

The Birds Study Guide

The Birds by Daphne Du Maurier

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Plot Summary

The Birds opens on the third day of December, when the seaside weather has changed overnight. Nat Hocken, a wounded war veteran who now supports his family by working part-time at the local farm, has noticed that all the birds in the village seem uncharacteristically restless. He thinks the weather has affected the birds' behavior. Perhaps, they think winter has come early. That evening in bed, Nat hears a strange tapping on his roof. When the tapping moves to his window, Nat rises to drive the bird away. When he opens the window, half a dozen birds fly in attacking him. He hears his children screaming in their bedrooms. Batting the birds away from him, Nat rushes to their rescue. The next morning, Nat cleans up fifty dead birds in his house, but none of his neighbors believe his story of the attack.

Soon, however, word of the attack spreads. Reports of bird attacks across the world are reported on the wireless radio. Nat gathers all the dead birds from around his home and takes them to the beach to bury them. There, he notices thousands of seagulls riding the waves as if patiently waiting for something. Rushing home, Nat quickly boards up his doors, windows, and chimneys from what he is sure is another impending attack. While he works, Nat becomes aware that there are many in his village who don't understand the severity of the impending attack, but he knows he cannot save them. He can only save himself and his family. By 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the sun is already blocked out by the gathering birds, and the sky is dark. Seeing the birds, Nat rushes from the house to pick up his young daughter, Jill, from the school bus. On the way home, a neighbor, Mr. Trigg, offers Nat a gun and Jill a ride home in his truck, which will be much faster than walking. Nat declines the gun, but manages to shove Jill safely into the car before the birds set upon him. The birds hurl themselves into the sidewalk, claiming their own lives in their pursuit of Nat's blood. He rushes home and into the house, suffering only minor, yet bloody, injuries during the attack.

After the second attack, Nat realizes that the birds move with the tides and that he would have roughly six hours between attacks to plan counter-attacks. The army sends reconnaissance planes to defend against the birds, but the next attack clogs the planes' propellers. They crash almost immediately. The birds once again set upon Nat's home, nearly managing to crash through the boarded-up windows and doors. The next morning, Nat quickly repairs the damage to his home and stacks bird bodies around the windows as an extra layer of protection. He sets a fire in one furnace in the hopes of keeping the birds away, but they hurl themselves into the fire in their desperate attack against humanity. During the next lull, Nat rushes to Mr. Trigg's house in search of more supplies. He is devastated and disgusted to see that the birds have killed Trigg's entire family. Without a moment for remorse, Nat ransacks Trigg's home, taking every usable supply to help protect his own family. Driving home, Nat sees the hundreds of thousands of birds lying in wait for the tide to turn. He hurriedly unpacks his car, locks up doors and windows, lights a fire, and waits. The story ends with the birds smashing through the splintering wood at Nat's windows, and Nat smoking his last cigarette: "He threw the empty packet into the fire and watched it burn" (Page 19).



Pages 1 – 5

Summary

The Birds opens with the announcement that the weather in a seaside English town has changed overnight. While it had been “mellow, soft” yesterday, it is suddenly winter today. Nat Hocken, a disabled war veteran, lives on a farm in this village with his wife, daughter (Jill), and infant son (Johnny). In the days leading up to the weather change, Nat noticed that large flocks of birds had been gathering near the water and that the birds seemed restless. They circled the sky, dropping occasionally to eat, but they never seemed to have a purpose. When they ate, for example, they never actually seemed hungry. Nat, like his neighbor Mr. Trigg, feels that the birds are warning them of the weather change and that it will be a particularly bitter winter.

That night, Nat is awakened by a tapping at his window. He sees that it’s a bird at the window and tries to shoo it away. When he reaches out, the bird jabs at his knuckles, drawing blood. Nat returns to bed, and the tapping persists. He rouses again and sees that this time it’s a dozen birds at his windowsill. When he opens it, the birds fly straight toward his face. Upstairs, Jill screams in her bedroom and Nat stumbles toward the stairs, scattering the birds away with his flailing arms. The birds have turned on the children and begin dive-bombing their faces. Nat grabs a blanket to beat the birds away. The fight continues until the sun comes up and Nat sees the piles of dead birds lying around him. As morning breaks, Nat and his wife do what they can to comfort their children. Mrs. Hocken is particularly confused by the attack, especially because there is still plenty of food in the fields to feed the birds.

After breakfast, Nat walks with Jill to the bus stop, comforting her that the changing weather has confused the birds, and promising that they won’t return. On his way back home, Nat bumps into Mrs. Trigg, the farmer’s wife. At first, she doesn’t believe Nat’s story about last night’s attack, but then suggests that the birds might be “foreign,” and therefore confused. Back home, Nat gathers the dead bodies in a bag and takes them down to the beach to bury them. Down by the water, the wind is so strong that it whips the corpses from the hole Nat’s dug, and whirls them back into the air. As he watches the bodies fly away, Nat notices the flocks of seagulls floating on the sea. At first, he thought their white feathers were whitecaps in the water, but now he sees that the birds are bobbing, lying in wait. Determined to spread the word about what he believes to be an impending attack, Nat races home and turns on the radio. A bulletin announces that all across the country, people have been reporting strange bird behavior. When he hears this, Nat feels triumphant: he had been right about the attack.

