

Adrian Sigala Chavez

Ms. Weiss

Literature Through Film

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### Guh “The Birds” or *The Birds*

In works of literature and movies alike, nature is portrayed as an entity that can unexpectedly turn against humanity with devastating consequences. Daphne du Maurier’s narrative “The Birds” and Alfred Hitchcock’s film adaptation delve into this theme with a sense of unease and tension. Within du Maurier’s tale, lies a tale of a quaint seaside village in England besieged by birds launching attacks on unsuspecting individuals, we actively see this in the story early on when Nat exclaims “Did you hear that? They went for me. Tried to peck my eyes.” (du Maurier 1). Nat Hocken and his family find themselves lost in a struggle for survival, amidst the avian onslaught. Hitchcock’s movie moves the action to Bodega Bay in California where socialite Melanie Daniels gets tangled in bird attacks while visiting a romantic partner while also having to deal with the accusations of being the cause of said attacks, “It is the woman who had the two children screaming at Melanie” (Hitchcock). The alterations emphasize variations in the environment and characters intentions while also focusing on the captivating aspect of the movie to increase suspense and horror for a wider audience.

One of the greatest changes Hitchcock made to du Maurier’s story has to do with the plot structure. The plot becomes much more contained, dealing entirely with Nat Hocken and his family barricading themselves in their cottage while the bird attacks escalate. The narrative is incredibly honed in on issues of survival, and a sense of isolation and doom hangs over the

characters. In contrast, Hitchcock's film expands the scope of the conflict; he introduces places such as the schoolhouse and gas station where the terror of the birds can be felt in far larger and chaotic proportions. One classic scene, takes the attack of the birds at the gas station to the extent that they create a massive fire, which spreads in no time, threatening many people. This shift from confined family drama to general widespread disaster really underlines capriciousness, showing the destructive power of nature on a wider social scale. Hitchcock probably made this as it would increase tension and involve viewers in several settings with escalating dangers visually, since the film can be highly dependent on visuals and action in order to maintain suspense.

Hitchcock also made big changes in the characters, most notably by creating Melanie Daniels as the main protagonist. In du Maurier's story, Nat Hocken is a PTSD scarred family man whose sole concern is to save his wife and children. His character is very pragmatic and down to earth, while his sense of responsibility toward his family is the driving force of all the emotional tension in the story. By contrast, Melanie Daniels is a glamorous socialite who gets involved with the bird attacks almost accidentally. Her initial motivations have to do with nothing about birds; rather, she is after a romantic interest in Mitch Brenner. Character change in this way shifts the tone of the story from one of survival to one where personal dynamics and relationships further complicate the tension. Possibly, Hitchcock also decided to bring in a female lead with a complicated backstory because the social dynamics of the 1960's were greatly involved in the roles that played in films. Back then this would not have been such a social issue as it is now, his portrayal of women being "Dependent" on the men in their lives can be seen as misogynistic or offensive. With this modification, it puts the audience directly with a character to

be followed through and grown attached to, adding layers of physiological tension as Melanie finds herself in a dangerous situation.

The other big difference lies in the use of imagery and atmosphere. In du Maurier's story. It sets an atmosphere of eerie isolation where in the landscape setting is described to build a sense of gradual dread. What has been emphasized in the story is the quiet, unsettling build of birds as they gradually become more aggressive, such as when Nat notices the birds gathering ominously on telephone wires and rooftops. du Maurier writes, "Upstairs in the bedrooms all was quiet. No further scraping and stabbing at the windows. A lull in battle. Forces regrouping." (du Maurier 20), inviting an ominous, claustrophobic sense of encroaching doom. Hitchcock on the other hand, evokes an atmosphere that is far more overtly terrifying. The birds in his film are not a creeping threat; they are sudden, an explosive force. For example, the famous scene of the attack of the birds on the school children running down, a mass attack causing complete confusion. Through special effects and the visual medium, Hitchcock is able to enhance the shock value of the attacks. This shift in atmosphere from the quiet horror of du Maurier's narrative to the explosive, visually chaotic horror of Hitchcock's film likely derives from Hitchcock's mastery of the suspense and the ability to understand film for what it is; an emotional manipulation through sudden, startling imagery.

While the short story and the film were amazing in their own way, Hitchcock's adaptation seemed far more engaging simply because of the level of visual intensity and a broader range of character interactions. Being greater in scope, with more dynamic characters, gave weight to the film's narrative, while Hitchcock's signature suspense techniques kept me right on edge. While

du Maurier's story was a master of subtly building physiological terror, Hitchcock cranks the tension and peppers the film with moments of sheer cinematic horror. For me the ability of film to drop the viewer into a fully realized world of spiraling chaos gave it an edge that made it an overall more thrilling experience.

Glossary:

Capriciousness: the quality of changing mood or behavior suddenly and unexpectedly: Her capriciousness made her difficult to work with. See. capricious.

Pragmatic: dealing with things sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations.

Ominously: in a way that suggests that something bad is going to happen.

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