
Refiguring *The Birds* as Modern Female Gothic in the Kennedy Era

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Released in 1963, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* is a cinematic artifact of the Kennedy era, though much of the film's criticism tends to ignore that historical connection. Moreover, even historically attuned scholarship on Hitchcock, such as the compelling associations to the Kennedy era elucidated by John Hellmann, abstain from a robust scrutiny of the film's female characters, which I believe to be necessary for a thorough appreciation of *The Birds* as a product and as a reflection of its unique American milieu. The female Gothic genre is an overlooked contributor to the culture of the Kennedy era. My feminist reading of the film expands upon existing historical critique, not only by focusing anew on the women characters, but also by profiling them as female Gothic figures.

As John Hellmann details throughout "*The Birds* and the Kennedy Era," critics of the film (Horwitz, Samuels, and Žižek) have focused psychoanalytically on the corrosive emotions of characters in their entanglements with each another and in their apocalyptic fear of the murderous birds. Fear of apocalypse also lurks in Daphne du Maurier's original 1952 short story, which reflects postwar existential anxieties in the emerging age of atomic warfare. Hellmann updates and refines the film's historical affinities by pointing out that the brief Kennedy presidency, in which the film is set, was a transitional time. Certainly, unsettling changes to the American cultural terrain in the 1960s continued to spur anxieties about the future, even apocalyptic ones. Simultaneously, however, part of that culture shift was a movement away from anxiety—for example, the strain imposed by patriarchal values finds relief in the profoundly liberating social changes of the mid-to-late '60s (97-98).

Tracing Jameson's "cobwebs of topical allusions" throughout the film, Hellmann's essay examines three telling segments involving Melanie Daniels: her conversation on the dunes with Mitch Brenner in which she tries to explain her growth in social awareness, her experience

at the school jungle gym as birds gathered ominously before attacking the children, and the scenes in the Brenner house where Melanie is seriously injured during the bird attacks. In these segments, Hellmann finds numerous allusions to sweeping changes on the horizon in the 1960s. These include, for example: similarities between Melanie and Jacqueline Kennedy, traditional ballad lyrics sung by children about the hard lot of women in the patriarchy, and a radio in the background of the Brenner home discussing JFK's State of the Union speech. He also notes the many visual allusions to the New Frontier (Bodega Bay standing for an older, conservative, rural America outside the sphere of San Francisco) that would be the site of so much revolutionary change to come (100-15). Hellmann observes:

The Birds can . . . even appear to be an eerie visualization of the longing and anxieties of the period hurtling toward the apocalyptic consequences of the coming years: the collapsing of identity politics of distinct domestic and public spheres; the assaults by activist civil rights and youth movements upon cultural, social, and political hierarchies, and the turning away from patriarchal authority as a source of safety and wisdom. (98)

When viewed in its historical context, the film conveys what Winfried Fluck calls “an era of optimism and self-confidence,” along with an immense fear of the destructive power of the coming social transformations (486).

Another important facet of the postwar years is the underlying restlessness that was evident among women during a period of cultural history at times called “the long 1950s.”¹ The film's characterization of its female figures illustrates how the simmering energy of the time, particularly of the Kennedy era, exerted a formative influence on women. Melanie, Annie, Lydia, Cathy, and even some of the minor female characters reflect gender role tensions of the era and look to the possibility of realizing a freer, more self-determined life than was possible in less fluid times. As I will discuss, they do so within the terms of the female Gothic genre, with its long lineage in literature and film.² Women in the female Gothic often play the dual role of victim and heroine, i.e., they may achieve only partial success in overcoming patriarchal obstacles, as do the women characters in the film. Moreover, in the female Gothic genre, key women characters are often seen by

other figures as powerful agents of change; they change themselves and others and may change their surroundings for good or for ill, as do the women in the film.

The Birds appeared within months of the release of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, widely regarded as a harbinger of the second feminist wave. This work considers a number of examples taken from fiction contained in popular women's magazines, which was primarily, but not entirely, written for white middle-class women. Friedan's analysis of these publications reveals the concerted pressure exerted on women during the long 1950s to privilege their domestic roles as wives and mothers, although they were legally and culturally denied many alternatives to homemaking.