Analysis

In this opening section, it is most important to note the significance placed on the changing weather in town. The opening line is dedicated to a description of the weather,



which signifies the importance Du Maurier places on its symbolism. Throughout this first section, Du Maurier reminds the reader that the skies are black, the wind is howling, the shingles rattle on the rooftop, and the grey clouds have rolled in. There is never mention of sunlight, which perpetuates the gloom of the situation. Without light, there is no hope, and for this reason, the reader may assume that the Hockens have little hope of survival. It is also interesting to note that on the first page, Nat takes an ominous warning message from the birds' strange behavior: "Many of [the birds] will perish. And like people who, apprehensive of death before their time, drive themselves to work of folly, the birds do likewise; tomorrow we shall die." This mentality foreshadows the doom and destruction that lies ahead for the Hocken family. Du Maurier uses foreshadowing throughout this short story, and readers should be encouraged to note particularly foreboding scenes and descriptions. Similarly, readers should be advised to note the rising tension and escalation of violence in the bird attacks. In this opening section, the birds' behavior escalates from strange migratory patterns to the first attack, which draws blood from Nat's hand. Readers should expect the violence to escalate far past this as the novel progresses.

In the months leading up to the sudden change in weather, the birds had been gathering and feasting from the upturned soil of the autumn harvest. Until today, the villagers had been curious about, even enamored by, the birds' strange migratory behaviors. From the onset, the narrator personifies the birds, giving them human emotions and motivations: "Restlessness drove them to the skies again. Crying, whistling, calling, they skimmed the placid sea and left the shore" (Page 1). In this early section, the birds are still viewed as animals – although humanized through the narrator's personification. Keen readers should note the way the view of the birds changes from animal to machine as the story progresses.

It should also be noted that "The Birds" was published in 1952, pre Cold War, but that the presence of "foreign based fear" can be seen throughout the story, and it has been cited as a Cold War Parable. Tensions between the "east" and "west" began escalating in the 1940s, ten years before this story's publication. Even in this opening section, Nat is portrayed as a wartime vet hell-bent on protecting his family from invasion, and at the time of publication, this invasion could be interpreted as the communist invasion spreading through the east. On Page 4, Mrs. Trigg says, "Can you tell me where this cold is coming from? Is it Russia? I've never seen such a change ... I suppose the weather brought them ... Foreign birds maybe, from that Arctic Circle" (Page 4). From this line, however offhand, a tie is made to foreign fears coming from the east. Later in the story, Mr. Trigg suggests that "The Russians have poisoned the birds" (Page 9), which cements the connection.

Finally, the story's setting is clearly constructed in this opening section. The Hockens live in a seaside town isolated from the city. The Hockens are far away from civilization, and therefore far from help during the attacks. For this reason, Nat must rely on his ingenuity and determination to save his family. Also, because of the small population surrounding him, the Hockens and Triggs are the only targets for the birds in the area, making their existence far more dangerous than that of city dwellers in overpopulated



areas. This story presents a classic conflict of man versus nature, and Nat must rely on his basic instincts for survival.

Vocabulary

Pension, solitary, placid, insistent, rouse, bewilder, jackdaw, amble, shingle, ebb.



Pages 6 – 10

Summary

Nat doesn't understand what the seagulls are waiting for, but he senses that they might attack soon. To prepare his house, he boards up all the windows and chimneys so the birds can't break through. Over the radio, reports of bird attacks flood the station. The birds are described as "vast black clouds" that block out the sun. Although he's reporting a shocking story of local danger, Nat notices that the announcer's voice remains calm and suave. For some reason, this deeply annoys him: "Nat had the impression that [the announcer] treated the whole business as he would an elaborate joke. There would be others like him, hundreds of them, who did not know what it was to struggle in darkness with a flock of birds" (Page 6). Mrs. Hocken suggests that the army should come and shoot the birds from the sky, but Nat knows it would be impossible. Rather than plan army tactics, Nat concentrates on survival, planning food and shopping for the next few days. Mrs. Hocken complains that her shopping day isn't for a few more days, and that she would rather not drive into town today, which Nat agrees to so as not to frighten her.

Nat finishes boarding up the house at three o'clock in the afternoon. Although there should still be a few hours left of sunlight, the sky is blackened by the swirling flocks of birds. Looking out over the sea, Nat sees that the gulls have risen from the water and now hover in the sky, as if awaiting a command. Knowing that an attack is imminent, Nat races to the bus stop to wait for Jill. He orders his wife to stay inside with Johnny, light some candles, and lock the doors. Nat grabs a garden hoe from the shed and rushes toward the stop. Above him, he sees that the gulls have spread out in formation in the sky. The bus doesn't arrive for nearly an hour, and all the while, "Something black rose from behind [him], like a smudge at first, then widening, becoming deeper. The smudge became a cloud; and the cloud divided again into five other clouds, spreading north, east, south, and west; and then they were not clouds at all but birds" (Page 7).

Nat sees a telephone in the distance and rushes over, phoning the emergency line. The operator seems impatient, unimpressed when he describes the flock of gulls. Nat realizes that the operator doesn't understand the gravity of their situation and that she won't be any help. He knows he must rely on his own endurance to protect his family. From the corner of his eye, Nat sees Jill disembarking the bus. While initially jovial, a panic sets into Jill's eyes when she sees her father holding the hoe. Nat snatches Jill's hand and starts running home, dragging her behind him. As they rush past the Trigg farm, Mr. Trigg offers to give Jill a ride home in his truck. There isn't enough room for Nat to ride along, so Trigg offers Nat a gun to protect himself. Trigg is genial and seemingly unaware of the impending danger: "Why don't you stop behind and join the shooting match," he asks Nat. "We'll make the feathers fly" (Page 8). Nat declines Trigg's offer of a gun and continues home, following as quickly as he can behind the truck. Above, the gulls circle menacingly but continue to lie in wait.



