

Textual Summary

Book six begins with Monica moving to Milan so that she may be near Augustine, and also to Ambrose, whom she admires for his efforts in encouraging Augustine's conversion to the Catholic faith. We see that Augustine has learned to interpret scriptural passages metaphorically rather than literally, though he is still troubled by many questions and has not completely accepted the teachings of the church. Following is an account of Augustine's friend Alypius, a spectator at the gladiatorial games and the moral issues he confronts. The remainder of the book is dedicated to Augustine's discussion of lust and continence. This point in his life is marked by his separation from the woman with whom he has had a physical relationship since he was nineteen. The end of this relationship is in preparation for a marriage that will be more politically expedient for Augustine. However, as the woman he plans to marry is still under the legal age, he secretly takes another mistress to satisfy the carnal desires that still plague him.

Analysis

This book of the *Confessions* explores many pivotal events on Augustine's path to conversion. First, there is an important change in his attitude toward language. Ambrose teaches him how to interpret scripture figuratively rather than literally; Augustine learns to read deeper, and get at the real meaning of the text instead of the merely superficial aspects. Second, he adopts a fairly objective attitude toward lust (in many forms) as he begins examining its role in the lives of others, and then proceeds beyond that to look at his own life from the same perspective, and recognize the hold that lust has over him. A growing dissatisfaction with his life settles upon him as a result of his clarified view of the forces acting upon him, and his own inability to resist them. These developments of his understanding of language and lust are important progress markers in Augustine's journey toward his eventual faith.

Augustine's many years as a rhetorician have emphasized the use of reasoned argument to justify every position. The Manichees - with whom he has long been associated- are characterized by their pointing out of many inconsistencies present in a literal reading of biblical passages. Both as a teacher of rhetoric and as a student of Manichean thought, he is accustomed to using extremely intricate language, but always very prosaically. The Manichee's analyses of scriptural passages seem to look only at their surface meaning, without probing as intended into the underlying messages. Augustine is greatly troubled by the Manichean arguments; for example, the phrase "man created by You in Your own image" had confounded Augustine for years when he attempted to interpret it literally. Read in that way, the verse implied to

Augustine and to the Manichees that God was limited to a bodily form. This corporeal notion of God was one of many semantic stumbling blocks to Augustine's acceptance of the Catholic church.

Book six opens by showing a dramatic change in Augustine's approach to reading such scriptural allegories. With the guidance of Ambrose, Augustine begins to doubt the teachings of the Manichees. Ambrose teaches him of the need to interpret scriptural texts figuratively, and Augustine rejoices in his newfound understanding. This allows him to reject the Manichees' misleading claims. On page 90, we see how Augustine begins to better understand the passage above. He recognizes that it was not intended to be interpreted as a claim that God was in any way bounded to a shape like that of a man, but that it instead referred to a more abstract relation between God and man. Augustine's new attitude is powerfully reflected in a quotation he attributes to Ambrose: "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." (p. 91).

Now familiar with metaphorical interpretation, Augustine is able to refute many of the criticisms of Christian faith that had troubled him during his period with the Manichees. In addition, he breaks from the Manichean principles of demanding proof for all beliefs and recognizes the value - in fact, the necessity of accepting some things on faith. As mentioned earlier, his rhetoric training relied on rigorous justification of claims, not dependence on faith. Although he must abandon this prosaic attitude about language in order to advance his spiritual development, it is worth noting that this style of thought leaves him tremendously well prepared for the intricately detailed analyses of biblical texts that he presents later in the Confessions. Without this background, he would be unable to create the voluminous explications of short passages that constitute books XI - XIII of the Confessions. His search for truth has allowed him to experience and appreciate many different philosophical perspectives over the course of his life. This gives him the chance to make the precise refinements in his beliefs found in the closing books. An important purpose of the autobiographical books is to prepare for this deep examination of theological issues by leading the reader through the same path that Augustine followed en route to his conversion. Book six, then, is a crucially important step along this path. It outlines the shift from the Manichean paradigm of unbending logic to a flexible attitude that allows an appreciation of the poetic and metaphorical style of language used in the bible.

Book six also marks major changes in his attitude about sex and lust. We see how his attitude toward lustful desires of many forms evolves as a result of his scrutiny of his friends' behavior and his own. One subject covered in detail is Augustine's sexual life, and his self-examination regarding it. In the book, we see him starting to recognize his lustfulness as an obstacle to spiritual fulfillment. On pages 101-102, Augustine reveals how he personally disapproves of his own desirous nature (though he cannot yet free

himself of the constraints of this lust). While the church's doctrine in no way forbids him to marry, he presents himself with an obstacle. He feels that he cannot honestly commit himself to his faith until he is no longer dependent on earthly pleasures, until he can "forego the embraces of a woman" (p. 101). Breaking this dependency seems almost impossible to him at the time. He has lived (out of wedlock) with a woman since he was nineteen, and has become extremely accustomed to - indeed, dependent on- a sexual routine. He regards this type of earthly pleasure as sinful, and wishes that he can become continent, but his physical desire is too strong. For the sake of his career, it becomes necessary that he marry legally. The girl chosen for this businesslike arrangement is still two years short of marriageable age, so Augustine is forced to wait. Meanwhile, of course, the woman with whom he had been living must be sent away back home to northern Africa. Unable to tolerate the absence of female companionship, his carnal instincts compel him to take another mistress to satisfy his appetite until the legal marriage can be completed. Augustine is both brokenhearted at his separation from his long-time lover and also seems disgusted at himself for his own inability to temper his desires. On page 103, he describes his sexual desire as "my soul's disease," and regards it as an affliction to rid himself of.

