

The Birds



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAPHNE DU MAURIER

Daphne du Maurier was born in London, England to actors Sir Gerald du Maurier and Muriel Beaumont. Her family encouraged her artistic ambitions from an early age, as her father introduced her to various theater actors and her great uncle, a journalist and editor, published her early writing in *Bystander* magazine. Du Maurier published her first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, in 1931. The book attracted the attention of British Airborne officer Lieutenant-General Frederick Browning, whom du Maurier married in 1932. The couple had three children and spent much of their life together in the town of Cornwall, the rugged, coastal setting for many of du Maurier's works. Officially titled Lady Browning after her marriage, du Maurier continued to write under her maiden name. At age 31 du Maurier published her most famous work, the psychological thriller *Rebecca*. The novel was an immediate bestseller, going on to win the 1938 National Book Award and cementing du Maurier's status as a master of gothic romance and horror. In 1940 *Rebecca* was adapted into an Oscar-winning film by Alfred Hitchcock, who also adapted du Maurier's novel *Jamaica Inn* and "The Birds." Her short story *Don't Look Now* was brought to the screen by director Nicolas Roeg in what is considered a classic and influential work of British horror. In addition to her many novels and short stories, Du Maurier wrote three plays and several works of nonfiction, including a biography of her father. In 1969, she was named a Dame of the British Empire in recognition of her artistic contributions. She died in Cornwall at the age of 81.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Du Maurier wrote "The Birds" in the wake of World War II, a time of great upheaval for the British Empire. Though victorious, Britain was saddled with debt following the war and saw a sharp decline in its status on the world stage. The United States and the Soviet Union, meanwhile, emerged as the new leading world superpowers. The specter of Hiroshima and further nuclear proliferation hung heavy over Western democracies, where Cold War paranoia had already begun to take root. This is suggested in "The Birds" through du Maurier's references to an "east wind" as well as the Triggs' positing that Russia is somehow behind both the sudden cold snap and the bird attacks. "The Birds" also draws heavily from wartime imagery, suggesting both the personal horror of battle and broader disillusionment with authorities' ability to maintain order in the face of violent chaos. The story is particularly evocative of the "Blitz," a German mass aerial attack against

Britain that took place from 1940 to 1941. Sirens warned citizens of impending bombings, which killed at least 40,000 people, injured 130,000 more, and destroyed 2 million homes. Seventy-six people were infamously killed in an attack on an air raid shelter in the town of Plymouth, where Nat Hocken, the protagonist of "The Birds," remembers working on an ultimately useless shelter for his mother.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Birds" was written during the Angry Young Men Movement in British literature, a period characterized by resentment towards postwar society and perhaps most famously represented by William Golding's 1954 novel of lost innocence *Lord of the Flies*. But with their touches of the supernatural, dark endings, and traces of the macabre, du Maurier's tales draw most heavily from the gothic literary tradition, exemplified by Henry James' psychological ghost story *The Turn of the Screw* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Du Maurier also considered herself indebted to the work of Wilkie Collins, whose 1868 *The Moonstone* is often deemed the first English detective novel. She was also a self-professed fan of the Bronte sisters; du Maurier's first novel *The Loving Spirit* in fact takes its title from Emily Bronte's poem "Self-Interrogation," and her frequent Cornwall setting evokes the wild moors of *Wuthering Heights*. Due to similar plot elements, both *Rebecca* and *Jamaica Inn* have been compared to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. As a master of suspense, mystery, and shifting perspective, du Maurier has more recently been called a foremother of modern thrillers such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*, both of which feature multifaceted female characters and disturbing, deceptive domestic relationships.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Birds
- **When Written:** 1952
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1952
- **Literary Period:** Postwar, Angry Young Men
- **Genre:** Horror, thriller
- **Setting:** A quiet, coastal town in England
- **Climax:** Nat tosses his final cigarette into the fire as hawks begin to break down the door to his home
- **Antagonist:** The birds
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Literary Legacy. Du Maurier was cousins with the Llewellyn-Davis boys—the inspiration for the Lost Boys in J. M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy*.

House Inspiration. From 1943 to 1968 du Maurier lived at Menabilly, a historic Cornwall estate and the basis for Manderley house in [Rebecca](#).



PLOT SUMMARY

On the third of December in a quiet, seaside town, the season shifts abruptly from autumn to winter. Nat Hocken, a war veteran and farmhand with a disability, observes that there seem to be more birds than usual clamoring restlessly over the sea. Upon finishing his work for the day, Nat tells the farmer Mr. Trigg about the birds. Mr. Trigg asserts that the weather must be causing the birds’ behavior, and predicts it will be a hard winter.

That evening, Nat awakens to an insistent tapping on his window. Upon opening it, half a dozen birds swarm about his face. Nat scatters them away with his arms, only to hear cries coming from his children’s bedroom. He rushes to their room to find the window open and dozens of birds diving about in attack. Nat ushers the children out of the room before wrapping a blanket around himself and fighting with the birds until dawn. When day breaks, fifty birds lie dead on the floor.

The next morning Nat insists to his wife that the sudden cold snap and **east wind** are to blame for the birds’ behavior. He sees his daughter Jill onto the school bus and then visits the farm to check on the Triggs. When Nat tells Mrs. Trigg of the previous evening’s battle with the birds, she is dismissive of his story, positing that it was simply the weather. Jim, a cowhand, is similarly unconcerned.

Nat returns home to collect the bodies of the dead birds, but cannot bury them because the ground has frozen solid. He brings the bodies to the shore, where he sees thousands of gulls hovering over the sea. Back at his cottage, a **radio** announcement informs Nat and his wife that the attacks are happening across the country. Nat proceeds to board up the cottage windows and fill up its chimney bases. Hours later, another broadcast relays that an enormous flock of birds has brought London to a halt. Nat resents the announcer’s lighthearted tone, and predicts that many will refuse to take the attacks seriously.

Nat walks partway to the beach to find that the tide has turned and that the gulls have begun circling as if ready to attack. Alarmed, he rushes to pick up Jill from the bus stop. As the birds begin to swarm, the two run to the farm, where Nat asks Mr. Trigg to drive Jill the rest of the way home. Mr. Trigg does so but makes light of Nat’s fear, insisting it is a waste of time to

board up his house. The swarm of birds begin to dive at Nat as he runs home, making it inside only seconds before a gannet would have split his skull.

The Hockens huddle together in their cottage as hundreds of birds hammer against the windows and roof. Nat attempts to distract his family from the peril of their situation by singing and whistling as he further secures the inside of the cottage. That evening, the radio announcer declares a state of national emergency and urges people to barricade themselves indoors.