When he arrives home, Trigg is just leaving after dropping off Jill. He suggests that the birds are acting strange because they've been poisoned: "They're saying in town the Russians have done it. The Russians have poisoned the birds" (Page 9). Trigg continues, saying that he doesn't believe the hype, and that he refuses to board up his house against the invasion. As Trigg pulls away in his truck, the first of the gulls' dives from overhead, straight toward Nat. Suddenly, Nat is deafened by the whirl of wings around him, diving faster than he can swat them away. The birds draw blood from his eyes, hands, wrists, and neck as he stumbles toward the door. Nat beats on his front door, but it takes a moment for his wife to pry it open. Inside, Mrs. Hocken tends to Nat's injuries while he does his best to comfort the terrorized children. The family hears the birds continuing to hurl themselves against the windows, diving headfirst into the cement in suicide drops. Nat runs around the house checking the windows, doors, and chimneys, and reinforcing where he thinks the birds might pry through.

Analysis

In this section, the tension has begun to escalate as Nat prepares for the attack of larger birds. The small robins, wrens, and thrush were relatively easy to ward off (although the sheer number of them frightened him), but the much larger seagulls will clearly put up more of a fight. To prepare, Nat boards up the windows and doors, sensing that the shutters will not stop the gulls. It's interesting to note that Nat seems to have an innate understanding of when the birds are going to attack, and what their attack pattern might be. Perhaps this sixth-sense is due to his military training and the fact that he would have undergone many attacks in battle, including the battle that left him injured. Nat's wartime experience may give him insight into the birds' behaviors, naturally putting him in a defensive stance that underscores the story's wartime symbolism. No other character – including Mrs. Hocken, the Triggs, and the radio announcer – understand the gravity of the attacks because they have not lived through battle. While some characters might suggest that Nat is suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (which would cause him to overreact to the attacks), Nat feels certain that he is preparing for the inevitable.

Mrs. Hocken suggests that the army should come and shoot the birds from the sky, but Nat knows it would be impossible. There are simply too many birds, and their flight patterns are too unpredictable to shoot each one from the sky. This is highly symbolic of the West's desire to rid the East of communism, which was rapidly spreading throughout the area at the time of this story's publication. It would have impossible to kill each communist in the Soviet Union, so the army concocted different plans. It's interesting to note that in this section, the birds are often described as having missions and plans: "He knew, from their speed, that they were bound inland; they had no business with the people here on the peninsula. They were rooks, crows, jackdaws, magpies, jays – all birds that usually preyed upon the smaller species, but bound this afternoon on some other mission" (Page 7), and "[The gulls] were not intent upon their flight, as the crows, as the jackdaws has been. They still circled overhead. Nor did they fly so high. It was as though they waited upon some signal; as though some decision had yet to be given" (Page 8). When the birds start attacking, it is in the kamikaze style Nat might have seen



during World War Two: “With each dive, each attack [the birds] became bolder. And they had no thought for themselves. When they dived low and missed, they crashed, bruised and broken, on the ground” (Page 9). These descriptions reinforce the symbolism of the birds being cast as troops sacrificed for a foreign invasion, even if their mission is still unclear. While these descriptions are being created, Du Maurier reminds her audience, once again, of the Cold War symbolism in Trigg’s suggestion that the birds are acting so strangely because the Russians have poisoned them.

Vocabulary

Metropolis, thoroughfare, suave, vicious, peninsula, laconic, rubicund, oblige, stile, gannet, ashen, reinforce, ominous, jostle.



Pages 11 – 16

Summary

With the birds continuing to attack, Nat realizes that the family must stay together. Without discussing it with his wife, he removes the mattresses from the beds and drags them down into the kitchen. While he's moving the furniture, Nat continues to worry about their lack of food – they only have enough to last, at most, three days – but he convinces himself to only worry about the present moment, not the future. Nat is jarred from thought when he realizes that the radio has only been broadcasting dance music, a sure sign that the regular programming has been abandoned. At six o'clock, the announcer comes on one last time. Now, his voice is solemn, grave, as he announces that England is undergoing an “unforeseen and unparalleled [crisis]” (Page 11). Authorities have forbidden anyone from leaving their homes, and homeowners are advised that once safely inside, they should ensure their homes are impenetrable. He announces that broadcasting will cease until seven o'clock the next morning, plays the national anthem, and signs off.

Heaviness descends over the Hocken home, and Nat does what he can to cheer the children. As he makes dinner, he realizes that he no longer hears the birds. Instead, he hears the drone of bomber planes and gunfire as the Navy releases reconnaissance forces to ambush the bird flocks. Hope swells in Nat's heart, but immediately smashes when he hears the thud of each plane crashing to the ground. Again, Nat realizes that he must rely on his strength alone to protect his family. While he's sure the “best brains in the country” will be thinking up a plan to protect the nation, he knows it is his responsibility to protect his own. Outside, the winds pick up again, as if a storm is brewing. As the wind whips through the chimney, Nat looks at his watch and suddenly realizes that the bird attacks seem to coincide with the changing tide. Thinking quickly, he determines that there will be a six-hour lull between each attack, during which time he can repair the home and gather supplies.

