

2021

A Misconception About Hysteria: The Portrayal of Women in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*

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Recommended Citation

Doublesin, Natalie (2021) "A Misconception About Hysteria: The Portrayal of Women in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*," *Quest*: Vol. 5, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/quest/vol5/iss1/3>

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Interpretive Argument Essay

Research in progress for ENGL 1302: Composition II

Faculty Mentor: Michael Schueth, Ph.D.

I am pleased to introduce Natalie Doublesin's "A Misconception About Hysteria: The Portrayal of Women in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*," an essay she wrote for my English 1302 course in the spring 2020 semester. The research assignment was drawn from the textbook *Writing Analytically*, which asks students to practice writing a tightly argued interpretation of a film. I chose Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film, *The Birds*, because it is wonderfully apt for interpretive work as the events in the film are not fully explained and the surreal nature of the bird attacks makes for many different kinds of approaches to understanding the film's meaning. To that end, the COVID-19 shut down came just as we were starting this project, which also opened up new insights into the film's connections to environmental disasters, public hysteria, and crisis responses.

Natalie's interpretation of *The Birds* draws on what the writers of *Writing Analytically* call a "lens"—that is, a focused reading of the film that is filtered through a particular idea or theoretical point-of-view. Here, the lens is a mix of feminist and psychoanalytical theories that critique a long Western history of pathologizing women with "hysteria." Natalie's close reading of scholarly sources as well as her attention to details in specific scenes in the film reveal a writer deeply engaged in her ideas. Notably, Natalie worked on more than a dozen drafts after the course ended, meeting with me on Zoom for eight months to perfect the final manuscript you see here. In that process, Natalie deepened her engagement with her scholarly sources, often finding new material and ideas as she read and re-read her research over time. The same happened with the film: as she continued to engage the fine details of camera angles, costumes, and the nuanced performances of the actors, she found connections and patterns at work that were not obvious. As Natalie wrote into her ideas, she identified ways in which characters fit into and challenged the theoretical lens she was working with, reformulating her ideas throughout the writing process. To that end, this paper demonstrates not only critical insights into the film, but also serves to show what can happen when students take their work beyond the classroom, engage with the scholarly publishing process, and collaborate with faculty.

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Dr. Michael Schueth

ENGL 1302

10 February 2021

A Misconception About Hysteria:

The Portrayal of Women in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*

Historical writings about hysteria, an exaggeration of emotion that is sometimes said to be a psychological disorder, can be linked back to the fifth century B.C. in writings such as *The Nature of Women* and *Diseases of Women*, and reoccur in Greek, Latin, and other writings into the sixteenth century (Micale 42). According to Mark Micale, “the actual term ‘hysteria’ never appears” in these ancient texts; rather, the authors use the term “hysteria, signifying simply the uterus” (42). Hysteria was believed to only afflict women because of the presence of their reproductive organs. One of the main reasons that the idea of hysteria persisted into the early twentieth-century medicine and psychology was the fact that “the physicians were male-only occupations,” and they used their position in medicine to define women as emotional and dramatic (66). In fact, men thought of hysteria as “everything [they] found irritating or irascible, mysterious or unmanageable, in the opposite sex” (Micale 68). Thus, from the birth of modern medicine, women were pathologized as “unmanageable” by men who could not—and would not—work to understand them. In fact, the misconception about women being linked to hysteria was not only thought of as true by men who researched these of behaviors, but women even accepted hysteria as a female disease (Micale 66).

The history of hysteria can explain a great deal about Alfred Hitchcock's portrayal of female characters in his 1963 film, *The Birds*. In the movie, the central characters who develop hysterical mindsets are women of a variety of ages. Having several generations of women fall into hysteria illustrates another historical archetype of women: maiden, mother, and crone (i.e., an old woman) (Anderson). In addition, Hitchcock adds a more modern role to the archetype: "the keeper" role, as Nicole Sallak Anderson defines it. Sallak says the keeper occupies the role between a maiden and mother, "a person who manages or looks after something or someone," and we see this role played by the main character, Melanie Daniels (Anderson). The archetype of women in literature, along with prolonged historical misconceptions about hysteria, are an important basis to understanding the film. Hitchcock's use of historical ideas of hysteria and sexist archetypes of women in *The Birds* demonstrates how he portrayed women as having hysteric inclinations. Hitchcock presents women of various ages reacting differently to the bird attacks, focusing on Mitch's mother, Lydia; Mitch's sister, Cathy; Mitch's love interests, Melanie Daniels and Annie Hayworth, as well as an older woman, Mrs. Bundy.