Following supper, the family hears the drone of planes and gunfire heading toward the sea. Though Nat’s wife and children are heartened at the thought of military aid, Nat understands subsequent crashing noises to be the sounds of the planes falling into the water. He internally laments the “waste of life and effort.” When the bird attacks finally quiet, Nat realizes that they are linked to the high tide. Reasoning that he has six hours before the next attack, he goes outside and, in the cold and darkness, fortifies the cottage windows by stuffing cracked panes with the bodies of dead birds. Only after going back to bed does he realize he forgot to light a fire to keep the birds out of the chimney; he quickly relights the fire, burning the birds already attempting to force their way down. He then smokes one of his two final cigarettes.

The incessant tapping of the birds resumes, and Nat realizes that some have broken into the bedrooms upstairs. He barricades the door. The family anxiously awaits a promised 7:00 a.m. news bulletin, but when Nat’s wife turns on the radio nothing comes through but static. Nat wonders how much longer the radio battery will last.

At the next lull in battle, Nat and his family drive to the Triggs’ farm to get much-needed food and supplies. There Nat finds that the entire Trigg household has been killed by the birds. With no time to mourn, Nat gathers what he can over the course of three trips, and loads everything into his cottage shortly before the tide turns. The radio continues to play only static, even on foreign stations, leading Nat to suggest that the attacks are happening across Europe. As Nat muses about organizing the new supplies and subsequent steps he will take to fortify the cottage, hawks hammer at the door. The wood begins to splinter and tear, and Nat tells his wife he will smoke his final cigarette. He tosses the empty packet onto the fire.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Nat Hocken – The protagonist of the story, Nat is a World War II veteran with a disability who works part-time as a farmhand. A married father of two, he appreciates solitude, order, and the satisfaction of completing simple tasks. He is the only character to take the birds’ initial attack seriously, and his attempts to warn his neighbors of the impending threat are met with

mockery and dismissal. Nat goes to great lengths to protect his family throughout the story, drawing from his military background and survivalist instincts to outwit the birds. Nat also repeatedly attempts to shield his family from the reality of their situation, blocking dead bodies from their view, cracking jokes over dinner, and putting on an air of ease even as he senses the increasing hopelessness of their situation. Despite his perseverance, it is unclear whether Nat is actually able to save his family at the end of the story.

Mrs. Hocken / Nat's Wife – Nat's wife is never named, and is highly dependent upon her husband throughout the story. She relies on Nat to clear their children's bedroom of dead birds, secure their home, and repeatedly tell her what to do next. Her actions often emphasize the mundanity and futility of human-imposed order the face of catastrophe; as it had not yet been her designated shopping day before the attacks, the family is ill-equipped to survive the siege. A generally ineffectual character, she repeatedly expresses faith that someone else will come save the family.

Mr. Trigg – A farmer who employs Nat, Mr. Trigg is a kind yet proud man. He drives Jill home from the bus stop to escape a flock of birds, but does not take the threat seriously himself. He gently mocks Nat's fear and offers him a gun, refuses to secure his own home, and insists he will be eating a "gull breakfast" the following morning. He also questions whether the Russians have poisoned the birds, echoing burgeoning Cold War anxieties. Mr. Trigg's hubris leads to his downfall, however, as his entire household is killed by the birds. Nat finds his body next to a dangling telephone, suggesting he was trying to call for help when he died.

Mrs. Trigg – Mrs. Trigg is "a good-tempered woman" who, like her husband Mr. Trigg, is foolishly nonchalant about the birds. Upon greeting Nat following his first late-night tussle with the creatures, she dismisses his story as a nightmare and suggests he write to the newspaper for an explanation. She also wonders if the cold snap is coming from Russia, further echoing Cold War fears. Nat finds her body the next day beside a broken umbrella and a pile of dead gulls.

Jill Hocken – Jill is Nat's daughter and older child. Birds attack her and her younger brother Johnny in their bedroom in an early event that helps their father appreciate the threat the birds pose. Nat picks Jill up from school before the birds' second attack and only makes it home with the help of Mr. Trigg's vehicle. Jill repeatedly expresses fear of the birds and looks to her parents for reassurance.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Johnny Hocken – Nat's son and younger child. Birds break into his bedroom and attack him and his sister Jill, leaving scratches near his eyes.

Jim – A cowhand on Mr. Trigg's household who appears

uninterested in Nat's story about tussling with the birds. Another illustration of the perils of pride, Nat finds Jim's mutilated body in Mr. Trigg's yard.

The Radio Announcer – The announcer to whom Nat and his wife listen for updates about the attacks. At first he sounds as if he considers the attacks to be a "joke," but later reflects the seriousness of the situation.

The Phone Operator – The woman who receives Nat's warning call about the birds. She sounds unconcerned, prompting Nat to worry how many more will fail to appreciate the danger they are in.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MAN VS. NATURE

"The Birds," a story of great flocks of birds descending into England to attack people, presents human beings in conflict with nature itself. Du Maurier uses the story of a single, rural family—the Hockens, who are trying desperately to fend off the bird attacks—to illustrate humanity's isolation within the natural world and humankind's vulnerability to nature's wrath.

While the birds are the primary force of the story's violence, du Maurier is careful to situate the bird attacks in the context of general hostility from nature. The arrival of unusual numbers of birds coincides with sudden frigid temperatures, rough seas, and strong winds, creating a sense that the birds are part of a broader natural trend. Even before the birds' attacks begin, Nat imagines that "a message comes to them" with the changing of the seasons, and observes that their aggression is linked to the rise and fall of the tide. He later reasons, "There was some law the birds obeyed, and it had to do with the **east wind** and the tide." The birds are also united in their goal; even black-headed gulls, which Nat knows usually attack other birds and as such are typically "kept apart," appear to be leading a mixed flock.

Du Maurier uses figurative language to further establish the birds as part of the natural world. Nat observes, "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." The radio announcer echoes this statement when he later says, "the mass was so dense at ten o'clock this morning that it seemed like a vast black cloud." But while du Maurier configures the birds as a part of the natural world, she places human beings starkly outside of—and at odds with—the nature that surrounds them. For example,

though the birds take their cues from the winds and the tide and they gain fury at night, Nat must battle the cold and the darkness to protect his family from the birds. Therefore, while “the cold did not affect the living birds, waiting out there in the fields” and the darkness seems to feed them, Nat and his family are being destroyed by nature.