During the lull, Nat considers the poor cows, that won't have been milked all day, and the crops that need tending to. He walks around the house repairing cracked windows, and re-boarded where the birds managed to peck through the wood. He even heaps the piles of dead birds onto the windowsills to add protection against the next attack. All the while, the wind howls around him. After, he tries to rest inside, but as soon as he closes his eyes his wife shakes him awake. The birds have started their next attack, and they're flapping through the kitchen chimney. Nat hurriedly builds a fire, burning the birds squeezing through the flue. Once again, the children burst into tears, and this time, Nat shouts at them to be quiet. Nat rakes the singed bird bodies from the hearth and vows never to let the fire go out again. Gagging on the smell of burnt feathers, Nat asks his wife for a cigarette, noting that there are only two left in the pack. He makes a note to buy more cigarettes when he goes into town for groceries and firewood later that day. For the next four hours, Nat and his family listen in fear as the birds hurl



themselves against the window. Upstairs, Nat hears a window break and knows that the birds have managed to beat their way into the children's locked bedroom.

The morning passes as Nat and his family cower in the kitchen awaiting a lull in the latest attack. At seven o'clock, the family expects to hear the latest news bulletin, as promised by the announcer, but the room fills with static. They wait for over an hour, agitation growing, but the bulletin never starts. Nat switches the radio off, sensing that their communication with the outside world has ended.

Analysis

wife. Throughout the story, Nat has withheld information from his wife, and infantilized her – treating her the same way he treats his young children during the attacks. Nat makes decisions, such as moving the mattresses downstairs, without discussion or explanation. He withholds information, like his fears that the family doesn't have enough food to last the week, and belittles her ideas on how to cope with the attacks, such as her suggestion that the army should shoot the birds from the sky. Whenever Nat makes silent decisions, he does so because he "doesn't want to scare" his wife. This is noteworthy because it's the same mentality Nat has when he makes decisions to protect the children, whom he also doesn't want to frighten. Rather than speaking openly with his wife about the dangers their family is facing, he shields her from the truth because he believes she cannot cope with it.

It is not only Nat's relationship with his wife – who is the only character not to be given a name in the story – that characterizes her, it is also Du Maurier's portrayal and description of her. Reinforcing her infantilization are the recurring images of Mrs. Hocken as a helpless, weak woman who would wither and die without her husband there to protect her. After the first attack, Mrs. Hocken whimpers, "I daren't go into the room to make the beds until you do. I'm scared," (Page 4). After the second attack, she can't even muster the courage to buy groceries for her family, nor can she cope with the thought of being alone with the children while Nat searches for supplies next door: "You're not to go,' she said at once, 'and leave me alone with the children. I can't stand it" (Page 12). Nat also repeatedly lies to his wife, making up silly stories so she won't see the gravity of their situation. For example, when the birds break into the children's bedroom after the second attack, his wife calls up to ask what he's doing and he replies, "I won't be long ... I'm just making everything shipshape up here" (Page 15). Interactions like this portray Nat as a strong, brave man and his wife as a simpering, weak woman. While this portrayal might be jarring to modern readers, this representation of women was commonplace during the time of the story's publication. Also, the fact that Nat cannot openly communicate with his wife adds to the overwhelming isolation he feels.

Throughout the attacks, Nat does what he can to maintain his humanity, despite the fact that he feels as if he's fighting for his life. The family continues to eat meals together and clean up when they're finished. This element is particularly interesting when considering the drama of what the family is faced with. They've just boarded up their



windows, destroyed their furniture, built barricades with the bodies of dead birds, and huddled together in the kitchen before facing an inevitable attack, yet it's still important to clear away the dirty dishes after a meal. This sense of humanity – of Nat's desire not to frighten the children – maintains an element of hope. Nat hasn't give up yet. He still believes the family will survive, and thus wants to protect his children (and arguably his wife) from emotional trauma. So he continues to whistle while he's cooking dinner and pretend that moving the mattresses down to the kitchen is akin to a sleepover. However, this humanity – and hope – is momentarily lost when Nat shouts at his children to stop crying (Page 14). This reminds the reader that no matter what hope Nat clings to, the destruction continues to escalate. The loss of humanity is also hinted at with the announcer's plea for all citizens to barricade themselves inside. Typically, man has dominion over birds and even keeps them caged as a personal amusement. By the end it's the humans who become caged in, as they are forced to stay confined in their houses, and the attacks, which have no apparent motivation, are arguably carried out with a sense of amusement.

Throughout this section, the bird attacks continue to be likened to a storm. The birds are frequently compared to dark storm clouds, and Du Maurier relentlessly reminds the reader of the weather: "It was pitch-dark. The wind was blowing harder than ever, coming in steady gusts, icy, from the sea" (Page 13). At this point, there should be no question in the reader's mind that an epic battle between good and evil, man versus nature, is about to ensue. Nat concentrates on survival for his family alone, rather than survival for all of humanity. In this way, "The Birds" becomes a classic story of Man versus Nature. In literature, there are three main conflict structures: man versus man (two characters struggling against each other), man versus self (one character struggling to overcome a character flaw), and man versus nature (character(s) struggling against a force of nature). Throughout this story, Nat is reduced to searching for the basics of survival, food, shelter, and fire: "Food and light and fuel; these were the most necessary things. If he could get them, they could endure another night" (Page 16).

Finally, in this section, Du Maurier uses silence to intensify the story's drama and the characters' feeling of isolation. The wireless radio is the Hockens' only real communication with the outside world. Even though Nat initially finds the broadcaster to be arrogant, he still feels comforted at by the steady pace of the news broadcasts. Nat's sense of foreboding is heightened when he realizes that regular programming has stopped, and reaches fever pitch when the regularly scheduled seven o'clock broadcast fails to air. Certainly something horrific must have happened for the wireless to emit nothing but static. Nat's sense of isolation increases when he is forced to silence the radio, knowing he will have no further access to the outside world. The radio silence could also be interpreted as the "calm before the storm," as most readers will sense that the story's final battle is imminent.

