

English 10
St. Augustine's *Confessions*

Here are study questions to help you stay oriented in the text as you read. Frequently, I begin a literary unit by just having you start reading the text. This unit, though, begins with an important lecture. Be sure you have your lecture notes at hand as you begin to read and annotate the text.

Outside readings:

Aeneas/Dido episode of *The Aeneid*

Plato's "Ladder of Love" discourse

Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave"

Book 1: Infancy and Boyhood

1. Look at the opening paragraph. Who is the speaker? Who is the "you"? What do these choices of speaker and audience suggest about the genre of the book and mean for our relationship to the book as readers?
2. What is the effect of the sequence of questions Augustine asks in the beginning of the book? What is the role of paradox? What is the effect of the repetition of the questioning syntax? What is the effect of repetition of words in the passage? Copy out a selection of 2–3 sentences that illustrates your idea.
3. Notice the notes at the bottom of the page. What is the effect of the copious biblical allusions? Choose one you recognize or are curious about. How does Augustine use the biblical text?
4. Given the opening, questioning structure, and biblical allusions, what do you gather about possible purposes Augustine may have had in mind for his work?
5. Plato defines harmony as the objective of the soul's progress. How does this idea relate to the first paragraph of the text, particularly the last line of that first paragraph? Further, what is Augustine's Christian twist on the pagan idea?
6. What kind of sin does a baby commit? How are babies sinful, according to Augustine? What are the implications for older people of a baby's sin?
7. What is the goal of the education Augustine receives? How does Augustine feel about this goal?
8. What is Augustine's first prayer? What does this prayer show about Augustine's spiritual state and understanding of God?

9. How does Augustine feel about the authority of his schoolmasters? How does Augustine regard business? What is wrong with his masters and with the enterprises of business? What do these ideas say about the nature of true education?

10. “Matters are so arranged at your command that every disordered soul is its own punishment” (25). Explain.

11. How does Augustine feel about the literature he reads—and, indeed, every Roman schoolboy would have read *The Aeneid*—and the effect of that literature on the development of his character? How does Augustine misread *The Aeneid*?

12. How does Augustine feel about the moral failings of the Classical gods and the way these stories are used in education, to teach elegant Latin?

13. Overall, what confluences and divergences does Augustine see between Classical culture and Christian culture?

14. At the end of the first book, Augustine refers to Plato’s Ladder of Love and gives himself credit for a little spiritual progress. What is the nature of this progress? What virtue does Augustine see in himself?

Book 2: Adolescence

1. What is the key sin (or group of sins) Augustine confesses in this section? Quote text to cement your point.

2. Give an example of the imagery Augustine uses to describe the struggles and conflicts of adolescence. How would you characterize the imagery? What is its effect?

3. In the section called “A year at home,” Augustine overtly mentions his audience and purpose. What are they?

4. How do Augustine’s father and mother react to Augustine’s reaching puberty? How does Augustine look back on their reactions?

5. What is the effect of Augustine’s allusion to Babylon (36 and elsewhere)? Know enough about Babylon to make a meaningful answer.

6. What are the chief sins described in “Adolescent lust”? Quote text to cement your idea.

7. The robbing of the pear tree is one of the most famous scenes of *The Confessions* and in all of Augustine. Augustine spends almost half of Book 2 describing and discussing it. Let’s explore it:

a. Compare/contrast this event with the sort of story the Roman culture is more interested in (*Aeneid*?). What might Augustine be up to by telling a small story about an internal struggle?