Nature proceeds to isolate human beings even from each other, as the birds disrupt communication systems and leave Nat’s family entirely on its own. When Nat tries to make a phone call outside Mr. Trigg’s house, the line is dead. Du Maurier heightens the Hockens’ isolation by suggesting that this is a world-wide catastrophe, as Nat’s wife is unable to find “anything but the crackling” of static coming from domestic and foreign radio stations alike.

The **radio** is simply one of many technologies that fail human beings in their struggle against nature. In “The Birds,” the very thing that has broken human history into ages—tools of stone, bronze, etc.—proves useless in the face of nature’s rage. Because our ability to create and use sophisticated tools is one of the main ways in which human beings separate themselves from other animals, the story’s rejection of technology is a rejection of human identity itself. Everything from Nat’s simple hoe, to Mr. Trigg’s guns, to the military’s planes are useless against the birds’ onslaught. Nat literally calls his hoe “useless,” and deems the fighter planes a “waste of life and effort.” He also believes Mr. Trigg’s bombastic attempt to shoot at the birds is “crazy,” asking, “What use was a gun against a sky of birds?” In the end, the birds themselves become a machine more powerful than any humans have created, as a “million years of memory” bestows them with an “instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines.”

This instinct differentiates the apocalypse at the story’s heart from the usual narrative of natural disasters, wherein events like hurricanes and tsunamis are regarded as tragedies devoid of intent. “The Birds,” meanwhile, presents nature as an explicitly malevolent force that is targeting human beings. Nat believes the birds are following specific orders about where and what to attack, and that they “know what they have to do.” Additionally, though Mr. Trigg’s entire household is killed, the cows and sheep in his field remain conspicuously unharmed, suggesting that the birds are discerning in their prey, and focused only on killing humans. The birds are so intent upon reaching people that hundreds of them sacrifice their bodies in the process; mere fear or hunger must not be the driving force behind their attacks if they willingly die in pursuit of their prey. Imagery of the birds blocking the sun and bringing darkness across the land echoes also biblical punishment, further positioning the birds’ attack as a sort of reckoning for human sins. In this way, humanity is set as being alone in a harsh and even antagonistic universe, unable to truly master nature or, if it turns against us, even survive it.



HUBRIS AND HUMILITY

As a fable of humility, “The Birds” condemns humanity’s hubristic belief that we can control the world around us. Building on the theme of man vs. nature, Du Maurier’s tale rejects the notion of humankind as the master of nature, instead suggesting that any belief in human superiority to nature is foolish and doomed. While Nat’s response to the bird attacks is to take immediate, purposeful action, nearly every other character is stubbornly skeptical that the birds are a true threat. Arrogant faith in man’s dominion over supposedly simple creatures like birds leads to destruction, as those who refuse to take the attacks seriously are the first to die.

Nat’s repeated attempts to warn those around him are met with mockery or dismissal. When he tells Mrs. Trigg about the incident in his children’s bedroom, she assumes it was a nightmare and asks if he is sure they were “real birds.” Jim, the cowhand, is similarly uninterested in Nat’s story. Later, Mr. Trigg teases Nat about shooting the birds for a “gull breakfast” and calls the whole thing a “lot of nonsense.” The entire Trigg household then dies from bird attacks that night.

Even the world beyond Nat’s small circle appears, at first, to dismiss the birds. The operator Nat dials upon seeing a flock of gulls hovering over the water sounds “laconic, weary,” causing Nat to deduce, “She’s another ... She doesn’t care.” As Nat’s family listens to the **radio** announcement of the attacks, the announcer sounds like he is treating “the whole business as he would an elaborate joke.” Nat fears there will be many others like the announcer, and that Londoners would hold parties to get drunk and watch the birds.

Blind faith in human ingenuity proves just as dangerous as personal pride. Even those who take seriously the threat of the birds assume erroneously that their salvation will come at human hands. Nat, Nat’s wife, and the Triggs all put their faith in human ability to overcome any obstacle, trusting that a vague, distant “they” will come save them. This is itself a kind of hubris, a belief in the limitless power of human beings to solve problems and tame the natural world.

Mrs. Trigg says to Nat after he tells her of the first attack, “You ought to write up and ask the Guardian. They’d have some answer for it,” though, of course, this would be futile. Even Nat’s wife says, “Someone should know of this, someone should be told.” Later: “Why don’t the authorities do something? Why don’t they get the Army, get the machine guns?” She also asserts that America, newly-emerged as a world superpower at the time, will save them. Yet the British empire’s cutting-edge military technology is no match for the birds. Though the Army does send planes to attack them, Nat hears the planes crash and sees one of them burning, as the birds have jammed up the propellers.

Nat’s family repeatedly huddles around the radio for news,

anxiously awaiting a broadcast to tell them what is happening and give them instructions. The radio announcer calls buildings “impenetrable,” yet Nat’s experience has highlighted the persistence of the birds, which undercuts the authority of the people he hoped would save him. By morning, the radio has stopped broadcasting altogether, revealing the depths of human hubris as the birds have so rapidly destroyed the most basic functions of society. While Nat seems the most prepared of anyone to take on the birds, even he puts too much faith in others at first, musing, “There’s one thing, the best brains in the country will be on it tonight.” As time goes on, however, Nat’s faith is shaken until he finally accepts that his family is on their own.

Given that “The Birds” was written in the wake of World War II—a time of great decline and economic struggle for the British Empire—the story also echoes general disillusionment with humanity and government’s ability to ensure stability and progress. Nat’s frustration with the government grows as he senses how ill-prepared it is. He thinks, “This was not a job for the government, for the chiefs of staff—they would merely carry out the orders of the scientists.” When no more aircraft come to help, Nat curses “the inefficiency of the authorities” who “always let us down. Muddle, muddle, from the start. No plan, no real organization.”

Nat is only able to survive as long as he does by realizing that no one is coming to help him, and staying humble and realistic about the situation and his own abilities. Yet he too stumbles in being “pleased with his handiwork” after securing his home, as soon enough the birds penetrate all his best defenses. Those around him, meanwhile, are condemned for putting too much faith in humanity’s hubristic belief that we have any real control over the natural world and a fundamentally chaotic universe.



THE INHUMANITY OF WAR

Du Maurier’s story takes place shortly after World War II, a setting emphasized by her imagery of violence and references to fighter planes, machine guns, mustard gas, and Navy ships. Not only do the birds’ attack echo the horror of weapons of mass destruction and, specifically, the Blitz, but it also explores the toll of war on the human psyche. In “The Birds,” fending off the birds becomes analogous to engaging in war, which strips human beings of everything that makes them human.