Vocabulary

Unforeseen, utmost, imperative, transmission, drone, lull, batten, forenoon, barricade, singe, persistent, hitherto, talon, fortify.



Pages 16 – 19

Summary

At eight o'clock, the birds stop their persistent tapping, cracking, and slamming. Nat quickly begins removing the latest collection of bodies, knowing that he only has six hours to work. Nat kicks his way out of the house, hoping to collect as much food and firewood as he can carry. Outside, Nat is startled to see that the birds no longer gather in the sky or sea; they land on the lawn, watching and waiting. The birds make no movement to attack, as they are gorged with food. They merely watch Nat as he rushes up the lane to the Triggs' farm, his family following behind.

As soon as Nat nears the Trigg farm, he senses that something is wrong. The sheep have knocked through the fence, and the cows low pitifully in the yard. There is no smoke coming from the chimney, and Nat sees that Trigg has made good on his promise to not board his windows. As he gets closer, Nat sees that all the windows are smashed, and dead seagulls litter the yard. In the middle of the driveway, Nat stumbles over Jim – a farmhand– lying dead next to his gun. Horrified, Nat rushes inside and finds Trigg's corpse near the phone. Mrs. Trigg's bloody body is upstairs in the bedroom. Although he wants to help, Nat knows that the Triggs are already dead; there's nothing he can do for them now. Moving quickly, Nat strips the house of all the food and firewood he can find. Mrs. Hocken and the children stumble onto the Trigg farm even though Nat warns them to stay away. Mrs. Hocken seems unable to process what she's seeing, so Nat tells her to sit in the car. It takes Nat three trips to unload all the supplies from the Trigg home, but he manages to unload everything before the next attack begins. On the drive back, he stops at a telephone booth, but the line is dead.

Inside, Nat sets to work again repairing the blockades. He climbs the roof to repair holes in the shingles, and runs boards across every chimney except in the kitchen. He is barely able to move in the freezing wind, but he powers through. Looking up, he sees something gray and white flying through the sky. Thinking it's the Navy coming to release mustard gas on the birds, he rejoices. As the cloud nears, however, he sees that it is another swarm of birds. The tide had turned again. Racing inside the cottage, Nat warns his family that the attack is starting again. Mrs. Hocken mournfully twists the knob on the radio, searching for a signal on any station. She finds nothing. As the family sits down to a soup dinner, the crash of the suicide gulls begins. Looking around, Nat sees that he has managed to secure enough supplies to last them for at least a few days. During the next lull, he plans to fix barbed wire around the windows. As he thinks, the smaller birds make way for the larger birds – the eagles and hawks – that threaten to beat down the door. "Nat listened to the tearing sound of splintering wood, and wondered how many millions of years of memory were stored in those little brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them this instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines" (Page 19). Staring into the fire, Nat smokes his last cigarette and then watches the empty packet burn.



Analysis

As the story comes to a close, Nat is completely isolated at home. The wireless emits nothing but static, the phone lines have gone dead, he cannot discuss the attacks with anyone in his family, and his closest neighbors are dead. In this final section, many of the themes and motifs that have been created throughout the story are brought to a head. Readers interested in Mrs. Hocken's character development will be disappointed to see that she remains a weak character throughout the story. In this section, her neediness continues as she clings to her husband shouting, "I'd rather die than stay here alone" (Page 16). When the family reaches the Trigg household, Nat orders his wife to stay outdoors even though she wants to come inside. When he sees that the Trigg family is dead, he tells his wife that "they must have gone to friends," speaking to her in the same condescending tone he would take with the children (Page 17). At the end of the story, the reader's attention is focused on Nat's survival alone as he smokes his last cigarette, and Mrs. Hocken's wellbeing is not given another thought.

While most readers will argue that *The Birds* is an allegory to the Cold War, another argument can be made: that the birds represent imminent large scale environment catastrophes. On Page 4, a reference to the Arctic Circle is made. Modern theorists have suggested that Du Maurier is hinting at the implications of global warming. This is unlikely, however, as public worry about global warming during the 1950s was practically nonexistent. However, there were a handful of environmental disaster narratives published at this time, with the natural disaster raining down as punishment for man's sins. It's possible that Du Maurier was chastising England for its role in World War II, which is why she chose to cast Nat Hocken an injured vet. This might also explain why the birds only seem to attack the humans, leaving the farm animals – the sheep and cows – unharmed.

When the story comes to a close, readers may be surprised that Du Maurier chose to leave her ending so uncertain. By increasing the severity of the birds' aggression throughout the story from their bizarre flight patterns to drawing blood in an attack to (presumably) killing the Triggs, Du Maurier raises the stakes and creates tension by foreshadowing the Hockens' fate. By the story's final scene, the reader has come to expect the Hockens' death, and the ending is particularly eerie in that it ends during a lull in attacks, just as the birds return for another battle. As the family cowers in their kitchen, they hear the tap, tap, tap at the windows and doors, "the rustling, the jostling, the pushing for position on the sills" (Page 19). Even though Nat has plans to improve his defense – he has brought barbed wire for the windows – it's clear that he won't be able to fend off the attacks forever, and the family's demise is imminent. In the story's final scene, Nat smokes his last cigarette and throws his pack in the fire, symbolic of life's final pleasure being snuffed out. Also, by leaving the final "storm" off the page, Du Maurier lets the reader connect the dots with the clues (foreshadowing) she's left throughout the story. This technique is not only an effective tool in creating a suspenseful mood, it also leaves the ending up to the reader's imagination and adds a personal touch to the terror.

Vocabulary

Buoyancy, stile, gorge, inefficiency.