Since the publication of Friedan's book, revisionist historians have shown a more complex gendered reality, one that is at odds with the predominant image of women being immersed happily or unhappily in domesticity. For example, a 1994 study by Joanne Meyerowitz retraced Friedan's method by highlighting the nonfiction feature stories of the same magazines, in which she found far more varied stories of career women, though overall they were operating under similar pressures. Indeed, the numbers of women working outside the home steadily increased during the long 1950s, albeit mainly in low-status jobs. Karen Dunak's 2018 study revealed shifting gender roles within the family and an open expression of discontent among women confined to domestic roles. Feminist historians have even reassessed Jacqueline Kennedy, who was long considered only as an icon of style and beauty. In an article published in 2005, Carol B. Schwalbe cites a number of examples of how the First Lady had a more substantive impact on her own than was previously thought, including her role as a good will ambassador abroad and as a cultural historian in her renovation of the White House (115-17).

Clearly, this period offered women a number of mixed messages. On the one hand, white middle-class women were told they were New Women. The designation included opportunities that their ancestors never had, such as access to education and conduits to remarkable accomplishments. On the other hand, women were largely denied access to positions of power and to desirable careers, even to higher-status community service positions. As such, the New Woman had few opportunities to exercise agency. The title that Friedan gave

to her book's first chapter reflects these abstruse contradictions: "The Problem That Has No Name."

Thus, while traditional scholarship maintains that the second wave of feminism began in 1963, with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, some feminist scholars have noted that the eras between the waves were more significant than we have been led to believe. Flora Davis describes the cycle this way: "First there's a lot of intense activity and some aspects of life are transformed; then when the public has absorbed as much as it can stand, reaction sets in. Stability reigns for a while, and if there's a strong backlash, some of the changes may be undone. Eventually, if vital issues remain unresolved, another wave of activism arises" (11). In the long 1950s, the pervasive sense of restlessness and questioning that culminated in the Kennedy era was in turn the precursor of the wave that followed.³

The narrative of *The Birds* captures the reality for women during the Kennedy era. A flock of women characters—principally, Melanie, Annie, Lydia, and Cathy—manifests that female existence. This story line is the creation of screenwriter Evan Hunter and Hitchcock himself, not du Maurier's. Her short story focuses solely on the experience of an isolated rural farmer living near the coast of Cornwall. There are no principal women characters. Readers of du Maurier simply witness the beleaguered man's repeated efforts, using whatever crude tools he has at hand, to protect his home from avian invaders. In contrast, Hunter populated the screenplay with three strong women characters and a young girl. Hitchcock further enhanced the script with additional topical references. In *Scripting Hitchcock*, Walter Raubicheck and Walter Srebnick delineate which dilemmas of the characters stem from Hunter's initial topical vision and which were added by the director. Surprisingly, given the pervasive stereotyping of women in film during the long 1950s, the filmmakers' vision of women reflected not only the limitations of the time, but also the women's restlessness and their yearning for something more. Another factor contributing to the depiction of the female figures comes from cast members who resisted patriarchal stereotyping. For example, in Camille Paglia's scene-by-scene account of the film, the interviewer asks Tippi Hedren about one of two scenes with Annie, in which the actors deviate from Hunter's screenplay and seem to play against the hackneyed idea of female rivalry for Mitch. In response,

Hedren confirms that the scenes were fraught with intensity, and she illustrates how unprepared film criticism is to recognize creatively autonomous acting by remarking to Paglia, “You’re one of the first people that have really said *anything* about it” (*The Birds*, BFI, 11). Tania Modleski supports this idea of actor independence in her observation that, despite Hitchcock’s strenuous efforts to exert control, “. . . his films are always in danger of being subverted by females whose power is both fascinating and seemingly limitless” (1). Then too, it is generally agreed that Hitchcock himself had a complex welter of feelings for women. Some scholars, including Modleski and Schaefer, have recounted his misogynistic behavior with female stars. Others, notably Paglia, see the positive side of his attitudes towards female cast members and are convinced that he faithfully conveyed the “magic” he saw in women (Paglia, “Mad About the Girl”). Whatever the origin of the women’s actions in *The Birds*, these figures seem to be very much of their time—the Kennedy era—and are, in my analysis, ardently trying to grow past the limitations of the gendered roles that have been prescribed for them. As Modleski maintains, the drastic differences in how critics read Hitchcock’s attitudes toward women can be explained by understanding the “thoroughgoing ambivalence about femininity in his work” (3). The film exhibits patriarchal attitudes toward women and depreciates their efforts at resistance. Yet we simply do not know to what extent those impulses stem from Hitchcock’s vision, from the culture reflected in his films, or from both.

