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The Salvation of Count Ugolino

“As long as my book is somewhat alive in you, I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

—Dow Mossman

As we read, the characters of a given story have a tendency to grow within us, ultimately adding to our own life experience. These characters remain a part of us long after the book itself has been finished. I, for example, have distinct memories that are not my own, but through reading, have become mine. Whether it is Scout Finch asking to “pass the damn ham,” or Screwtape affectionately signing another letter to his nephew, Wormwood, the characters in the books that I have read have become alive in me. These characters add not only to me, but also to each other. Every life intertwines, making the collective experience more worthwhile. For example, the lives of Count Ugolino in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, as well as those of Huck and Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are linked together, one narrative adding to the other. Through Twain’s novel, Huck shares the valuable life lessons that he has learned, helping others to learn those same lessons. Count Ugolino could have avoided damnation had he read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because he would have realized, like Huck does, that he is a member of humankind, no better than anyone else. Count Ugolino’s twisted sense of himself is what ultimately leads to his damnation. He is so completely absorbed in his own perceived importance that he fails to acknowledge anyone else’s humanity, including his own sons. This failure is apparent through both his actions in Hell as well as through the story of his death. When Dante/pilgrim first comes across Count Ugolino, Ugolino is frozen in ice, chewing on the

nape of Archbishop Ruggieri's neck. As the pilgrim approaches the ice, Ugolino "raise[s] his mouth from his fierce meal, then use[s] the head that he had ripped apart in back: he wipe[s] his lips upon its hair"(Alighieri, XXXIII, 1-3). Through this seemingly small action, Ugolino reveals his own twisted nature because his attempts to separate himself from the rest of humanity become apparent. First, he is suspended in ice, representing his own (this might be hokey) *ice-olation* from the rest of humanity. Ugolino only adds to his distancing from humankind by gnawing at the neck of another human being. This demonstrates his disregard for human life, as though he thinks that his own life is more important than the lives of others. What is worse, however, is that Ugolino himself fails to realize his flaws. In fact, despite being in the depths of Hell while chewing on someone's neck, he maintains the proper etiquette that any respectable gentleman would. He wipes his mouth using Ruggieri's hair as a napkin, as if he has been interrupted while eating at the dinner table in his home. In addition, he refers to his enemy and meal as his "neighbor" (Alighieri, XXXIII, 15). Through his actions, Ugolino clearly reveals his belief in his own uniqueness, that is to say, that nobody else is as important as he is. In his own mind, Ugolino is superior to anyone and everyone, so much so, that he fails to realize even the simple fact that he is in Hell. Ugolino expresses his belief in his own superiority not only through his actions, but also through the story of his death with his sons. While recounting his story, Ugolino feeds off of Dante/pilgrim's sympathy for him, trying to evoke tears from Dante by saying "if you don't weep now, when would you weep" (Alighieri, XXXIII, 42)? While pleading with the pilgrim, however, Ugolino does not shed a single tear. Despite appealing to the pilgrim's empathy towards mankind, Ugolino shows no human emotions himself, distancing himself from others by not engaging in distinctly human actions, such as empathy. Ugolino's hardened emotional state is further revealed when his sons call out to him while in the tower.

Despite being locked in the tower with his sons for several days, Ugolino does not speak to them until after they have died. Even when one of his sons calls out to him “Father, why do you not help me?” (Alighieri, XXXIII, 69) before dying, Ugolino does not respond. This not only depicts his disregard for human emotions, particularly those of his family, but it also echoes a passage from the Bible where Jesus calls out to God and asks “Why hast Thou forsaken me?” By essentially rewriting the Bible with himself in place of God, Ugolino further expresses his belief in his own superiority. Furthermore, he mimics God again when his sons offer themselves as food for the starving Ugolino. The sons speak to Ugolino, saying “you clothed us in this sad flesh - it is for you to strip off (Alighieri, XXXIII, 62-63). This passage mirrors the biblical adage that “God giveth, and God shall taketh away.” Ugolino clearly reveals his own inflated sense of himself by essentially calling himself “God.” By both describing his death and acting as though he were superior to all other human beings, Count Ugolino separates himself from humanity and earns a place in the ice of Inferno. His damnation, however, could have been avoided had he read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and learned about the developing relationship between Huck and Jim. Like Count Ugolino, Huckleberry Finn initially believes in his own superiority over other humans, particularly the runaway slave named, Jim, after spending time on the raft in the Mississippi River with him. However, Huck comes to realize that Jim is a human being, no different from himself. Early on, Huck acts exactly as anyone would have expected Ugolino to have acted, were he in a similar situation. Huck does not speak to Jim frequently and refers to him as a runaway slave, instead of by his name. It is not until he has spent time with him on the raft that Huck comes to recognize Jim’s humanity. In one instance, Huck becomes separated from Jim while on the river at night in a thick fog. When he finally manages to find the raft again, he finds Jim asleep, exhausted from his calling out for Huck. When Jim wakes up,

however, Huck pretends that the entire ordeal had been in Jim's dreams. After Jim finally discovers the trick that Huck plays on him, he is very hurt. Jim says of the trick "Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is datv puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed"(Twain, 95). Surprised upon seeing Jim's response, Huck feels guilty and eventually works up the nerve to apologize to Jim for the trick. He says "I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way"(Twain, 95). By seeing how deeply hurt Jim was by his trick, Huck recognizes Jim's humanity through his emotions. He quickly understands that Jim is a human being with human emotions, and he, therefore, deserves respect. Had Count Ugolino been able to recognize the emotions of his sons in the tower, he would have acknowledged their humanity and subsequent equality with himself. As a result, he would have stepped down off of the pedestal that he made for himself and learned to walk alongside other human beings. In addition to his cruel trick, Huck further recognizes the humanity and equality of all human beings when he is forced to decide whether or not to turn Jim into the authorities. While his upbringing pressures as well as social pressures push him to turn Jim in for the reward, Huck ultimately chooses to follow his own instincts and "go to Hell" (Twain, 223). Huck's backward perception of Heaven and Hell simply add to the weight of his decision because, by choosing to follow his instincts, he believes that he is committing a sin. Huck shows that he is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to save his friend, Jim. By witnessing the selflessness exhibited by Huck, Ugolino would have benefited because he would be taught to serve others instead of himself. Ugolino would not have sat silently as his sons offered themselves as food to him, but instead he would have sacrificed his own life so that his children could have eaten.

Clearly, Count Ugolino would have been saved from damnation had he read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because he would have witnessed the mutual friendship and respect that Huck and Jim show for each other. Hopefully, after having become familiar with Huck and Jim, Ugolino would have learned that he, too, is a member of the human race. By recognizing this, and this alone, Ugolino could have avoided his sins towards his family. Like most bodies in Hell, Ugolino failed to find blame within himself. Had he fallen back on the life experiences of Huck and Jim, however, he might have been saved.

Works Cited

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