The maiden role in the film is portrayed through Cathy Brenner, a young woman trying to navigate her early teenage years. She takes an instant liking to Melanie once Mitch introduces her to the family. In fact, Cathy says, "I'm sick, Melanie" while she is shown to be crying in fear about the bird attacks that just caused the death of her teacher, Annie. Melanie rushes to the bathroom with Cathy, acting as a mother caring for her child. Cathy's own mother, Lydia, watches, frozen by her own "hysteria," and has an expression that suggests why she, the mother, is not helping her daughter while she

is sick. Here, Hitchcock touches on a long-standing notion that women were prone to first show signs of hysteria in their early teenage years. Historically, hysteria has been observed to occur “more frequently in the female sex” and even more specifically, young women who have reached “the age of puberty” (Kretschmer 577). Once a woman’s body starts to mature during puberty, there “is a sensation of suffocation due to pressure from an ascending uterus on the heart, liver, and lungs,” which is what early researchers believed to cause hysteria in a woman (Micale 42). Thus, Cathy’s reaction to the bird attacks demonstrates this longstanding stereotype about sexually maturing women being overly emotional. Additionally, this scene reveals Melanie’s caring nature and her desire to be a mother. Early in the film, Melanie is seen occupying the maiden role because of her carefree, flirtatious attitude.¹ However, Melanie’s role as a maiden is challenged when she is introduced to Cathy, a young teenager, because it forces her to move past the role of the maiden and onto the keeper. Melanie’s role as keeper, as explained earlier, points to her future need to attain motherhood status and her fear of missing it. This fear is ultimately what causes Melanie to care for Cathy, and it simultaneously reveals to Lydia her growing displacement from her status as a mother.

Indeed, Melanie’s focus on motherhood also reflects her responses to the bird attacks. In the beginning of the film, Melanie is seen as an active and lively single, young woman driving around San Francisco in her sporty convertible. In contrast, at the end of the film, Melanie is in a limp and paralyzed state—a hysterical state—from the bird attacks. Discoveries by neurologist and psychoanalytic researcher Sigmund Freud reveal that “no hysterical symptom can arise from a real experience alone, but that in every case the memory of earlier experiences awakened in association to it plays a part

in causing the symptom” (qtd. in Polkinhorn 5). In other words, multiple factors cause “hysteria.” In the case of the film, the birds were not the only factor that caused these “hysterical” reactions in the women. After Melanie was attacked by the birds, she swats at Mitch’s helpful touch instead of finding comfort in him. Hysteria forms from past experiences and “develop[s] out of gradual progressive anxiety for one’s safety,” which is reflected in Melanie wanting to protect herself from Mitch’s hands coming at her (Kretschmer 576). The bird attack triggers Melanie’s hysteria but may not be the reason for her hysteric state of mind. Indeed, on surface level, it might seem that Melanie is hysterical only because of the bird attack; however, the thought that hysterical responses arise from past experiences reveals the birds are not the only cause of hysteria for Melanie. As mentioned earlier, Melanie has a growing awareness and anxiety to fulfill her motherhood status when she meets the Brenner family. Additionally, when Melanie takes care of Lydia while Mitch and Cathy are away, we see her motherly, caring nature that further reflects Melanie’s desire for motherhood and Lydia’s retreat into the role of the crone. These realizations also uncover the particular dangers of being a maiden. In post-war American life, Melanie is at an age when women were expected to marry and have children, so her anxieties about marriage and family, in conjunction with the surreal and violent bird attacks that pose an existential threat to the Brenner family, are more than enough to tip Melanie into a “hysterical” state.

In turn, as Melanie cares for Lydia in this scene, Lydia starts to realize her motherhood status is being diminished, pushing her into the role of crone and inciting such an emotional toll on her that she, too, becomes “hysterical.” For instance, Lydia starts yelling at her son and asking him a spiral of questions: “When do you think [the

birds] will come?” and “Where will they go [if they have to leave town]?” In this scene, along with other scenes of women being hysterical, camera distance reveals how Hitchcock saw these hysterical responses of the women as being irrational and ridiculous, which reveals Hitchcock’s views of women. For example, Hitchcock frames close-ups of the women as they lash out, capturing the full extent of the hysteria and portraying the dramatic responses as ludicrous. Throughout the film, viewers see Lydia as protective and motherly towards her son, Mitch, which is most likely because of the death of her husband and the fact that she wants to protect her children since they are all she has left. Lydia senses the motherly potential in Melanie, which could perhaps lead her to believe her position as mother is no longer needed, and that starts to create a fear within her. In fact, in the scene when Lydia is yelling at Mitch, she says, “If your father were here” before stopping herself and realizing why she was screaming in the first place. It wasn’t because of the birds specifically, but rather about the fact that she is still mourning the loss of her husband while also trying the care for her children. When she stops herself from yelling at Mitch, she falls out of hysteria because she realizes her true motivation. The bird attacks trigger Lydia to realize that she might be at risk of losing her son to Melanie, which causes her to fall into hysteria because of this “earlier experience” of already losing her husband. This fear of losing her children and her status as mother, and moving onto the role of crone, is the real cause of Lydia falling into hysteria, although it may seem like the bird attacks are the sole cause.