Although Mitch is the character who links all the female figures, the three women and the child are the primary focus of attention. They are all subject to the constraints of the time, even as they resist limitations and try to create constructive roles for themselves. Bernard F. Dick points out: “Actually, all the women in the film are like two-way mirrors, each reflecting her own image and the others’. They have all lost someone: Annie lost Mitch, Melanie lost her mother, Cathy lost her father, and Lydia lost her husband” (244). Modleski is among those critics who have noticed that Melanie resembles Lydia and indeed appears to be a younger version of her (5). The identities of the women do, indeed, seem to overlap. Judith Halberstam goes even further in commenting that the film is actually “homosocial,” a surprising observation given the dominance of the heteronormative romance in films of the long 1950s. Even so, Diane Waldman adds

that Gothic women's films generally “. . . place an unusual emphasis on the affirmation of feminine perception, interpretation, and lived experience” (29). The women in *The Birds* emphasize those same concepts. Their limitations, as well as their connections with one another demonstrate their growth, or rather their efforts to grow, even though advancement is often thwarted by forces beyond their control. Cultural and patriarchal influences are systemic impediments, while the uncontrollable threat of the attacking crows oppresses in a more immediate and vivid way. Like female characters over the two-century genealogy of the female Gothic, these women are on the brink of change, and each, in turn, is changing others. They are concurrently both victim and heroine as they struggle to resist or subvert cultural constraints and to test out new roles and representations available to them in the Kennedy era.

In many ways, Melanie Daniels is the classic Gothic heroine. Simultaneously a courageous adventurer and a hapless victim, she enacts the ambivalence of the times. In a sense, she is also the quintessential Kennedy era woman—full of positive qualities but demonstrating no actual career credentials. In the opening scene she is portrayed as rich, but her wealth is attributable to her father's money. Melanie is attractive, well dressed, flirtatious, and supremely confident, even entitled. She possesses assertive qualities that patriarchal culture clearly discourages in women. Robert Corber's assertion is well taken here, that bold women pursuing their desires in the long 1950s were viewed as even more culturally threatening than homosexuals (87).

In keeping with female Gothic tradition, Melanie winds up embodying the personas of both fearsome female and damsel in distress. Her notoriety is derived in part from a splash she made in the press by jumping naked into a fountain while on holiday in Italy. She applies the same playfulness to her aggressive pursuit of Mitch. Paglia goes so far as to call Melanie a “stalker” (*The Birds* 26-27), a label she also attributes to Annie. I find, however, that this use of the term suggests gender bias. When a woman is the pursuer and makes a romantic gesture, such as surprising Mitch with her choice of love birds as a birthday gift for his young sister, it may strike viewers as transgressive and aberrant. A man in pursuit of a woman, in contrast, is read as simply enacting a familiar gender role.

It is important in any case that upon Melanie's arrival in Bodega

Bay, the keeper of the general store refers to Mitch as one of Lydia's children. Up until that point Mitch has been portrayed as the successful lawyer who sees through Melanie's stratagems and is outwitting her. Residing in a big house all by itself across the bay, Mitch shares some traits with the historic Gothic Lord of the Manor. As Melanie will soon learn, however, and as I will illustrate elsewhere, Mitch is largely defined by his mother Lydia.

Apparently, a force to be reckoned with on both land and water, Melanie drives an expensive sports car, top down and way too fast. She seems to straighten the curves on the winding road to Bodega Bay, bending them to her will instead. Melanie likewise steers a boat quite capably, even while wearing a mink coat, high heels, and kid gloves. Her suit, however, despite its conventional suggestion of power and professionalism, seems to be a matter of mere show, since she has no professional identity. Melanie's choice of wardrobe is certainly not helpful in fighting off bird attacks. It becomes more torn and soiled as the story progresses. As Hellmann points out, Melanie appears to be reminiscent of Jacqueline Kennedy: "Hitchcock's glamorous and young, capable, somewhat madcap, but ultimately earnest heroine exhibits the style and spirit that Jacqueline Kennedy brought to the White House" (*The Birds* 99). In her expensive outfit she clearly comes across as a confident, cultured and well-educated upper-class woman. Her smart, pale green suit is a style that was often worn by Kennedy. As the garment becomes more tattered through her misadventures, it oddly and presciently calls up to a contemporary spectator the memory of the blood-stained pink suit that the first lady wore after her husband's murder. In that historic moment, Jacqueline Kennedy also embodied the Gothic trope of being both victim and heroine.