- b. If you were telling a story about yourself that says who you are or were as a teenager, what sort of story might you choose?
 - c. How does the story parallel the story of The Fall? How does Augustine's telling echo Genesis 3? How does the serpent tempt Adam and Eve? What is the relationship of that temptation to young Augustine's situation? What does the biblical parallel add to your understanding of this story?
 - d. What are the implications of thievery? What does it mean to be a thief? How does the thief regard himself? How does the thief view others?
 - e. Cicero posits in *On Friendship* is a moving from individuality to unity. How does Augustine's youthful friendship relate to this definition (which also appears at the beginning of Book 2)? Develop this parallel a little more by reading a summary or excerpt of Cicero's text.
 - f. Why, does he say, is this such a big deal? It's just pears...
 - g. How does the going along with his friends echo the rest of Augustine's (mis)education?
 - h. What considerations about the pears does Augustine ignore? Why, for example, does he pay no attention to the needs of the owner of the tree, the intended purpose of the pears, etc.?
8. Augustine posits, "For in vice there lurks a counterfeit beauty" (39). Explain how this idea works, to the point of imitating God, reaching through the rest of Book 2 for evidence.
 9. At the end of Book 2, Augustine says, "I became to myself a land of famine" (42). Work out the biblical reference given as well as any other Bible stories/passages that might be relevant.
 10. Book 2 looks at the three most important influences on a person: parents, teachers, and friends. How does the pear tree incident encapsulate where Augustine's education is with regard to these influences?

Book 3: Student Years at Carthage

1. Augustine goes at age 18 to Carthage, replicating the journey of Aeneas, who goes to Carthage. What does this parallel suggest?
2. What is Augustine's attitude toward the theatre?
3. What is the role of *Hortensius* in the education of Augustine? How does it relate to the difference between temporal truth and eternal truth? How is it possible that Cicero turns Augustine toward Christ?
4. How does Augustine react to the Bible?
 - a. Why does he react in this way?

b. What is the role of dramatic irony in this reaction? Consider not only Augustine's conversion but also the style of Augustine's text.

c. Later in Book 3, a bishop refuses to talk to him (at the request of Monica). How do these two episodes relate to each other?

5. Augustine's hanging out with the Manichees shines a light on his struggle between spirit and matter. The Manichees reinterpret scripture in a way contrary to Monica's Christian belief. How might Manichaeism appeal to Augustine, given what we know about his reaction to scripture and the nature of his formal education overall?

6. How does Augustine account for changes in moral standards over time?

7. What is the role of Monica's dream in Book 3? Why do you think Augustine includes it here?

Book 4: Augustine the Manichee

1. What are the main errors Augustine makes in Book 4? How do they keep him from the wisdom he seeks?

2. Rhetoricians in Ancient Rome have a great deal of power. What is Augustine's relationship to that power? What power-seeking do we see in various aspects of Augustine's professional life?

3. How does Augustine seek wisdom? Discuss the ways Augustine seeks truth and beauty.

4. Cicero defines friendship as an agreement of all things on heaven and earth. How has Augustine advanced? What limitations are there still to true friendship for him?

5. How does Augustine's friend surprise Augustine at the end of the friend's life? What are the implications?

6. After Augustine's friend dies, Augustine is plunged into grief.

a. What is missing from Augustine's way of thinking—what might have consoled him? Further, what is amiss in Augustine's current idea of friendship?

b. Further, when Augustine is a schoolboy, he weeps over the death of Dido in *The Aeneid*; how does this earlier episode echo the current one? How is this grief different?

c. Along the same lines, Augustine's father is called selfish when he sends Augustine off to the best available school. To what degree does the figure of Augustine echo his father's selfishness?

7. Augustine in Book 1 has criticized his teachers for not being able to point him to higher things; how is Augustine doing now as a teacher?

8. What does Augustine's dedicating his book to Hierius show about his character?
9. What profound error does Augustine make about the nature of God? What does this error say about Augustine's principal sin?
10. N.B.: Augustine's dissing of Aristotle in Book 4 causes Christian thinkers not to rely on Aristotle, for Aristotle not to be translated, etc., until the time of Thomas Aquinas, whose work pulls heavily from Aristotle.

