). Monica also had arrived in Milan by this time and had been similarly moved by Ambrose, suggesting that, symbolically, the teachings and interpretations of Ambrose did not differ from Monica's own, in essence, confirming the idea of the universality of the Catholic Church. Monica's

devotion to Ambrose also mirrors Augustine's own admiration of the man. "She loved that man as an angel of God" (91). Additionally, these two characters may have been contrasted in order to draw attention to Ambrose's more scholarly and sophisticated understanding and interpretation of faith and Scripture and Monica's humbler, blinder type of devotion. To place both of these characters together in harmony represents the unification of Augustine's secular and spiritual desires.

As Augustine became drawn into the Christian faith, he began to reject the secular aspects of his life. Although he longed to resign from his academic post, Augustine felt that he had to continue until he had an excuse to leave, fearing he might draw undue attention to himself. Augustine continued to occupy this office until his conversion, leaving at that time because of what he considered to be fortunately timed health problems, "pleased that [his] indisposition was a genuine excuse" (157). In this way his physical health declined as he improved his spiritual health. He also continued to grapple with his carnal urges, trying to cleanse himself so that he might be worthy of converting to his new faith. It is not until the garden scene beneath the fig tree that Augustine came to the realization that he did not need to achieve perfection prior to pursuing his faith; in contrast, he could pursue perfection *through* his faith. Both Adeodatus and Monica passed away within a few years of his baptism by Ambrose, but the deaths are recounted in close proximity to Augustine's baptism in the text of *Confessions*, which may support the argument for Adeodatus as a symbol of Augustine's own youth. Monica initially stated that she would like to be buried with Patricius, furthering her Christian devotion to her marriage. On her deathbed, however, she tells Augustine that she is satisfied with her life, having seen his conversion, telling him, "Bury my body anywhere you like. Let no anxiety about that disturb you. I have only one request to make of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you may be" (173). Monica's remains are interred in Ostia.

Augustine, too, returned to Africa, taking a religious post in Hippo, where he eventually became bishop. Hippo is geographically close to Thagaste within one hundred kilometers which may have caused Augustine to consider the two places—or the region of his birth as a whole—to represent the same values. At this point, his travels have brought him full circle, back to the place of his birth, a much-changed man. The chance exists that Augustine saw this evolution himself, recognizing the allegorical significance of his own journeys. While he was moving away from Christianity and then back towards it spiritually, he was moving toward his secular goals and then away from them physically. This contrast fits with the duality between mind and body, which Augustine discusses in his doctrine.

In retrospect, the journey to Carthage and the time Augustine spent there represent the largest lapses in spirituality for Augustine, as it was during this period that he delved into Manicheism and astrology. He also took a concubine and fathered a child. After this, he travelled to Rome to advance his career and to pursue acclaim for his skill in rhetoric. When he arrived in Rome, however, he found it to be less than he expected, representing the dead-end path of secular goals. At the same time, he continued to associate with the Manicheans—though he soon began to distance himself from them. Augustine may have

used this account of his time in Rome in *Confessions* to foreshadow his change of heart in Milan, where he began to pursue Christianity and attempted to end his secular career. With his baptism and conversion, Augustine had finally reached the goal of spiritual fulfillment that had nagged him all along. The return to Africa symbolizes a return to simpler times for Augustine, as his childhood in Thagaste was one in which he accepted Christian faith through his mother. Additionally, if Africa is to be seen as the Augustine's "origin," his return to this area may represent the Neo-Platonic belief that the soul strives to return to its source to achieve unity.

Augustine was a brilliant and complicated man, though *Confessions* draws criticism from some scholars for its lack of structure (McMahon 2). Perhaps what critics view as a haphazard string of anecdotes interspersed with prayer is an effort to bring the symbolic aspects of his life into focus, using them as a literary tool rather than the convoluted ramblings of a man in the rapture of devotion. Augustine was very well educated, and the allegorical interpretations, which were introduced to him by Ambrose, clearly had an effect upon him. For these reasons, it should be considered that Augustine may have attempted to incorporate this same type of allegory when describing his own past.

WORKS CITED

- Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. Henry Chadwick. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo*. London: Faber & Faber, 1967. Print.
- Chadwick, Henry. *Augustine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.
- Ferrari, L. C. "The Pear-Theft in Augustine's 'Confessions.'" *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 15 (1970): 75-112. Print.
- McMahon, Robert. *Augustine's Prayerful Ascent*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989. Print.
- O'Donnell, James J. *Augustine*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985. Print.
- Wetzel, James. "Predestination, Pelagianism, and Foreknowledge." *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*. Ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 49-58. Print.