As we learn later, Melanie is more than her reputation as a rebellious playgirl jumping into fountains. Midway through the film she reveals to Mitch a woebegone self-assessment. Abandoned by her mother as a child, Melanie now seeks meaning by volunteering for Travelers Aid, financing the education of a foreign child, and taking a semantics course at Berkeley. Her means of engaging with the world around her gives Melanie much in common with women of the day, as they begin to assume public roles and develop a sense of agency through volunteer work and humanitarian endeavors. As Hellmann points out in his analysis of topical features of the film, she seems to

be enacting JFK's call to public service (*The Birds* 102). But Mitch fails to take her good work seriously. He has an established professional identity as a lawyer, whereas she, like most American women of that time, has no career credentials.

We cannot ignore Melanie's attractive appearance. As a Hitchcock blonde, she embodies a special mystique seen in a parade of his actresses: Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*, Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, Janet Leigh in *Psycho*, and Tippi Hedren herself in the later film *Marnie*. Much of their allure is likely due to the rarity of the hair color and its angelic otherworldly connotations. Melanie, in one of the common tropes of the Gothic heroine, seems to have magical powers that bring about change. The bird attacks start with her arrival in Bodega Bay. The town appears to be less a place than an altered state, where roles turn upside down and inside out, creating chaos and disorder. In the end, the disruption drives her to a state of internal chaos, indeed to the brink of madness.

Melanie always seems to be a jump ahead of the others in spotting danger. Either she is simply brighter and quicker than other characters, or she has almost supernatural powers of prescience. For instance, in the opening sequence she looks quizzically at birds in Union Square, and later in the film she is the first to spot a small sparrow on the hearth of the Brenner house. It is Melanie who hears sounds in the attic that prompt her to investigate and subsequently to fall prey to a severe attack by the birds. Her closest female Gothic predecessor could well be the crafty and clever Jean Muir in Louisa May Alcott's story *Behind a Mask: Or, A Woman's Power*. Jean arrives at the Coventry country house and changes everyone before securing her place as Lady of the Manor. Melanie too changes everyone, or at least her arrival coincides with changes forced upon the town. However, Melanie is more vulnerable than Jean. True, she endears herself to Lydia, Annie, Cathy—and Mitch; yet whatever success she experiences comes less by conscious design than by blindly groping toward an ambiguous larger vision for her life.

Melanie repeatedly experiences physical confinement, which mirrors the psychological confinement of women in the female Gothic tradition, as well as during the Kennedy era transition. She is defenseless against the birds when she shuts herself inside the phone booth or seeks refuge in the car. Both tentatively protective interior

spaces, which offer only glass to shield her, prefigure the final assault in the attic, where she is surrounded by attacking birds. Tragically, she is confined at the end to the back seat of her own tiny sports car, the same emblem of top-down freedom that she once steered so confidently.

It is notable that Mitch repeatedly rescues Melanie. Rescuer status of course connotes power and control. As many critics have commented, the patriarchy and the family that she joins are not kind to her. Indeed, they come close to destroying her, as one can see from her physical and emotional trauma at the end of the film. Kyle William Bishop sees her “destroyed as an independent subject,” not by the birds, but by the patriarchal structure of the Brenner family (136). Judith Halberstam also sees Melanie at the end of the film “completely under his [Mitch’s] power.” Halberstam adds that “his mother has become her mother as she has become infantile” (131). She appears to have won over Mitch and his mother and sister, but earning a place in that family comes at a terrible price.