Book 5: Faustus at Carthage, Augustine to Rome and Milan

1. How does Manichaeism fail for Augustine? What is the role of Faustus in Augustine's eventual turning away from the Manichees?
2. Write a character sketch of Faustus.
3. How does Augustine's ability to read and interpret (both personally and in general) written texts and speeches develop as he moves from his schoolboy reading of *The Aeneid* to his reading of scripture to his current situation with Faustus?
4. How does Augustine's exploration of natural philosophy (science) affect his pulling away from the Manichees?
5. What is Augustine's relationship to the Academics?
6. How does Augustine's departure from Carthage for Rome echo Aeneas's departure in *The Aeneid*? Use textual evidence to anchor and develop your ideas.
7. What does Augustine's way of leaving Carthage say about his priorities and spiritual development?
8. What makes St. Ambrose an ideal influence on Augustine at this time in Augustine's development? What is the relationship of form and content in Ambrose's presentation? How does Augustine learn from Ambrose?
9. What does Ambrose suggest about Hebrew scripture? What idea makes scripture more palatable to Augustine?

Book 6: Milan, 385: Progress, Friends, Perplexities

1. As Monica "offered [Augustine] to you upon the bier of her meditation," the Dido/Aeneas metaphor has shifted. Who's Dido now?

2. How does the character of Monica develop in Book 6? How does the difference between Monica's Christianity and Augustine's developing faith affect the text?
3. How does Ambrose influence Augustine in Book 6? Consider his rhetoric, his content, and his relationship with Augustine.
4. What is the effect on Augustine of Ambrose's unusual habit of silent reading? What does the silent reading say about Ambrose?
5. What conclusions does Augustine come to about the nature of faith? What is the relationship of believing vs. knowing with certainty?
6. What is the lesson Augustine derives from his encounter with the drunken beggar?
7. Write a brief character sketch of Alypius. Include his character as Augustine describes him and the traits you derive from the main anecdotes about him. (See #8 for ideas about Alypius at the gladiatorial games.)
8. Augustine says Alypius "suffered a more grievous wound in his soul than the gladiator he wished to see had received in the body" (105). First, is Alypius able to keep himself from pleasure in violence on his own? Second, how does the situation of Alypius parallel that of the gladiator? What does this passage tell us about the importance of the inner vs. the outer life for Augustine? Does Alypius's struggle with violence relate to Augustine's struggle with celibacy?
9. What are Augustine's concerns about and solutions to the challenge of celibacy?
10. What does Augustine's proposed commune tell you about his interests and degree of seeking? What is the main obstacle to Augustine's proposed commune?
11. What is the meaning of the last section of Book 6? What do you think about Augustine's grief and subsequent reflections? Why not just live for bodily pleasures?

Book 7: Neoplatonism Frees Augustine's Mind

1. Examine the title of Book 7; make clear how this title is apt.
2. How have Classical scholars and texts (Aeneid, Cicero [bk. 3], Aristotle, and now the Platonists) influenced Augustine? What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?
3. Neoplatonism helps Augustine see that serious intellectual inquiry is not incompatible with Catholicism. How does this help Augustine? What problems remain?
4. Analyze Augustine's technique of quoting scripture to show what he learned from the Platonist philosophers. How does he set up the long passage from John? What "but" follows the

passage? Augustine does this four times. What does he find/not find in the Platonists? What is the reader to take from this rhetorical move on Augustine's part?

5. How does Augustine use the story of Jacob and Esau to explain his relationship to Christianity? How does this metaphor extend itself into Augustine's ideas from St. Paul?

6. How does Augustine use "Egyptian gold" as a metaphor?

7. How does the encounter of Moses and the Burning Bush shape Augustine's thinking about the nature of God?

8. How do the Platonists help Augustine re-shape the question of evil? What conclusion does Augustine come to?

9. How does Augustine use light imagery in Book 7? Consider God and, also, "The Allegory of the Cave."

10. Explain the following passage: "And then my mind attained to *That Which Is*, in the flash of one tremulous glance. Then indeed did I perceive your invisible reality through created things, but to keep my gaze there was beyond my strength. I was forced back through weakness and returned to my familiar surroundings, bearing with me only a loving memory, one that yearned for something of which I had caught the fragrance, but could not yet feast upon" (131).

11. Though what heresies does Augustine come to accept Christ the Mediator? What, according to Augustine, is the purpose of heresy?

Book 8: Conversion

1. "In a spirit of thankfulness let me recall the mercies you lavished on me, O my God; to you let me confess them" (137). Discuss the further meaning of the word "confession."