The birds are relentless and indiscriminate in their attacks, killing men, women, and children alike. Du Maurier uses the language of battle to connect the birds to the military and machinery, presenting them as not simply a natural disaster, but an opposing army. Nat compares the feeling of the attacks to “air raids during the war” and tells his family after boarding up his home that they’re “snug and tight, like an air-raid shelter.” As though broadcasting from a war zone, the radio announcer warns, “The birds, in vast numbers, are attacking anyone on

sight.” And while the birds are initially described as looking like clouds, Nat eventually confuses their formation on the bay with the Navy, observing, “The Navy was not there. It was the gulls rising from the sea.”

The birds also become like weapons through du Maurier’s description of their “instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines.” In keeping with the idea of the birds as a military force, Nat, a disabled veteran, repeatedly thinks about military strategies to defeat them, such as firing at the birds while they rest at low tide. As he secures his family’s cottage Nat is reminded of working on a shelter for his mother in the town of Plymouth, which ultimately proved useless against German air raids.

Du Maurier’s evocation of war also gestures towards fundamental ethical questions of combat, namely how many casualties to accept in pursuit of defeating an enemy. As Nat postulates the use of mass weapons, he assumes that authorities would “warn” the population before releasing mustard gas or shelling. He asserts “The guns couldn’t shell the shore because of the population,” clinging to the preservation of his small seaside town even in the midst of a world-wide catastrophe. But even as he hopes for his town’s salvation, Nat professes his belief that the authorities prioritize urban citizens, positing that “we don’t matter down here ... The people upcountry have priority. They’re using gas up there, no doubt, and all the aircraft. We’ve got to wait and take what comes.” He also fears that the use of mustard gas, though effective in killing the birds, would contaminate the surrounding lands and animals. His thinking reflects the nuclear fallout of World War II, and the increasing tension of nuclear proliferation, when he muses, “Where the trouble’s worst they’ll have to risk more lives if they use gas. All the livestock, too, and the soil—all contaminated.”

By focusing on Nat Hocken’s family as they battle the encroaching birds, du Maurier illustrates on a small scale how war reaches and transforms every aspect of life, leaving little room for many of the characteristics that make us human. The story is entirely focused on Nat’s attempts to survive and save his family, as he is constantly “planning against emergency”; there is no reflection on what his family actually means to him. Nat’s attempts to distract his wife and children from the hammering of the birds with special dinner treats and forced laughter ring hollow against the encroaching threat. He also doesn’t have time to mourn the death of the entire Trigg family; he must immediately begin ransacking the house for supplies if he is to make it home before the birds resume their attack. Du Maurier later emphasizes the Triggs’ absence as Nat watches his wife pour “the Triggs’ soup, cut him a large slice of the Triggs’ bread, and spread their dripping upon it.”

Until the end, Nat is planning next steps to secure his home and family. Only in the final moments of the story, when it appears the birds are breaking through the door and all is lost, does Nat

decide to smoke his final cigarette—perhaps giving in to a final moment of pleasure and “civilization” in the face of imminent death. “The Birds” thus invokes the sheer horror and inescapability of mass violence, and the seeming futility of humanity in the face of its own destructive tendencies.



REASON VS. CHAOS

Du Maurier never gives any explanation for the relentless bird attacks, which is part of what makes them so chilling. Human beings pride themselves

on their rational intellect—they assume that their ability to make rational inferences about the world will allow them to manage their own fates. “The Birds,” however, dismantles the notion that reason has the power to dispel chaos by presenting humans as engaged in a futile battle with irrational and relentless forces.

Within a single day of the birds’ attacks, the intricately-constructed man-made world is brought to a halt. This highlights the fragility of these structures and the tenuousness of the order that guides society. People are so beholden to reason that things that are irrational or unexpected are fascinating and even awe-inspiring. Irrationality is shown to have a power over people, then, simply because it defies their expectations about the world. In this way, “The Birds” shows our over-reliance on reason, as the human reaction to something abnormal is to basically malfunction. Nat listens as the radio announcer describes the effect of the birds on the city: “traffic came to a standstill in many thoroughfares, work was abandoned in shops and offices.”

Du Maurier suggests not only the fragility of man’s world, but its absurdity as well. Nat’s wife only shops for the family on designated days, and her strict adherence to this completely arbitrary order has left the family with little food when the attacks begin. Table manners seem similarly ridiculous in the face of the attacks, as evidenced by Jill’s admonishment of her brother to wipe gravy from his chin mere moments before it appears the birds will break down the cottage door and kill them all.

By refusing to offer a clear rationale for the birds’ actions, du Maurier pits meaningless violence against Nat’s methodical attempts to survive. However heroic, Nat’s efforts are ultimately short-sighted and futile because he cannot defeat irrationality with reason.

Until the very end of the story, Nat is thinking of what concrete steps to take next to secure his family—from boarding up the windows, to gathering food, to lighting a fire in the chimney. Part of Nat’s mistake is to believe that, by completely securing the house, he can convince the birds to go somewhere else. Though Nat describes the “silly, senseless thud of the suicide birds,” he also believes that other, smarter birds “knew what they were doing.” “They’ve got reasoning powers, he thought.

They know it’s hard to break in here. They’ll try elsewhere.” This logic attempts to ascribe rationality to the birds in order to predict how to defeat them. Nat cannot fathom, though, that the bird attacks are irrational and that he cannot deter them, as he would a human intruder, by making their entry difficult. The birds, of course, get inside anyway, showing a victory of irrational forces against the most concerted attempts to reason a way out.

Both the birds and the human beings in du Maurier’s story do things for no logical reason. Du Maurier suggests that, in his attempts to structure an ultimately meaningless world, man ironically spurs himself toward chaos. Though Nat can sense this instinct in the birds, he cannot see it in himself. Early in the story, he thinks that the birds are “like people who, apprehensive of death before their time, drive themselves to work or folly.” This parallels Nat’s own later actions when he encourages his wife to make tea and cocoa, rationalizing, “Keep her busy, and the children too. Move about, eat, drink; always best to be on the go.” He fails (or refuses) to see the folly in his own actions as he takes step after step to secure his home.