Conversely, I argue that with her head resting on Lydia’s shoulder in the final scene, Melanie, deprived of any maternal support of her own, at last benefits from a mother’s love and care. Two contemporary critics, Henri/etta Bensussen and Marian Moore, support this interpretation. Woven throughout their alignment of *The Birds* with the Book of Ruth is the understanding that Lydia and Melanie are a contemporary version of the Biblical figures Naomi and her loyal daughter-in-law Ruth. Melanie’s ersatz “family,” perhaps a harbinger of the blended or fractured families to come in the 1960s, consists of a widow and a portrait of her late husband; a son who acts as a husband and protector to his mother and father to his sister; Annie, a sort of stand-in for an aunt; and Cathy, a somewhat motherless child, whom Lydia keeps at an emotional distance. Melanie seems to seek out meaningful connections with them all. She is a care provider for Lydia, demonstrated, for example, by making tea. Melanie mothers Cathy and befriends Annie, and she acts as helpmeet for Mitch as he tacks the windows closed in anticipation of the coming attack. Melanie’s non-biological family affiliation is not an uncommon relationship in the Gothic genre. Henry James prefigured a similar ersatz family in his horror novella *The Turn of the Screw*, in which servants, children, and a governess become a “family” not unlike Hunter’s odd collection of personalities in *The Birds*.

The house itself, like the family, seems patched together and is easily penetrated by the avian hordes. Shards of broken teacups and window glass litter the interior, the jagged indicators of both domestic fragility and defenseless exposure to outside forces. Melanie's daring exploration of the attic follows the Gothic tradition of *Jane Eyre's* Bertha and is also reminiscent of the heroine of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," both of whom are confined in the attic. In keeping with that convention, Melanie, in a traumatized state, is overwhelmed by birds and driven to the verge of insanity. The breakdown of a shattered mind in a shattered house portends the breakdown of the traditional family during the domestic changes that will follow in the 1960s.

Critical reception of the film often points out that Mitch infantilizes Melanie. That aspect of their interaction first appears in the vein of the romantic comedy, when Mitch tries to cut her down to size at the bird shop (Halberstam qtd. in Bishop 144). The tendency becomes more conspicuous as the film progresses, for example, in the conversation at the birthday party, when Mitch elicits the story of Melanie's absent mother, after which Melanie comments in mock-meek fashion, "I'll go now and join the other children at the party." It is important to keep in mind, however, that Mitch changes as the film progresses. Initially an arrogant and confrontational prosecutor in his encounters with Melanie, his character gradually mellows and assumes similarities to hers, as he too becomes a caretaker for all the others.

In addition, Mitch exhibits qualities that are shared by John Kennedy. As Raubicheck and Srebnick remark, "Hunter has created a knightly Mitch, strong, capable, authoritative, and protective" (98). Historians of the era, such as John Hellmann, in *The Kennedy Obsession*, as well as Simona Čupić in "The First Political Superstar: JFK as the New Image of History (1960-63)," have documented how Kennedy's image of patrician masculinity was intentionally crafted to promote his quest for the presidency and how it became an enduring cultural ideal. As attractive a man as Mitch may be, his patronizing behavior toward Melanie is initially an annoying pattern. However, his demeanor changes after the bird attacks. For instance, conventional patriarchal attitudes toward ex-girlfriends disappear as Mitch tenderly carries the dead Annie inside her house. Toward the end of the film, his mother demands the sort of absolute assurance of masculine protection that

her dead husband once provided. When she presses her son to explain what they will do, the formerly brash Mitch responds by saying, “I don’t know.” Mitch’s changed character presages the far-less rigid masculine roles that will emerge in the 1960s.

The scenes in the pet store and in The Tides Restaurant provide glimpses of other characters from the Kennedy era, all of whom act as foils for Melanie. In the opening scene in the bird shop, Mrs. MacGruder, the clerk, tells Melanie that the myna birds are not yet available. Melanie, quite self-assured and in control of the interaction, decisively instructs her to deliver them to her. That same self-confidence is on display in The Tides, where she encounters Mrs. Bundy, the ornithologist. As a masculine woman, Mrs. Bundy appears to be coded as a lesbian, according to the parameters of gender identity as it was understood at the time. She is dressed in a fitted maroon suit from the 1940s, smokes, and speaks sonorously and authoritatively. As a voice of science and reason, the ornithologist declares that the bird attacks that Melanie describes are simply impossible within rationalist terms. Her flat-out denial offers nothing constructive to help the imperiled town, any more than does the drunken doomsayer’s repeated prophecy, “It’s the end of the world!” The two figures suggest that the era of patriarchal authority is over, whether through science or religion. The old way of thinking has no useful answers to guide society in its current confusion and disorder. Melanie listens to both the rational and irrational messages of these townspeople, but she is not dissuaded from telephoning Mitch and alerting others to the danger. After the bird attack at the service station, another minor character, a terrified mother, bypasses reason and summons the old superstitious trope of blaming an outsider and a woman for misfortune. Clutching her children, the mother accuses Melanie of being responsible for the bird attacks. Viewers see the woman in close-up from Melanie’s perspective: “I think you’re the cause of all this. I think you’re evil! Evil!” In response, Melanie vigorously slaps her. Indeed, Melanie is an agent of Gothic change, but not in the way the mother thinks. In all these interactions with minor figures, Melanie comes across as a thoroughly modern, independent woman of the Kennedy era: level-headed, confident, and unafraid. She is a harbinger of revolutionary cultural change.

