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Normativity as the Root of Secrecy and Moral Degeneration in Ellen Hart's *A Whisper of Bones*

Ava King

This paper was originally developed for a Writing 101 course taught by Dr. Sylvia Brown.

The Skarsvold house had seemed like such an inviting place to him the first time he walked in the front door ... And yet, as he got to know them better, he'd begun to detect shadows in their relationships, drops of pure, corroding acid that suggested a sickness at the core. (Hart 210-11)

Like many mystery novels, Ellen Hart's *A Whisper of Bones* places familial secrecy at the heart of her story. As readers eventually discover, in 1978 matriarch Eleanor beat her brother-in-law to death with a baseball bat. Eleanor decides to bury the body beneath the root cellar and allows her son Frank, who injured him with an ax, to believe that he has committed the murder. In her eyes, this action enables Frank to believe that he has behaved as a hero and serves as Eleanor's way to maintain a veneer of respectability regarding the family and their legacy. Throughout the course of the novel, Eleanor desperately clings to her secret in an attempt to preserve a façade of normality, ironically creating the exact abnormal familial environment that results in the psychological and subsequent moral ruin of her son, Frank. Hart uses this central irony to illustrate the corrosive power of secrets, suggesting that an obsession with "the normal" can be particularly dangerous, especially when a person is willing to justify anything in service of that goal.

Eleanor, however misguided, believes that keeping her secret will protect Frank and allow him to grow from a "normal" boy into a "normal" man, ready to take his place in the family legacy. When bones are found in their root cellar, Eleanor claims that her father nailed it shut to prevent young Frank from getting injured, insisting that "he was a normal boy. If there was something dangerous to get into, he'd find it" (Hart 106). Eleanor regularly characterizes Frank as normal, in contrast to how the rest of the town perceives him. On the outside he is lazy and pathetic - a middle aged man living in his mother's basement. However, her characterization unintentionally reveals a seed of doubt when she confesses that part of Frank is drawn to the deviant. While she

dedicates all her energies to guaranteeing a “normal” childhood for her son, Eleanor fears any chinks in the armor of the narrative she has spun for her perfectly Midwestern “Minnesota Nice” family (Hart 14). Eleanor encourages her son to exhibit traditional standards of masculinity like professional success and bravery as hallmarks of a “normal” man. Readers learn that Frank’s “mother had encouraged him to attend college [...] she wanted him to get into a respectable, money-making profession” (Hart 51). For Eleanor, Frank’s eventual success will prove that she made the right choice in keeping her secret. Eleanor, hiding the truth from Frank, believes, “he thought he was a hero,” and she “[tells] him as much,” urging Frank to view his crime as a heroic and manly act of protection (Hart 297). Projecting her desire for normality onto her son, Eleanor needs Frank to participate in her view of the family legacy. She tells him, “this is your house [...] it’s what you’ve always wanted” (Hart 231). Eleanor thus views Frank as the next in a long line of morally upstanding Skarsvold citizens who will inhabit their family home. In her mind such a continuance of the patriarchal line preserves a “normal” family. The secret at the heart of the novel, therefore, originates from Eleanor’s fixation with “the normal,” exemplified by her desire for Frank to conform to normality and adhere to her conception of legacy. However, despite all her attempts to preserve a respectable legacy, Eleanor’s secret soon irreparably destroys the family she tries to protect.

As a result of his mother’s secret, Frank grows into a man wracked with self-hatred, prone to violence, and suffocated by his codependency with his mother. In Chapter 6 when Hart introduces Frank’s point-of-view, she immediately reveals that he sees “himself as an underachiever,” trapped in his loveless accounting job, ignoring his dreams of becoming an artist (Hart 51). Perhaps if Frank had not learned so young about the cruelty of the world, he might have had more faith in his own ability to pursue his passion and escape the oppressive force of the secret buried beneath his family home. Although Frank tries to address his belief that he “[doesn’t] deserve happiness,” in therapy, his unwillingness to reveal his secret prevents him from receiving the care he needs to escape his cycle of depression and self-loathing (Hart 57). Frank harbors immense guilt from participating in the murder of Stewart Ickles who he attacked to prevent Stewart from kidnapping his son, Timmy. This guilt is compounded by the shame he experiences in hiding the truth from Wendy, his wife. Frank turns these feelings inward with no one to confide in, resulting in his overwhelmingly negative perception of self. While Eleanor has tried to convince Frank that his actions in 1978 make him a hero, there exists a disconnect in

Frank's mind between the image his mother has created for himself and what he truly believes, as illustrated by his remark "I'm nobody's hero. I hate that word" (205). Eleanor's goal has backfired: instead of raising Frank to be a well-adjusted individual, she has doomed him to a life where he must constantly question what he knows to be true, both about himself and his mother. Frank's self-hatred, an effect of his mother's secret, demonstrates how seriously Eleanor's picture-perfect family has been impacted by her lie.

Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that Eleanor's secret, instead of providing her son with a "normal life," results in a type of moral insanity where Frank does not take his own threats seriously, exhibiting a loss of conscience. Frank's therapist warns him that "if [he] won't face what happened... there will be consequences. Not just for [him], but for the people [he] love[s]" (Hart 179). Hart reveals one such consequence in Frank's threat of violence against his wife. Frank has held on to a deep-seated anger ever since "the incident," and because the wound of his family secret has not been aired out, Frank quickly turns that anger against the woman he loves, who can never understand him because she remains ignorant of his childhood trauma. Frank fears that his moral insanity will result in his harming of Wendy saying, "he was afraid he'd do something he couldn't take back" (Hart 205). The fear that abounds in Frank's psyche, stemming from the skeleton inside his closet, both prevents him from confiding in Wendy and has shaped him into this violent person willing to threaten his wife to ensure that his secret remains buried. Hart suggests that the great tragedy of *A Whisper of Bones* lies in how Eleanor's decisions and Frank's complicity have molded him into an abusive and manipulative partner, always more likely to lash out than ask for help. In addition to self-hatred and violent tendencies, Frank grapples with PTSD from the night Stewart Ickles was murdered (Hart 291). This mental health struggle results in his periods of disassociation where he remains somewhat unaware of the violence he enacts. When the dissociation occurs, Frank's morality crumbles, exhibiting his moral corruption as an effect of the forced secret-keeping. Allowing Frank to believe that he dealt the fatal blow has severely hindered any chance Frank might have had at living a normal, healthy life. Thus, Eleanor inevitably causes her own son's mental health challenges with the very secret she keeps to protect him.

Through her depiction of Frank's relationship with his mother Eleanor, Hart reveals how the secrecy around that night in 1978 has created an unhealthy dynamic between the two characters. Eleanor, called "a shameless control freak whose sole mission in life [is] to prevent

[Frank] from having a life of [his] own,” by Frank’s wife Wendy, has damaged their relationship by tying Frank to a past which haunts him in the present (Hart 93). Whether intentional or not, Eleanor has engineered a life for Frank that constantly confronts him with the evidence of his crime. He cannot escape his mother’s basement, a part of the house suggestive of the repressed nature of the Skarsvold secret. His mother encourages him to remain underground to keep the secret, literally when she urges him to move back into the basement and figuratively in how she prevents Frank from unburying their family trauma. The original sin of the corpse buried in the garage has created a life for Frank where “the only world where he’d ever felt safe,” is the world of his own creation - his art (Hart 123). Eleanor’s insistence on normality has resulted in an intensely abnormal relationship where the roles of parent and child remain stuck in their childhood incarnations. Because of their intense codependency, the poison of secrecy bonds Eleanor and Frank together in a relationship that actively harms Frank especially, preventing either character from moving on with their life.

Eleanor’s obsession with normality fuels her delusion, allowing her to justify her own immorality and hypocrisy. Eleanor’s self-perception as a God-fearing, good Christian woman leads to her delusional view that she retains no culpability for the murder she committed. Even while driving away from the place where she disposed of the evidence of her crime, Hart shows us through Eleanor’s first person point of view that she describes herself “like Lot’s wife, [that] she’d turn into a pillar of salt if she dared look back” (Hart 4). The use of biblical allusion demonstrates that Eleanor deludes herself by identifying with biblical morality, thus exempting herself from the reality of her own actions. Eleanor’s need to control her own narrative quickly extends to her sister Lena who she treats like a stubborn stain that refuses to leave the otherwise pristinely white apron of her life. Lena represents a counter-cultural manifestation of what it means to be a woman, which Eleanor resents: “in Eleanor’s opinion, a seventy-year-old woman wasn’t supposed to listen to rock music, use the vocabulary of a sailor, or state her opinions as if they’d been whispered into her ear by God himself” (Hart 14). Lena, in stark contrast to Eleanor’s aprons and caramel rolls, does not abide by the societal expectations set up for her regarding her gender or her age. Thus, when Eleanor kills Lena in the latter half of the novel, this symbolic act represents Eleanor’s inability to accept anything out of the norm. Lena does not fit with the ideal family image she wishes to cultivate, so Eleanor kills her in an attempt to regain normality in the house and protect her secret. This very action reveals Eleanor’s hypocrisy: in a

desperate attempt to preserve her facade of normalcy she becomes a murderer - the antithesis of stereotypical womanhood. Even in the very end, confronted with the reality of her own arrest, Eleanor refuses to admit her fault, which proves detective Jane Lawless right in her statement that, “it almost always started with a story, a fiction that was created out of need and then the individual worked to believe it. Over time, that fiction replaced reality. The moral center collapsed” (Hart 300). Eleanor’s own psychological problems, chief among them her delusion, fuel her hypocrisy, turning her into a person unable to recognize her own abnormality and immorality.

In *A Whisper of Bones*, a mystery novel about the dangers of social norms, Hart depicts how Eleanor’s obsession with normality ironically leads to the total collapse and ruin of one Midwestern family. In doing so, Hart explores the ramifications of a fixation on “the normal” for society at large. While Hart presents Eleanor as the true villain of the novel, examining the motivations behind her lies reveals social conformity as the puppet master responsible for both the criminality and relationship disintegration in the novel. Using the unique format of a queer mystery novel, Hart masks biting social commentary within a murder mystery story; while readers are distracted by intrigue, red-herrings, and plot-twists, Hart encourages them to subconsciously consider the question: Would this tragedy have happened if all characters were not subject to the heteronormative pressure to fit themselves inside a box – to be exactly who society expects them to be? Despite Eleanor’s presumed arrest at the end of the story, Hart suggests that the driving force behind immorality in *A Whisper of Bones* - social normativity - is still very much at large.

Works Cited

Hart, Ellen. *A Whisper of Bones*. Minotaur Books, 2018.