He regards his desire for physical pleasures as a barrier to conversion, preventing his full commitment to God, but at the same time he cannot yet muster the faith to refrain from earthly delights. Augustine provides a very appropriate subplot in book six dealing with the inability to resist a different variety of sinful temptations in the story of his friend Alypius. Though not afflicted with a sexual appetite as Augustine is, Alypius is a "slave to that particular insanity," the gladiatorial games (p. 95). He finds himself fascinated by the blood sports of the time. At Augustine's urging, he is persuaded to give up the sadistic pleasure of observing the games. This victory is only temporary however - for at the forceful urging of his friends he later went back to the games. Then, while caught up in the frenzy and excitement of the crowd, he "reveled in the wickedness of the contest and was drunk with lust for blood" (p. 96). That is, his carnal nature got the better of him, and his conscious will was not enough to enable him to break from his addiction to the savage sport.

At the close of the section describing the incident with Alypius, Augustine provides some insight into his theological view of continence: "none can be continent unless You give it" (p. 101), he says. He shows his view that only through faith in God can one be rid of the desire to commit the "sins" that he describes. He

sees himself (and the human race in general) as too weak of will to resist the pleasures of the world. Augustine's examples show how he and others (like Alypius) cease to derive satisfaction from their addictions. His increasing disgust at Man's apparent inability to temper his own desires is a central theme of book six. We can see another instance of this feeling of dissatisfaction in section VI, which describes

the incident of the drunken beggar. The beggar appears unquestionably foolish, as he derives what little "happiness" he has in his wretched condition from his drunkenness, using whatever "few pennies" he has "begged from passers-by" to buy more alcohol. The lack of any true happiness in the beggar's life only forces Augustine to consider the futility of his own pursuit of worldly things. "Certainly his joy was no true joy;" states Augustine, "but the joy I sought in my ambition was emptier still." (p. 93). Clearly, Augustine has begun perceiving at his own lust-driven lifestyle with the same clarity as he does the lives of others, and is consequently filled with self-loathing.

Augustine's three main examples of lust and worldly desire work together to illustrate his point. Shared among the different vices of drunkenness, bloodthirstiness, and sexual desire is the characteristic of unsatisfying addiction. Truly, it does seem that sin is addictive in Augustine's world-view. He finds that his sexual appetite cannot be sated. The hunger is always there, and yielding to it gives only a momentary decrease in the craving, a craving that can never be satisfied and will only return even stronger after the surrender. An analogous situation exists with Alypius, who - though intellectually appalled by the spilling of blood upon the gladiatorial arena - still is compelled by his carnal nature to watch the spectacle. And the most blatant case of all is that of the drunk, who suffers from addiction in the most obvious form - a chemical dependency.

These illustrations of individuals trying to satisfy addictions of various forms typify what Augustine sees as wretchedness. The victims are no longer fulfilled by their activities, but are merely alleviating the pangs of desire. This pessimistic state of mind, apparently in accord with what Nietzsche described as "avoidance of pain" rather than desire for pleasure, might today be looked upon as depression. For Augustine, this state of wretchedness or depression left him finally receptive to the concept of placing faith in God. Book six is pivotal in that it exposes the reader to the year in which Augustine really plunges into this feeling of wretchedness that will eventually provoke him into accepting God in the later books.

Augustine's comes to regard as lustful sin those experiences that had formerly satisfied him that now ceased to do so. Although he had certainly been *instructed* that things like "fornication" were sinful, it seems that he did not truly believe this prior to being afflicted with the general sense of dissatisfaction that is described above. Though he would agree semantically that his relationship with the woman with whom he lived was sinful, this belief clearly was not deeply held in his heart and mind. He does not truly find that the reputed sinfulness of such a relationship outweighs the benefits during the years that he is with her. He only begins to feel that their life is sinful when he is stricken with the feeling that he is no longer deriving pleasure from his sexual pursuit, but only reducing a craving. The concept of sinfulness seems

not to take on meaning for Augustine until the point at which he no longer feels any fulfillment from his actions, when he becomes a mere a puppet of instinct, driven by force of habit. In this state of wretchedness, he does come to regard things that once held real appeal for him as just unsatisfying sin.

The autobiographical books provide the reader with the context in which Augustine's values were shaped, and justify his eventual choice of perspective very effectively. Book six smoothly integrates with the other books of the Confessions, providing a glimpse of one step in Augustine's spiritual and philosophical development. It contributes well to the groundwork that Augustine lays in preparation for his theological expositions in the final books.