The two other main adult women characters are stymied within

their patriarchal confines. Their relationship with Melanie changes them and aids in their attempts to grow or to escape their socially constructed cages. Mitch's mother, Lydia Brenner, is identified in many contemporary analyses of the film as monstrous. She is surely one of a long line of diabolical mothers—possessive of their sons and threatened by younger women. Such toxic maternal influences create a staple situation in Gothic films during the long 1950s. Mrs. Bates in *Psycho* is, of course, one of the most extreme cases, but the list includes several moms in the Southern Gothic film tradition, such as Mrs. Venable in *Suddenly, Last Summer*. Another example appears in *The Long, Hot Summer*, in which the mother of Clara's beau Alan (identified as a "mama's boy") likewise finds a comfortable fit in the monster category. The popular psychoanalytic view of the period was still being influenced by Philip Wylie's 1942 *A Generation of Vipers*, which coined the term "momism." This perspective held that matriarchal power over the children found expression, in part, through emasculating or psychologically devouring the sons. Bernard F. Dick finds that "terrible mothers" in Hitchcock's corpus even predate Wylie's conceptualization, extending as far back as 1935 with *The 39 Steps*, and occurring in virtually every film thereafter (239).

Though continuing to cling to Mitch, her source of strength after her husband's death, Lydia begins to change in the scene where Melanie brings her tea. The tranquil encounter is part of Lydia's recovery from the grotesque horror of having stumbled across the corpse of her neighbor, whose eyes had been pecked out. Rattled to uncharacteristic candidness in her state of shock, Lydia confides her vulnerability to Melanie and identifies its auspices in her husband's death. "It's terrible how you depend on someone for strength," she confesses. Lydia admits to several other afflictions and shortcomings during the conversation, including her recognition that her husband understood children better than she does. She has been chronically anxious since his death and remarks to Melanie, "I'd love to be able to relax, to sleep." Her openness corroborates Annie's earlier comment to Melanie that Lydia does not possess the strength to face life alone, and that the prospect of having to do so is what she fears. As a result, Lydia turns to Melanie as a source of strength, a role that Melanie comfortably and eagerly assumes. When she asks Melanie to check on her daughter Cathy at school, Lydia's awareness has finally risen to the

point of joining Melanie and Annie in grasping the danger that the birds pose. This awareness is unusual in a village where many in the populace appear to be in denial, and it reveals that Lydia is not simply an evil mother; rather she is a perceptive woman who is also a victim of the old patriarchal order.

Later, as the birds assault the house, Lydia comes close to berating Mitch in monstrous mother style when she goads him, “You don’t know . . . your father knew.” She then catches herself before she goes too far. One has the sense that, since her husband’s death, all her emotion has been bound up in fear and invested in a desperate attachment to Mitch. However, instead of looking to a model of masculinity that her husband represented, she corrects her course and perceives glimmerings of something new. It is possible that she is discovering some inner strength of her own. In the final scene, we see her caring for young Cathy and even for Melanie, who rests on her shoulder and turns to her for maternal nurturing. Lydia also changes by opening up emotionally to those who need her. She is developing new capacities within herself, internal resources that would likely have remained inaccessible had her husband lived, had Melanie not arrived on the scene, and had the attacking birds not compelled her to grow and change. Like the experience of so many women in the Kennedy era, change is thrust upon her.