Characters

Nat Hocken

Nat Hocken is the protagonist, and the story follows the bird attacks against Nat, his family, and his home. Nat is a wounded war veteran who, due to his injuries, supports his family working part-time on a nearby farm. When Nat takes his breaks, he likes to sit by the edge of the rock cliff and watch the birds. One afternoon, Nat notices that the birds seem particularly restless, but he explains away their strange behavior citing the strange weather. When the bird attacks start, Nat realizes that he will do anything to protect his family – his wife, daughter, and son. Nat does what he can to warn his neighbors of the impending doom, but they laugh him off. Nat dedicates himself to boarding up the windows, doors, and chimneys in his home after the birds begin attacking his family. He alerts the authorities of the attacks, but soon realizes that if he wants to get out of this alive, he must rely on himself alone. Working tirelessly, Nat turns his home into a fortress, and scours the neighborhood for supplies, even stealing from the neighbors the birds kill. At the end of the story, the reader is left with an ambiguous ending: does Nat's diligent planning save his family from the attack, or do they perish in an un-winnable battle between good and evil?

Mrs. Hocken

Mrs. Hocken is Nat's wife. For the most part, Mrs. Hocken – who doesn't even have a first name in the story – simply fulfills the expectations of her gender specific role as "wife." She does the cooking, cleaning, and worrying while Nat answers questions, gathers supplies, and protects his family.

Jill Hocken

Jill Hocken is Nat's school-aged daughter. She is saved from a terrible bird attack outside her bus stop, which would have almost certainly claimed her life, when Mr. Trigg volunteers to drive her home in his truck.

Johnny Hocken

Johnny Hocken is the baby of the Hocken family. He does little in the story but cry, yet his presence gives Nat extra motivation for protecting his family. Johnny, as an infant, is completely reliant on his father for protection and most vulnerable in the bird attacks.

Mr. Trigg

Mr. Trigg is the Hockens' neighbor and the owner of the farm where Nat works. Unlike Nat, Trigg is skeptical of the bird attacks and does little to prepare his home and family, which makes them easy targets for the bloodthirsty birds. Before his death, Trigg seems convinced that he will be able to fight off the crazed birds with his gun. When Nat travels to the Trigg home for supplies, however, he finds a bloody scene. The birds have pecked the entire Trigg family to death, and plucked out their eyes.

Mrs. Trigg

Mrs. Trigg is the Hockens' neighbor and Mr. Trigg's wife. Mrs. Trigg works on the farm with her husband, and when the birds begin setting in on the town, is the first to suggest that the weather might be affecting their behavior. Despite her initial insight, Mrs. Trigg is gruesomely killed when the birds peck her to death at the end of the story.

Jim

Jim is a farmhand whose body was found on the Trigg property after the third bird attack. He dies a bloody death next to his gun, which did little to protect him from the bloodthirsty birds.



Objects/Places

England

England is the country where *The Birds* is set. The only clue to the story's setting comes when the wireless radio plays "God Save the Queen," England's national anthem, before going off the air.

Winter

Winter is the season in which *The Birds* is set. The bleak, dreary weather adds to the sense of isolation and despair that characterizes the story.

The Birds

The Birds are the villains that attack and kill the innocent villagers for unknown reasons.

The Wireless Radio

The Wireless Radio is Nat Hocken's only connection to the outside world for receiving information. When the birds begin attacking, the wireless radio goes silent, symbolizing "the calm before the storm."

Gun

A Gun is what Mr. Trigg offers Nat Hocken for protection. Nat refuses Trigg's offer, realizing that a gun will do little against a sky full of angry birds. At the end of the story, Nat's theory is proved correct when Jim's lifeless body is found lying next to his gun.



Themes

The Role of Women

The Birds follows one family's struggle for survival during an unexpected bird attack. Although the story focuses on the entire family, Mrs. Hocken (the wife and mother) is portrayed as a weak, helpless woman. While this portrayal might be jarring to modern readers, this representation of women was commonplace during the time of the story's publication. Also, the fact that Nat cannot openly communicate with his wife adds to the overwhelming isolation he feels. Throughout the story, Nat withholds information from his wife, treating her the same way he treats his young children during the attacks. Nat makes decisions, such as moving the mattresses downstairs, without discussion or explanation. He withholds information, like his fears that the family doesn't have enough food to last the week. He belittles her ideas on how to cope with the attacks, such as her suggestion that the army should shoot the birds from the sky. Whenever Nat makes silent decisions, he does so because he "doesn't want to scare" his wife. This is noteworthy because it's the same mentality Nat takes when he makes decisions to protect the children, whom he also doesn't want to frighten. Rather than speaking openly with his wife about the dangers their family is facing, he shields her from the truth because he believes she cannot cope with it.

It is not only Nat's relationship with his wife – who is the only character not given a name in the story – that characterizes her, it is also Du Maurier's portrayal and description of her. There are recurring images of Mrs. Hocken as a helpless, weak woman who would wither and die without her husband there to protect her. After the first attack, Mrs. Hocken whimpers, "I daren't go into the room to make the beds until you do. I'm scared," (Page 4). After the second attack, she can't even muster the courage to buy groceries for her family, nor can she cope with the thought of being alone with the children while Nat searches for supplies next door: "You're not to go,' she said at once, 'and leave me alone with the children. I can't stand it" (Page 12). Nat also repeatedly lies to his wife, making up silly stories so she won't see the gravity of their situation. For example, when the birds break into the children's bedroom after the second attack, his wife calls up to ask what he's doing and he replies, "I won't be long ... I'm just making everything shipshape up here" (Page 15). Interactions like this portray Nat as a strong, brave man and his wife as a simpering, weak woman.