Du Maurier repeatedly invokes this notion of doing something solely for the sake of doing something as a distraction from knowledge of mortality. Nat believes that birds, like human beings, are prone to panic in the face of death, and that this loss of rationality is the real “trouble.” He thinks, “As long as everyone doesn’t panic. That’s the trouble. People panicking, losing their heads.” But if keeping busy has no deeper purpose, the work suggests, it is not any more a “rational” choice than embracing the chaos that is reality.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE EAST WIND

Du Maurier’s frequent mentions of the “east wind” evoke concerns about the spread of Communism across Western Europe and America. When “The Birds” was published in 1952, Western democracies were just beginning to see Communism (which was associated with Russia and the global East) as an existential threat to the West. When Mr. Trigg and Mrs. Trigg directly posit that Russia is responsible for the birds’ unnatural behavior, then, their speculation reflects rising Cold War paranoia about Communism being the source of anything menacing or unusual. The east wind—a force of disorder and foreboding in the story that is tied closely to the arrival of the birds—therefore represents the menacing but difficult to control seepage of Eastern ideology into Western life, and the characters regard the east wind much as they would regard overt Communist propaganda. Nat, for example,

contrasts the hard “black frost that the east wind brings” with white frost that shines in the sun, suggesting the depth of the east wind's menace, and he says a “madness” had seized the birds “with the east wind.” The east wind is further described as a force that robs the world of life, “a razor” that “stripped the trees” and left them “bent and blackened.” Finally, the east wind whipped “the sea to breakers,” echoing its ability to sow violence.



THE WIRELESS RADIO

The wireless radio to which Nat and his wife repeatedly turn for guidance ultimately comes to represent both their isolation and the broader failure of human technology to withstand a natural attack. A radio broadcast is what first informs the family that the attacks are not limited to their coastal town, and it gives the Hockens false hope that outside help will come, emphasizing their misguided faith in human ingenuity. But though the radio initially connects the Hockens with the outside world, broadcasts stop within a day of the attacks and Nat and his family are afraid to turn on the radio too often lest they drain its battery and permanently isolate themselves, which suggests the hubris of humanity's reliance on manmade technology to protect them against nature. At the end of the story, as hawks appear to be breaking down his front door, Nat turns the static on once again, perhaps hoping for a final sign of human contact in the face of death.

birds clamor restlessly over the sea. This is the first indication that anything out of the ordinary is happening with the birds, and it establishes Nat as an astute observer of the natural world. Du Maurier's mention of impending winter—signifying death to much of the natural world—also builds the story's initial sense of doom and foreboding. Nat believes that the birds' behavior is irrational, spurred by anxiety and fear rather than reason. This observation is echoed by Nat's own actions later in the story, when he performs and assigns his family tasks to keep them distracted from the increasing hopelessness of their situation.

☝ Nat gazed at the little corpses, shocked and horrified. They were all small birds, none of any size; there must have been fifty of them lying there upon the floor. There were robins, finches, sparrows, blue tits, larks, and bramblings, birds that by nature's law kept to their own flock and their own territory, and now, joining one with another in their urge for battle, had destroyed themselves against the bedroom walls or in the strife had been destroyed by him. Some had lost feathers in the fight; others had blood, his blood, upon their beaks.

Related Characters: Nat Hocken

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

The aftermath of Nat's nighttime battle with the birds dispels any doubts about what horror the creatures can inflict en masse; despite their small size, they have drawn Nat's blood. The listing of common, allegedly harmless species contrasts starkly with the bloody horror of the scene, and also establishes that the birds have joined forces as a sort of army against mankind. Nature's law has either changed, or was never properly understood in the first place. Du Maurier emphasizes the brutality and single-mindedness of the attacks, calling attention to the fact that many birds willingly broke their bodies against the bedroom walls and died in their efforts to hurt Nat and his children—an act that also defies other natural “laws” regarding self-preservation and survival.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the New York Review Books edition of *Don't Look Now: Selected Stories of Daphne du Maurier* published in 2008.

The Birds Quotes

☝ Perhaps, thought Nat, munching his pasty by the cliff's edge, a message comes to the birds in autumn, like a warning. Winter is coming. Many of them perish. And like people who, apprehensive of death before their time, drive themselves to work or folly, the birds do likewise.

Related Characters: Nat Hocken (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Nat Hocken makes this observation at midday before the first bird attacks of the book, while watching a great flock of

It was, Nat thought, like air raids in the war. No one down this end of the country knew what the Plymouth folk had seen and suffered. You had to endure something yourself before it touched you.

Related Characters: Nat Hocken

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Nat makes this observation the day after battling with the birds in his children's bedroom, shortly after both Mrs. Trigg and Joe appear utterly unfazed by his story. Their lack of concern is prompted by both pride and ignorance; unlike Nat, they have yet to withstand a bird attack. The invocation of air raids and Plymouth, a city hit hard in the Blitz in World War II, further serves to associate the attacks with the horror of war—something that, Nat knows, cannot be truly understood without personal experience. This also foreshadows that many others, having not yet fought with the birds, will underestimate the threat that the creatures pose.

The announcer's voice was smooth and suave. Nat had the impression that this man, in particular, 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.

Related Characters: Nat Hocken, The Radio Announcer

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Nat and Mrs. Hocken listen the radio the day after his fight with the birds in his children's bedroom, only to learn that the attacks are happening far beyond their small town. The announcer's tone makes it clear to Nat that, much like his neighbors, those in London do not appreciate the threat the birds represent. With this quote, du Maurier extends the hubris exhibited by Mr. Trigg, Mrs. Trigg, and Joe to encompass society at large, further isolating Nat as the only character to take the birds seriously. Nat's proximity to the natural world and his personal experience with the bird

attack have granted him understanding few others possess, and he correctly predicts that many people will laugh off "the whole business" with the birds until it is too late.

Nat thought to himself that "they" were no doubt considering the problem at that very moment, but whatever "they" decided to do in London and the big cities would not help the people here, three hundred miles away. Each householder must look after his own.

Related Characters: Mrs. Hocken / Nat's Wife, Nat Hocken

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 73-74

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after his first fight with the birds, Nat and Mrs. Hocken discuss the plausibility of military intervention, with Nat rejecting his wife's idea that the Army could shoot the birds out of the sky. Though Nat does not completely dismiss the hope of outside help, he does quickly understand that in warlike situations, people must fend for themselves. His survivalist nature has already begun to manifest, as has his frustration with the authorities. The frailty of human order—signified by vague authorities in faraway London—is already on display, as Nat understands the limits of authority and the importance of individual responsibility in wartime.

"I don't want a gun," said Nat, "but I'd be obliged if you'd run Jill home. She's scared of the birds."

He spoke briefly. He did not want to talk in front of Jill.

