‘That day and the next we did not speak a word. O hard earth, why did you not engulf us? When we had come as far as the fourth day my Gaddo threw himself on the ground before me, crying, “O father, why won’t you help me?” There he died; and even as you see me now I watched the other three die, one by one, on the fifth day and the sixth. And I began, already blind, to grope over their bodies and for two days called to them, though they were dead. Then fasting had more power than grief.’ Having said this, with maddened eyes he seized that wretched skull again between his teeth and clenched them on the bone just like a dog.

It is easy for readers to feel like they’ve seen all hell has to offer by the end of Canto 32, and why shouldn’t they? At this point they’ve already been blown around by the violent winds of lust, conversed with the burning heretics at trapped in their tombs of fire, and traveled a literal lake of shit just to descend through hell’s nine circles. They overcame a nearly 3,250-mile journey[1] through some of the sharpest and most jagged terrain imaginable to just to make it to the bottom. Even the frozen lake itself, while a surprising twist, seems infinitely less torturous then being flayed alive like the schismatics or ripped apart by harpies like the trees in the suicide woods. This is why the story told by Count Ugolino at the beginning of Canto 33 comes as such a horrific shock to Dante and readers alike. Its gruesomely descriptive detail leaves more questions than it answers, while demonstrating fundamental themes of the poem taken to their extreme. What is it about the last 15 lines that change the stories context, though, and how can understanding the historical significance of the count change how we view his place at the lowest level of hell?

By this passage in the poem Count Ugolino has already reveled to Dante the person he believes to be responsible for his stint in hell, the Archbishop Ruggieri. See, Ugolino was once the most influential man in all of Pisa, being named Podestà (like the governor) and then

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[1] Pagano, A., & Delena , M. (2022, October 20). *Dante’s “inferno” is a journey to hell and back*. History. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/dantes-inferno-is-a-journey-to-hell-and-back

subsequently the Capitano del Popolo (captain of the people).[2] Somewhere along the line, however, he began being forced to share this responsibility with his nephew Nino, which understandably did not go over well. In an attempt to consolidate power and oust his nephew, the count began working with the archbishop to plot a coup and take back his city. Ultimately, Ruggieri betrayed Ugolino and reported him to the authorities for treason, eventually exiling the count and all his male kin to the Tower of Hunger. Locked in prison, all he can dream about is being hunted by those who have wronged him on earth. Vivid images of his children's brutal death at the fangs of sharp teeth fill his mind day and night.

That brings us to the last 15 lines of the story, which we will now discuss for the rest of this essay. The segment opens following a difficult conversation between Ugolino and his children. Stress and sorrow from being locked away have caused him to begin ferociously gnawing away at his hands, but his kids seeing this as hunger begin pleading with the patriarch to eat them, saying "you clothed us in this wretched flesh, now strip it off." Thus, when he begins with, "that day and the next we did not speak a word. O hard earth, why did you not engulf us?" his silence is not one of fear, but one of acceptance. An attempt to wrap his mind around the choice he knows he will soon have to make. His decision begins to torture him even further when he watches his son Gaddo throw himself to the floor and beg for mercy, "there he died, and even as you see me now, I watched the other three die one by one, on the fifth day and the sixth." The line raises the question, if Ugolino wasn't already considering cannibalizing his sons to extend his chances of getting out, why did he not let them feast on Gaddo once he passed? Or if he truly

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[2] Chisholm., H. (Ed.). (2019, January 11). *1911 Encyclopedia Britannica della gherardesca, ugolino*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Della_Gherardesca%2C_Ugolino

was overcome by hunger like he attempts to tell Dante, why not eat his son while he's fresh, why wait three more days for the body to grow cold and stale?

Before he begins digging in on the whole, body buffet, Ugolino does truly attempt to process the death of his children in the best way that he can. He "gropes over their bodies and for two days called to them, though they were dead." This is his final act of resistance against the biological desires holding him captive. A chance to feel their skin one last time and understand tactilely that they will not be coming back to this earthly plane. That only makes it all the more impactful when he says, "then fasting had more power than grief". Now, this line can be taken in two different ways: firstly, on its face, Ugolino is describing how hungry he is locked away in the tower, claiming that the physical desire to eat held more control over him than the protection of his sons' bodies. This motif is not only seen a lot in the Inferno, such as circle four which holds the lustful, but also eons of Christian literature. Desire over spiritual safety was the original sin of man and will continue to be what makes us human for all eternity. Secondly, and far more interesting, Ugolino could be talking about the hunger for revenge against Ruggieri. A kind of revenge he knows can only be claimed if he causes an atrocity in the tower. He wants them to find the mangled bodies strewn about the room and view the scene as a tragedy. It's his only way of going out with a victory. Once people find the bodies, they'll know the archbishop caused this horrific tragedy by placing Ugolino here and turn their backs to him. Even if he recognizes there is no escape, he can drag his enemies down with him

Through this lens it becomes awfully convenient that immediately after delivering that line, Ugolino goes back to ravaging the skull of Ruggieri. "With maddened eyes he seized that wretched skull again between his teeth and clenched on them on the bone just like a dog." Clearly his physical hunger makes him think of the archbishop at the very least. In a way

Ugolino's punishment is exactly what he prayed to receive on earth, the chance to get back at the only man who wronged him and lived to tell the tale. When he uses phrases such as "like a dog" it only increases the idea of insatiable aggression against the figure. Yet even with all of eternity to get back at his perpetrator, Ugolino never stops chewing the skull, demonstrating that his desire for revenge is still stronger than his hope for forgiveness. It is this line of thinking which all be guarantees the count's place in the icy rivers of hell. Because of that he is forced to spend eternity reliving his greatest failure.

What if we give Ugolino the benefit of the doubt, though, and we assume that he had a perfectly logical reason for not allowing his sons to feed on the bodies or eating until day seven? Well then by Dante's rules, he still belongs in the 9th circle of hell, which is exclusively for those who have committed treachery or betrayal. Let us not forget Ugolino attempted to initiate a coup against his country before he was even banished to the Tower of Hunger. Doing this exclusively to steal the power from his nephew he is also still a betrayal of his kin, which is another 9th circle sin. No matter what point in the timeline we start at, the cannibalization of his children was not the sin that condemned Ugolino to life trapped in the frozen lake. It was simply the finishing blow.

In the end, Ugolino's attempt to draw sympathy from Dante, especially knowing that the archbishop cannot speak up for himself, feels like the apex of all the traits we've seen carried by sinners throughout the poem. He simply wants to be able to blame somebody else for his actions in life, a quick shot of forgiveness in the arm to carry him through the next thousand years in between nibbles. It's easy to blame the archbishop for his treachery and his cruelty against Ugolino, but what it's hard to do is inspect personal blame. To ask ourselves what the count did in his life to be put in a position of exile, and whether those decisions would have caused him to

wind up in hell anyway. Learn from the spirits trapped forever in the inferno, peace can only come once it’s found inside. Making the decision to stop blaming others for the actions we commit, and thinking about our own responsibilities, is the first step in avoiding this eternal damnation described by Dante. Well, that and not eating your kids.

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