Readers interested in Mrs. Hocken's character development will be disappointed to see that she remains a weak character throughout the story. In this section, her infantilization continues as she clings to her husband shouting, "I'd rather die than stay here alone" (Page 16). When the family reaches the Trigg household, Nat orders his wife to stay outdoors even though she wants to come inside. When he sees that the Trigg family is dead, he tells his wife that, "they must have gone to friends," speaking to her in the same condescending tone he would take with the children (Page 17). At the end of the story, the reader's attention is focused on Nat's survival alone as he smokes his last cigarette. Mrs. Hocken's well-being is not given another thought.



The Loss of Humanity

Throughout the attacks, Nat does what he can to maintain his humanity, despite the fact that he feels as if he's fighting for his life. The family continues to eat meals together and clean up when they're finished. This element is particularly interesting when considering the drama faced by the family. They have just boarded up their windows, destroyed their furniture, built barricades with the bodies of dead birds, and huddled together in the kitchen before facing an inevitable attack; yet, it's still important to clear away the dirty dishes after a meal. This sense of humanity – of Nat's desire not to frighten the children – maintains an element of hope. Nat hasn't give up yet. He still believes the family will survive, and thus wants to protect his children (and arguably his wife) from emotional trauma. He continues to whistle while he's cooking dinner and pretend that moving the mattresses down to the kitchen is akin to a sleepover. However, this humanity – and hope – is momentarily lost when Nat shouts at his children to stop crying (Page 14). This reminds the reader that no matter what hope Nat clings to, the destruction continues to escalate. The loss of humanity is also hinted at with the announcer's plea for all citizens to barricade themselves inside. Typically, man has dominion over birds and even keeps them caged as a personal amusement. By the end, it's the humans who become caged in, as they are forced to stay confined in their houses. The attacks, which have no apparent motivation, are arguably carried out with a sense of amusement.

It's interesting to note that Du Maurier even brings in a sense of humor in the family's desire to remain "human" during the attacks. On the story's final page, when the family is (arguably) faced with their imminent demise, Mrs. Hocken still reminds Johnny to use proper table manners, chastising him to "learn how to wipe his mouth" when drippings slip off his bread. Even in the face of death, Du Maurier suggests that one should remain human and not regress into acting like beasts.

The Atrocity of War

"The Birds" was published in 1952, pre Cold War, but that the presence of "foreign based fear" can be seen throughout the story, and it has been cited as a Cold War Parable. Tensions between the "east" and "west" began escalating in the 1940s, ten years before this story's publication. Even in this opening section, Nat is portrayed as a wartime vet hell-bent on protecting his family from invasion, and at the time of publication, this invasion could be interpreted as the communist invasion spreading through the east. On Page 4, Mrs. Trigg says, "Can you tell me where this cold is coming from? Is it Russia? I've never seen such a change ... I suppose the weather brought them ... Foreign birds maybe, from that Arctic Circle" (Page 4). From this line, however offhand, a tie is made to foreign fears coming from the east. Later in the story, Mr. Trigg suggests that "The Russians have poisoned the birds" (Page 9), which cements this connection.



Nat seems to have an innate understanding of when the birds are going to attack, and what their attack pattern might be. Perhaps this sixth-sense is due to his military training and the fact that he would have undergone many attacks in battle, including the battle that left him injured. Nat's wartime experience may give him insight into the birds' behaviors, naturally putting him in a defensive stance that underscores the story's wartime symbolism. No other character – including Mrs. Hocken, the Triggs, and the radio announcer – understand the gravity of the attacks because they have not lived through battle. While some characters might suggest that Nat is suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (which would cause him to overreact to the attacks), Nat feels certain that he is preparing for the inevitable.

Mrs. Hocken suggests that the army should come and shoot the birds from the sky, but Nat knows it would be impossible. There are simply too many birds, and their flight patterns are too unpredictable to shoot each one from the sky. This is highly symbolic of the West's desire to rid the East of communism, which was rapidly spreading throughout the area at the time of this story's publication. It would have impossible to kill each communist in the Soviet Union, so the army concocted different plans. It's interesting to note that in this section, the birds are often described as having missions and plans: "He knew, from their speed, that they were bound inland; they had no business with the people here on the peninsula. They were rooks, crows, jackdaws, magpies, jays – all birds that usually preyed upon the smaller species, but bound this afternoon on some other mission" (Page 7), and "[The gulls] were not intent upon their flight, as the crows, as the jackdaws has been. They still circled overhead. Nor did they fly so high. It was as though they waited upon some signal; as though some decision had yet to be given" (Page 8). When the birds start attacking, it is in the kamikaze style Nat might have seen during World War II: "With each dive, each attack [the birds] became bolder. They had no thought for themselves. When they dived low and missed, they crashed, bruised and broken, on the ground" (Page 9). These descriptions reinforce the symbolism of the birds being cast as troops sacrificed for a foreign invasion, even if their mission is still unclear. While these descriptions are being created, Du Maurier reminds her audience, once again, of the Cold War symbolism in Trigg's suggestion that the birds are acting so strangely because the Russians have poisoned them.

The overriding message Du Maurier seems to be sending her audience is that war is confusing, isolating, and inexplicable. In the end, it seems, Du Maurier reminds the reader that no matter which side you are fighting for, war ultimately results in the loss of human life, and perhaps even worse, our humanity.

Style

Point of View

The Birds, by Daphne du Maurier, utilizes first person, limited view. This limited view is seen through the eyes of the story's protagonist, Nathan. This allows the story to unfold to the reader much in the same way that it unfolds to Nathan, increasing the suspense for the reader as the pace quickens.