"OK," said the farmer, "I'll take her home. Why don't you stop behind and join the shooting match? We'll make the feathers fly."

Jill climbed in, and turning the car, the driver sped up the lane. Nat followed after. Trigg must be crazy.

What use was a gun against a sky of birds?

Related Characters: Mr. Trigg, Nat Hocken (speaker), Jill Hocken

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Even while agreeing to drive a terrified Jill Hocken home from school under a sky of looming birds, Mr. Trigg dismisses the danger he is in. His pride is on stark display here, as he rejects the mounting evidence in front of him and instead puts his faith in the continued dominion of man over the natural world. Having witnessed the brutality of the birds, Nat understands that Mr. Trigg's bombastic calls for a "shooting match" are foolish. The fact that Nat is a war veteran, and as such someone familiar with the intricacies of guns and the damage they can do, grants his rejection of the weapon even more weight. The passage underscores not simply the hubris of men like Mr. Trigg, but also the futility of even advanced technology in the face of a true natural disaster.

☞ 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. Cost too heavy. There's always gas. Maybe they'll try spraying with gas, mustard gas. We'll be warned first, of course, if they do. There's one thing, the best brains of the country will be onto it tonight."

Related Characters: Nat Hocken (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after the Hockens listen to the sound of aircraft flying overhead, Nat hears what he understands to be the sound of the planes crashing into the sea. The swift evisceration of the planes and guns by the birds reveals the limits of human technology, while du Maurier's use of military terminology further paints the birds as a sort of opposing army.

Despite his usual pragmatism, Nat still exhibits some misguided pride here as he clings to the belief that human ingenuity will ultimately triumph. His perhaps naïve hope that the military would spare his small town in the face of such total catastrophe highlights the brutality of war and weapons of mass destruction in particular.

☞ There was some law the birds obeyed, and it was all to do with the east wind and the tide.

Related Characters: Nat Hocken

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Nat makes this observation the second evening of the attacks, as he begins to piece together what pattern the birds appear to be following. It is through his proximity to the rhythms of the natural world that Nat is able to figure out the timing of the attacks, suggesting that those in more urban environments may not be so astute and that mankind's separation from nature will be its downfall. The birds' connection to other natural elements—wind, water—underscores the interconnectedness of nature, as well as the notion that some kind of large malevolent force is guiding the birds' actions. On a symbolic level, the continued mention of the east wind serves to echo fears of an encroaching Soviet threat on Western Europe and America.

☞ That was the line. Keep her busy, and the children too. Move about, eat, drink; always best to be on the go.

Related Characters: Johnny Hocken, Jill Hocken, Mrs. Hocken / Nat's Wife, Nat Hocken

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

These lines appear towards the end of "The Birds", after it has become clear that the Hockens are utterly alone; their neighbors have been killed, the radio plays only static, and the nearby phone line is dead. Nat has retrieved enough supplies from the Triggs' house to last the family another night or so. There is little else Nat can do; yet even in the face of near-certain death, he spurs his wife and children to action for no rational reason. Here, Nat is echoing the exact observation he makes in the beginning of the story, when first witnessing the restless birds over the sea, and driving himself to "work or folly" in the face of impending doom. His behavior is no longer purely rational, even though he is trying to preserve his and his family's sanity until the end.

●● Nat listened to the tearing sound of splintering wood and wondered how many million 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.

Related Characters: Nat Hocken

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Appearing near the very end of “The Birds” as the titular creatures begin to break into the cottage, these lines end

the tale on a note of dark uncertainty. With nothing more to do to save his family, Nat’s thoughts turn instead to a sort of detached fascination—that the birds’ behavior may be fueled by a deep-seated evolutionary drive, beyond the realm of reason as human beings understand it. Their “million years of memory” suggests the enormity of nature, while their comparison to machines underscores their superiority to man-made technology and the single-mindedness of their murderous purpose. Du Maurier evokes the horror of this final, strange moment through her description of the birds’ “stabbing beaks and “piercing eyes,” words that suggest the tearing of flesh to come. Finally, her use of the phrase “destroy mankind” suggests that this catastrophe will be global and total.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE BIRDS

On the third of December in a quiet, seaside town, the season shifts abruptly from autumn to winter. Nat Hocken, a disabled veteran who works part-time on a farm, observes that there seem to be more birds than usual clamoring restlessly over the sea. He muses that they must receive a message each autumn that winter is coming, and he compares their behavior to human beings driven to “work or folly” in the face of death.

Nat tells the farmer Mr. Trigg about the birds, and Mr. Trigg asserts that the weather must be causing the birds’ behavior—they must know that winter is coming and that the season will be a hard one. Just as Mr. Trigg predicts, the weather turns that night.

At home in his cottage that night, Nat wakes up to the **east wind** whipping outside. Hearing a rapping on his windowpane, he opens the window and something sharp grazes his knuckle, drawing blood. He watches a bird flutter back outside and, thinking the wind must have disoriented it, Nat closes the window and returns to bed.

The rapping sound returns and when Nat opens the window to investigate, a half dozen birds fly at his face. He drives them out and then hears a cry from his children’s room. Their window is wide open and their bedroom is filled with birds, which are fluttering around and then diving to attack the children. Beating back the birds with a blanket, Nat kills many of them until the dawn breaks and the birds fly away.

The morning is exceptionally cold, the sea seems wilder, and the frost has the “black look...that the **east wind** brings.” Nat’s son is sleeping, but his face is bloodied from the birds. Though Nat tries to reassure his wife that the sudden cold snap and east wind are to blame for the birds’ behavior, she doesn’t believe him—the weather has just turned, so the birds wouldn’t be desperate for food yet. While walking his daughter Jill to the bus stop, Nat looks for the birds but doesn’t see them.

The swift change in seasons and erratic behavior of the birds creates a sense of foreboding. Nat’s thoughtful observation of their behavior reveals him to be close to nature, while his musings about chaos in the face of death suggest the darkness to come.



This is the first of many incidents in which characters blame the birds’ behavior on the shift in weather, failing to ascribe their restlessness to anything out of the ordinary. This is also the first introduction to Mr. Trigg, and it already hints at his stubborn refusal to think the birds’ behavior is a threat.



Nat’s first violent encounter with a bird is marked by his opening of a window, echoing his lack of concern over the threat the birds pose. His willingness to open the window in an attempt to shoo the bird away contrasts with his later fervor to secure his cottage from entry.