2. Write a character sketch of Simplicianus.

3. What is the major obstacle Augustine faces to his conversion? Explain how Augustine overcomes it, as we see his progress over the course of Book 8.

4. Write a character sketch of Victorinus. Summarize the story of his conversion and consider how this character and his story resonates with Augustine and his own story. How does Augustine go public with his conversion?

5. Reflect on the consequences for Augustine if he converts. How do intellectuals at the time regard Christianity? What will the other masters of rhetoric think? Is Christianity necessarily public and communal?

6. Augustine reflects for a long time about the meaning of adversity, both unplanned and planned. What is the purpose of adversity?
7. How does Augustine regard what we would now call addiction? What does he decide about the nature of addiction? What, according to Augustine, is the solution?
8. Describe the tone of Book 8. How does he regard his former self? His reader?
9. Compare and contrast the direct, efficacious working of a text on Antony, on the two young men who discover St. Antony's story, and on Augustine.
10. Think of St. Paul as both a character in Acts and as the writer/narrator of letters. How does Paul relate to Augustine as character and as narrator of his own story?
11. What is the symbolism of the garden in which Augustine struggles to convert? Consider multiple biblical connections as well as elsewhere in the text of *The Confessions*.
12. Augustine's description of his "compulsion" uses an image of the chain. Consider the metaphor of the chain as it occurs in this book. Think both of the Allegory of the Cave as well as Pauline notions of the chains of sin.
13. How do you interpret the section called "Pick it up and read"? Include your ideas of the interplay of God's grace and Augustine's will along with other aspects (St. Antony? St. Paul? notions of astrology or divination?) that stand out to you. Also, "the light of certainty flooded my heart" (157).
14. What does the added conversion of Alypius add to the effect of Book 8?

 Book 9: Death and Rebirth

1. One key Pauline idea is that Christianity is liberating in an authentic way; Augustine begins Book 9 with language of freedom. Consider the theme and imagery of bondage and freedom throughout the text. How is giving oneself to God freedom, as opposed to bondage?
2. Augustine's conversion allows him to approach death in a new way. Remember the death of Augustine's friend in Book 4. How, now, does he respond to the deaths of Verecundus, Nebridius, Adeodatus, and finally Monica?
3. Why do you think Augustine includes the note that Ambrose suggests Augustine read Isaiah, but Augustine finds it too hard?
4. How does Augustine go public/stay private with his conversion? How does he seem to feel about his decisions? Consider the tradition of Antony of the Desert and Augustine's professional decisions during this period. He and his friends take up a quasi-monastic life. Why do you think that Augustine does not marry, given his desire for women?

5. Write a character sketch of Monica. What do you admire about her? Are there aspects of her character that you find less than admirable? Discuss.

6. Consider the role of addiction in the story of Monica. How does this story resonate with problems Alypius and Augustine have. Consider how the problem begins. What causes Monica to give up alcohol? What about Augustine and Alypius and their problems? What does the inclusion of Monica's difficulty with her will add for the reader of the text?

7. Examine the colloquy between Augustine and Monica on the nature of heaven. Look at the poem, the most important mystical moment in the whole of his work. While Augustine has been intellectual in his approach to his Christianity, his conversion shows a reaching beyond the intellectual and occurs through an encounter with another person. How does the text point toward the mystical event? Examine the style and imagery of the poem.

8. What do Monica's choices about her death and burial show about her character?

9. How does Monica's death affect Augustine? Compare and contrast with Augustine's reaction to his friend's death in Book 4. Then, what doesn't Augustine know? How is his reaction different now?

Book 10: Memory

This book is the only of the non-narrative books you'll read; I have included it to give you a taste of the non-narrative books and also because in ways Book 10 seems to function as a sort of epilogue for the narration, giving you advice about how to read and think about Books 1-9. Also, Augustine himself places Book 10 with the first 9, saying that the first ten books are about him and the last three are about God.

We'll each summarize a "chapter" of this book, seeing what it adds to our overall sense of why Augustine has written *The Confessions* and how the nature of memory is relevant to the discussion of the text itself and to discussions of what it means to be human and, ultimately, Christian.