Setting

The Birds is set in an unnamed English seaside town post World War II and before the Cold War. Although this is never explicitly stated, there are a variety of clues in the story to alert the reader to the setting. For example, Nat Hocken is described as a veteran with a “wartime disability” that prevents him from working full time at the farm. The telephone has been invented and is common in most homes, yet the Hocken family uses a wireless radio rather than a television for news reports. There are school buses, tractors, and trucks that place the story firmly within the mid-20th century, yet there isn't enough communication technology to suggest that the story takes place in modern day. As for the geographical setting, the reader is given only one clue. Before the wireless signs off after its final broadcast, it plays “God Save the Queen,” England's national anthem, a ritual for the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) whenever a broadcast went off-air.

The actual setting of the story – the seaside village – is integral to the devastation of the bird attacks. The Hocken family is extremely isolated. Their only neighbors, the Triggs, live on a huge farm nearby. There is no mention of a neighboring town, but Mrs. Hocken mentions having to drive into the city to do her shopping, which is why she plans for the journey days in advance. The Hockens are far away from civilization, and therefore far from help during the attacks. For this reason, Nat Hocken must rely on his ingenuity and determination to save his family. Also, because of the small population surrounding him, the Hockens and Triggs are the only targets for the birds in the area, making their existence far more dangerous than that of city dwellers in overpopulated areas.

Language and Meaning

The language used is easy to read and understand. Upper level middle school aged children and higher should encounter few problems with the text. Terms used are English (British) as the story is set in England on the waterfront in a coastal town. Idioms are kept to a minimum making it readable regardless of one's nationality.



Structure

The Birds is written from the perspective of a third person narrator with limited omniscience through Nat Hocken's perspective. This means that the reader is held closely to Nat Hocken's thoughts and emotions, but the narrator is still far enough away to see Nat at a distance. The tone of bitter isolation is threaded through every element of the story: from Nat's hopeless location to the bleak forecast and is therefore present in the story's structure. What is most interesting about the story's structure is the use of foreshadowing. There is clear escalation in the bird's behavior, from their strange flight patterns to the initial bloody attack in the Hocken home (which leaves the family with superficial injuries rather than death), to the birds' murder of the Trigg family. With this constant sense of escalation, the reader is left with the same sense of hopeless foreboding that has descended on the Hocken family. On the final pages, the family don't have enough wood to outlast the bird attacks, they hear a constant tapping and crashing at their windows, and Nat has smoked his final cigarette. All the family has left to do is wait; their deaths seem inevitable.

Also, mirroring the weather, the bird attacks are equated to storms. It's interesting to note that after the initial attack, the wireless descends into static and is eventually switched off completely. Not only does this silence add to the eerie sense of isolation, it could also reflect the "calm before the storm," which hints at the inevitable death of the Hocken family.



Quotes

In autumn great flocks of them came to the peninsula, restless, uneasy, spending themselves in motion; now wheeling, circling the sky; now settling to feed on the rich, new-turned soil; but even when they fed, it was as though they did so without hunger, without desire (Chapter 1)

Can you tell me where this cold is coming from? Is it Russia? I've never seen such a change ... I suppose the weather brought them ... Foreign birds maybe, from that Arctic Circle (Chapter 5)

It must have been fright that made them act the way they did". (Chapter 5)

The announcer's voice was smooth and suave; Nat had the impression that he treated the whole business as he would an elaborate joke. There would be others like him, hundreds of them, who did not know what it was to struggle in darkness with a flock of birds. (Chapter 6)

Trigg must be crazy. What use was a gun against a sky of birds? (Chapter 8)

There was no further drone of aircraft, and the naval guns had ceased. Waste of life and effort, Nat said to himself. We can't destroy enough of them that way. (Chapter 12)

He scarcely heeded the attack on the windows and the door. Let them beat their wings, break their backs, lose their lives, in the desperate attempt to force entry into his home. They would not break in. (Chapter 14)

You can't help admiring the beggars ... They've got persistency. You'd think they'd tire of the game, but not a bit of it. (Chapter 15)

Nat listened to the tearing sound of splintering wood, and wondered how many millions of years of memory were stored in those little brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them this instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines. (Chapter 19)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Describe the role Mrs. Hocken plays in the story. How does her character represent the role of women at the time of the story's publication? Be sure to include examples from the text to strengthen your arguments.

Topic 2

What do you think the birds symbolize? What clues does Du Maurier give the reader about the message in their attack? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Topic 3

Do you think Nat Hocken is a good father and husband? Why or why not? How does Nat treat his family at the opening of the story? How does his treatment change as the attacks persist? Be sure to include examples from the text to strengthen your arguments.

Topic 4

What role do the Triggs play in the story? Why do you think the Triggs are killed while the Hockens survive? What lesson can be learned through the Triggs' behavior? Be sure to include examples from the text to strengthen your arguments.

Topic 5

What does the wireless radio symbolize in the story? Why are the dance music programs and lost news announcements significant? Why does Nat have such an adverse reaction to the broadcaster's attitude on Page 6? Be sure to include examples from the text to strengthen your arguments.

Topic 6

How does Du Maurier employ foreshadowing to add the story's suspense? Based on the previous events in the story, what do you think happens to the Hocken family after the story comes to a close? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to strengthen your arguments.



Topic 7

In what way does the weather inform the story's tone and mood? Why are the birds frequently described in tandem with the weather? What effect does this have on your interpretation of the story? Be sure to include examples from the text to strengthen your arguments.