Furthermore, another type of hysteric reaction can be seen by an elderly woman in the local restaurant. In the scene, Mrs. Bundy claims that birds do not have “sufficient intelligence to launch a mass attack” on humans, denying the thought that their small

town could be in serious danger (Hitchcock). Because Mrs. Bundy is older, her more intellectual response, saying that “birds are not aggressive creatures, they bring beauty into the world,” was appropriate for her role as the crone, as she takes a wiser and more rational approach to the news of the bird attacks (Hitchcock). However, after the bird attacks, Mrs. Bundy falls into a silent stupor, a departure from her animated and forceful arguments about bird behavior just moments before. In the post-attack restaurant scene, Mrs. Bundy is at the back of the restaurant blocking out what she just saw. Her response reflects human “instinct of self-preservation—in the form of fear and anxiety in relation to dangerous situations” (Kretschmer 574). This explains that Mrs. Bundy’s state of denial about the bird attacks meant she wanted to protect herself and not face reality. Ernst Kretschmer, a German psychiatrist, describes this instinct as natural “animal instinct” used to protect oneself from intolerable situations that can eventually lead to a state of hysteria (574). Along with these ideas, humans “desire to be deaf to unpleasant facts,” and we also like to “avoid some difficulty” that can cause us to react to troublesome situations with a hysterical state of simply just denying everything that is happening (Russell 872). Furthermore, Mrs. Bundy is dressed much more masculine than the other women in the film: she wears darker colors and a hat to cover her hair. Hitchcock portrayed Mrs. Bundy as more of a “masculine” figure likely because of the perceived lack of sexuality of older aged women or women in the role of the crone. This character’s response suggests Hitchcock’s opinion that if men were able to become hysteric, they would act civilly and not overact as women were thought of to do. All of the women in the film who reflect “hysteria” also wrestle with fear: Cathy fearing the bird attacks, Melanie fearing her lack of motherhood, Lydia fearing losing her motherhood,

or Mrs. Bundy fearing reality itself. Fear of internal or external danger is what causes these women to fall into hysteria. Only when the women realize this fear do they fall out of hysteria, as demonstrated by Lydia who stops yelling at Mitch once she understands the true object of her fear. Overall, various fears trigger these characters' hysterical responses, and Hitchcock draws on long-standing gender stereotypes to emphasize the horror of the bird attacks.

In conclusion, Hitchcock uses a long history of hysteria and female archetypes as a basis of his 1963 film, *The Birds*. His sexist portraits of women in this film, as well as other films, is also disturbingly reflected back in his personal actions of terrorizing his actresses during filming. On the set of *The Birds*, he “abandon[ed] the mechanical birds agreed upon for the scene” of Melanie getting attacked in the bedroom and instead used real ones; the scene left Tippi Hedren (Melanie) “with a deep gash over her forehead and in a state of nervous collapse” (Jhirad 32). Hitchcock terrorized Hedren in order to get the shots he needed, not worrying about the deep trauma he inflicted in his actress. These personal actions toward women are further evidence that help viewers understand why Hitchcock portrayed women the way he did. Furthermore, the movie promotes age-old misinformation that women of all ages were thought to have the ability to become hysteric. Today, researchers believe “that hysteria, particularly in its florid, convulsive forms, is a thing of the past”; however, stereotypical remnants of the supposed condition were still around at least as late as the 1960s, as exemplified in Alfred Hitchcock's, *The Birds* (Micale 168). Perhaps this is because Hitchcock refused to believe that men could fall into hysteria, so as a result, he created *The Birds* around the idea that only women react hysterical to dangerous situations. Maybe he wanted to

prove that men were the superior gender based on their ability to act calm and collected during disasters. In fact, this idea that women are hysterical because of their dramatic nature is “a symbol of the limit of male knowledge about the opposite sex” (Micale 70). In other words, men did not know the real reasons of women becoming hysterical, which could explain why Hitchcock decided to portray the women in his film as hysterical. Whatever the reasoning for the film, the historical stereotypes of women reveal Hitchcock’s understanding of hysteria during the time and his minimal knowledge of the female gender.

Notes

1. My interpretation is based on Anderson’s assertion that we see a shift in the definition of the maiden role with the birth of the women’s movement in the 1960s. Anderson explains that, while “until 1960...a woman’s life was defined by her reproductive system” and expectations for marriage and family, after 1960 we see a transformation of the “maiden” to women exhibiting a “wild” nature who “charge out into the world and explore, while also discovering their inner selves” (Anderson).

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