This second attack begins to dispel for Nat the notion that the birds’ behavior is no cause for concern. The violent tussle in the children’s bedroom gives Nat his first real glimpse of the danger his family is in. It’s also notable that the birds flee not in response to Nat fighting them, but rather in response to the dawn—just as they came when the weather turned, they seem responsive to natural patterns like daylight and darkness.



The elements have turned even more hostile, increasing the story’s creeping sense of doom. The mention of “black frost” implies that this sudden winter will not be friendly to farmers like Nat. Assertions that the weather is to blame for the birds’ behavior grow ever more thin and foolish-sounding.



Though he does not have work that day, Nat stops by the farm to check that all is well. He tells Mrs. Trigg of the previous evening's battle with the birds. She is dismissive of his story, positing that it was simply the weather and suggesting Nat write to the newspaper for an answer. She also posits that the cold snap is coming from Russia. Jim, a cowhand, is similarly unconcerned. Nat reflects that, like "air raids in the war," the bird attacks are something one must witness for oneself to understand.

Nat returns home and, at the urging of his wife, clears the children's bedroom of dead birds. The ground is frozen solid, so he carries the carcasses to the shore to bury. There, he sees thousands of gulls hovering over the sea. He thinks that "someone should be told," but he worries his warnings would be dismissed as the ramblings of a mad man.

Back at the cottage, a **radio** broadcast relays that an enormous flock of birds has brought London to a halt. The announcer urges families to remain indoors and suggests that weather and hunger are to blame for the birds' behavior. Nat is ecstatic to have his observations validated, and he begins boarding up the cottage. As he does so, he remembers boarding up his mother's house during the war. He reflects that the Triggs will likely refuse to take the same precautions. Later, following another radio broadcast about the attacks, Nat resents the announcer's lighthearted tone and predicts that many others will refuse to take the birds seriously.

Nat's wife insists that the army should do something about the birds, though Nat believes they would not be able to help. He further reflects that his family must look after itself. His wife then tells Nat they have little food or supplies in the cottage, because her designated shopping day has not yet arrived. Reflecting on "the old days" when families had food stocked away for a "siege," Nat resents his wife's lack of preparedness, fearing it will be too late the following day to leave the cottage.

Nat walks partway to the beach to find that the tide has turned and that the gulls have begun circling as if ready to attack. He grabs a hoe from the cottage as a weapon and then rushes to pick up Jill from the bus stop. On the way, he calls the operator from a phone box to relay what he is seeing; she, too, seems utterly unconcerned by his warning. Jill arrives on the bus and Nat observes that the gulls seem to be awaiting some sort of signal. As the birds begin to swarm, the two run to the farm, where Mr. Trigg agrees to drive Jill the rest of the way home.

Nat and his wife seem to be the only characters in the story who appreciate the threat the birds present. The reader knows how dangerous the birds can be, and as such recognizes the hubris that Mrs. Trigg and Jim display in dismissing the attacks. Nat's evocation of air raids connects the story to war and foreshadows the battles to come.



This puts into perspective the enormous size of the foe human beings are up against. Nat's worry that his warnings would be dismissed again invokes human hubris, as it evidences the hesitance of human beings to believe that their dominion over the natural world could be challenged.



This is the first indication that the attacks are happening far beyond Nat's small town. Du Maurier again draws a connection between these attacks and the air raids of the war, while highlighting the hubris of those who fail to appreciate the threat the birds represent. The radio takes a symbolic turn here. At first, the radio makes Nat feel validated and connected to others, as his experiences are shared and his speculations about the birds are confirmed. However, the second broadcast is far less comforting—the announcer's tone makes Nat feel even more alone, as he realizes that other people are not taking the precautions he is.



Du Maurier further isolates Nat's family from the outside world while also demonstrating Nat's growing survivalism. The reference to a "siege" again echoes the language of war and heightens the sense of dread regarding a battle to come. The fact that the family is ill-prepared due to Nat's wife's shopping schedule highlights the absurdity and fragility of man-made order.



Nat now fully appreciates the danger his family is in, and he starts piecing together what order, if any, the birds are following. As the tide turning seems to activate the gulls, Du Maurier is giving clearer and clearer clues that the birds are tied into natural rhythms. Human hubris is once again on display in Nat's conversation with the phone operator.



Mr. Trigg returns and makes light of Nat's fear, insisting it is a waste of time to board up his house and offering Nat a gun. Nat reflects, "What use was a gun against a sky of birds?" Mr. Trigg wonders if the Russians have poisoned the birds. Nat hurries home as the swarm of birds begin to dive, cutting Nat with their beaks and claws. Nat drops his hoe and makes it inside only seconds before a gannet would have split his skull.

Mr. Trigg's pride is again on display, and his refusal to board up his home hints at the danger to come to him and his family. Nat's rejection of the gun and hoe reflect the failure of human technology to fight against nature. This is the most violent encounter with the birds yet, and it raises the stakes of the story as Nat is almost killed.



Nat's wife dresses his wounds and wonders why the army is not involved. Nat says it is because they were not prepared for this situation. The Hockens huddle together in their cottage as hundreds of birds hammer against the windows and roof. Nat attempts to distract his family from the peril of their situation by singing and whistling as he further secures the inside of the cottage.

Nat's wife has yet to lose her faith that others will come save her, even as Nat shows increasing disillusionment with human institutions. The hammering of the cottage is reminiscent of the aforementioned air raids. Nat's insistence on distracting his family echoes his initial observation that both the birds and human beings "drive themselves to work or folly" in the face of death.



Nat tells his family that they are "snug and tight, like an air-raid shelter." He begins to work out what supplies they will need to survive for a few days, still hoping that further instructions will come through on the **radio**. They turn the wireless on and listen as the announcer declares a state of national emergency. His voice is now "solemn, grave. Quite different from midday." The station goes on to play the national anthem, and Nat reflects that "There won't be any more programs tonight ...There's been a breakdown at the BBC."

Du Maurier now creates a direct comparison between the Hocken's situation and air-raid shelters during the war, echoing the violence and power of nature. The change in the radio announcer's tone reveals that he—and, likely, others—have finally come to appreciate the danger they are in. Nat's recognition that there will be no more radio announcements that evening reveals both the continued failure of human systems and the isolation of Nat's family.



Nat helps with supper, whistling and singing all the time in order to distract his family. He reflects the birds have "reasoning powers" and that "they know it's hard to break in here. They'll try elsewhere." The Hockens then hear the drone of planes and gunfire heading toward the sea. Though Nat's wife and children are heartened at the thought of military aid, Nat understands subsequent crashing noises to be the sounds of the planes falling into the water. He internally laments the "waste of life and effort."

Nat continues to drive himself to "work" and "folly" (as he accused the birds of doing in the beginning of the story) in order to distract his family from the birds. His belief that the birds will eventually bypass his house suggests he is clinging to reason in the face of chaos, perhaps unjustifiably, since the birds do not, in fact, seem to be rational (their motivation is completely mysterious). The immediate destruction of the military planes is another example of both the hubris of mankind and failure of technology in the face of nature's wrath.



Nat thinks about what next steps the military will take, and takes comfort in the belief that "the best minds in the country will be on it tonight." He reflects on the potential use of mustard gas, though admits it would lead to widespread land contamination. Above all, he believes that "people losing their heads" will be the real danger.

Nat has yet to entirely lose faith in the power of human ingenuity to overcome nature. His references to mustard gas and contamination further evoke war in that they echo the use of nuclear bombs in World War II as well as Cold War nuclear proliferation. Finally, his belief that people panicking is the real problem suggests he is still putting too much faith in the power of manmade order to triumph over chaos.



The bird attacks finally quiet, causing Nat to realize that they are linked to the rise and fall of the tide. Reasoning that he has six hours before the next attack, Nat's "mind was busy again, planning against emergency." He goes outside and, in the cold and darkness, fortifies the cottage windows by stuffing cracked panes with the bodies of dead birds that killed themselves in their desperate attempts to get inside.

Nat returns to bed, only to realize he has forgotten to light a fire to keep the birds out of the chimney; he quickly relights the fire, burning the birds already attempting to force their way down. Nat reflects that people living in newer houses nearby do not have the "small windows" and "stout walls" of his cottage, and are in great danger. As Jill starts to cry, he instructs his wife to make tea and cocoa, thinking, "Keep her busy, and the children too. Move about, eat, drink; always best to be on the go."

Nat thinks that he will soon need to get more fuel for the fire. As the family eats, he also notices that they are down to half a loaf of bread. The children cheer at the sound of more birds killing themselves in their dives at the cottage. Nat then smokes one of his two final cigarettes, saying he will keep the other "for a rainy day."

The incessant tapping of the birds resumes and Nat realizes that birds have broken into the bedrooms upstairs. He barricades the door, careful to keep his family unaware of the breach. Nat again worries about how unprepared his family is, and wonders about driving away from the countryside between tides. The family anxiously awaits a promised 7:00 a.m. news bulletin, but when Nat's wife turns on the **radio** nothing comes through but static. Nat wonders how much longer the radio battery will last, fearing that if it dies they won't hear any "instructions."

At the next lull in battle, Nat and his family go to the Triggs' farm to get much-needed food and supplies. There, Nat finds that the entire Trigg household has been killed by the birds. Jim is in the yard, his body trampled and his gun beside him, Mr. Trigg lies by the phone, and Mrs. Trigg is dead upstairs alongside an umbrella. The Triggs' sheep and cows, meanwhile, remain alive.

Du Maurier establishes the birds as part of the natural world through their connection with the tide. Nat's survivalism continues to spur his actions. The huge number of birds committing kamikaze-style attacks suggests the depth of their urge to reach human beings, as well as the lack of reason behind their actions.



The birds have not given up their attempts to reach the Hockens, despite Nat's belief that they would succumb to reason and move on. In keeping busy for no reason apart for distraction, Nat again uses "work or folly" to overcome his fear.



The Hockens' dwindling supplies reveal the ever-increasing danger of their situation. Du Maurier allows a moment of respite for the characters before further building the tension of the tale.



Nat continues his increasingly foolish attempts to distract his family from the peril of their situation. His faith in human ingenuity—both his own and others'—remains, even as it becomes clear that his family is completely on its own, and that no instructions or outside help is coming. At this point, the radio has completely failed them—not only are radio broadcasts not coming, but also the radio might run out of batteries. The family is now fully isolated in their home.



The death of the Triggs serves as a comeuppance for their previous hubris. It also suggests that the same fate has befallen other families that did not heed the warnings. That Mr. Trigg is found by the phone suggests he did try to call for help at the end, but it was too late. Jim's gun and Mrs. Trigg's umbrella are yet more instances of the futility of human technology. The fact that the farm animals haven't been killed reveals that the birds are only targeting human beings.



With no time to mourn, Nat gathers what he can over the course of three trips and loads everything into his cottage shortly before the tide turns. He tries the telephone box, but the line is dead. There is no smoke from any chimneys nearby either, causing Nat to realize all his neighbors are likely dead. Nat's children laugh at the bouncing of the car on their final ride home, their voices contrasting sharply with the horror of their situation.

Nat begins to unload his new supplies, cursing "the inefficiency of the authorities" as he does so. While working on the roof, he looks out to sea and spots what he thinks are Navy ships. To his horror, he then realizes that he is actually seeing thousands of gulls, rising with the tide.

The Hockens listen to the **radio**, which continues to play only static, even on foreign stations. This leads Nat to suggest the attacks are happening across Europe. Nat's wife then pours "out a plateful of the Triggs' soup, cut him a large slice of the Triggs' bread, and spread their dripping upon it." When "a piece of the dripping" runs down Johnny's chin, Jill scolds him: "Manners, Johnny."

Nat muses about organizing the new supplies and subsequent steps he will take to fortify the cottage, even as hawks begin to hammer at the cottage door. The door begins to splinter and tear. Nat tells his wife he will smoke his final cigarette. He tosses the empty packet onto the fire.

The birds have robbed Nat of the chance to mourn the Triggs, suggesting the dehumanization of war. Du Maurier has completely isolated the Hockens at this point, from both nature and other human beings.



By connecting the gulls to the Navy, du Maurier creates the sense that the birds are an army as powerful as any created by man. The Hockens' survival seems ever more unlikely.



The loss of radio contact signifies not only the utter isolation of the Hockens, but also the ultimate disintegration of man-made order in the face of the chaos the birds represent. The repeated use of "Triggs" to describe the Hockens' dinner emphasizes the horror of war, as the family has been forced to steal and eat their dead neighbors' food to survive. Jill's scolding of her brother in the face of near-certain death reveals the absurdity of human manners.



Nat's survivalism continues almost to the very end. However, the fact that he decides to smoke his last cigarette—the one he had previously been saving for a "rainy day"—suggests that he has come to accept the inevitability of death. Rather than continue to drive himself to "work or folly" as distraction, he simply allows himself a moment of meaningless pleasure.





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