Finally, there is Annie Hayworth, the third figure of the adult female triumvirate. As an educated woman, she inhabits a Gothic role often occupied by a governess and a teacher of children, though she is not quite the social equal of Mitch or Melanie. Annie too pursued Mitch to Bodega Bay, after apparently having met him in San Francisco. In her first scene with Melanie, she explains evasively, “A friend invited me up for a weekend a long time ago.” Then Annie follows with a veiled warning for Melanie. She is convinced that Lydia prevented her from marrying Mitch because she felt threatened by her and feared being replaced and abandoned. In fact, tellingly, she goes even further in conjecturing why Mitch never broke free of Lydia: “Maybe that’s because there’s never been anything between Mitch and any girl.” Annie’s affirmation of Mitch’s “confirmed bachelor” status and her opinion of him as a devoted son to an overbearing mother may suggest that he is gay. Certainly, the narrative sketches his sexuality as compromised and ambiguous, something other than that of a fixed

heterosexual subject. This characterization is in keeping with Modleski's conclusions about the frequent ambiguity of gender identities among Hitchcock's characters (2). The so-called "effeminate male," son of a monstrous mother, was a stock character in the era's Gothic films. Even though the Kinsey report suggested that gender was much more indeterminate than was popularly believed, film consistently presented gender identity in binary terms and represented gender inversion as a horrifying prospect that could even endanger national security (Corber 83, 85). As I have illustrated, Lydia certainly resembles the overbearing "monstrous mothers" of many 1950s melodramas. Part of that maternal characterization was the insinuation that the blame for "feminized" sons, usually coded gay, lay with the mother. Yet, in *The Birds*, this suggestion falls short of outright tagging and blame. Instead, the narrative simply allows the possibility of homosexuality to hover (as it were) as one possible explanation for Mitch's reluctance to marry. The abstention from an easy masculine or feminine, straight or gay characterization of Mitch is a noteworthy aspect of the screenplay; it came at a time when youthful marriage was the norm, and unmarried men in their thirties were rare.

Annie eventually becomes friends with Lydia, but Lydia welcomes the friendship only after she no longer feels threatened by her younger counterpart. Why Lydia's attitude changes is unclear, but it is likely that Annie ceases to be a threat once it is obvious that she is no longer an object of Mitch's desire. Annie also acts as a narrator of sorts, supplying us with the only history that we have of the relationship between Lydia and Mitch. The questionable reliability of a narrator who is a rejected ex-girlfriend of Mitch certainly adds to the ambiguity of the story line.

Annie, for her part, seems to embrace a typical role made available to her in the Kennedy era. She chooses a secluded life as a schoolteacher in Bodega Bay, a nurturer of other people's children. Though it may be said that her acceptance of a societally determined path shows surrender or compromise, or that she avoids growth, Annie nonetheless redefines traditional roles. Despite being an outsider, she joins Mitch, Lydia, and Cathy to become a member of the ersatz family, though not in the marital role that she initially sought. In fact, in the approaching social changes of the 1960s, a variety of queer or non-normative possibilities for friendships between men and

women will be explored, as will a variety of unconventional roles for women. Like other small towns outside San Francisco, Bodega Bay is an artist's colony, an affordable destination for bohemians escaping the city. It is a site where Annie can live as she wishes, at least to a considerable extent. Indeed, with her earth mother persona and love of gardening, she appears as a sort of proto-hippie, adhering to the lifestyle and philosophy that years later will draw youth from across the country to San Francisco. From a feminist perspective on the Kennedy era, Annie's choices are far less pitiable than they may initially seem, especially when compared to traditional patriarchal roles for women.

In the first of Annie's two significant scenes with Melanie, the two women balance feelings of rivalry and camaraderie. Both are drawn to Mitch, but their attraction is couched in the discreet behavior of educated and sophisticated urbanites. Annie offers advice and encouragement—even permission—to pursue Mitch, and the two become friends. Her association with Melanie allows Annie to explore new connections and identifications that lie outside the stereotypical love triangle. Even so, as the cast-off woman, Annie's role is reminiscent of other subsidiary women in Hitchcock's films of the long 1950s. In *Vertigo*, for example, Scottie's ex-girlfriend Midge, played by Barbara Bel Geddes, serves as a contrast to Kim Novak's character Madeleine, who is another mysterious and alluring Hitchcock blonde. Somewhat frumpy, practical, and asexual, Midge cares for Scottie in a maternal way and maintains a close friendship with him. In *Rear Window*, Stella, played by Thelma Ritter, is not an ex-girlfriend. Nonetheless, her persona as a wise-cracking brunette stands in deliberate contrast to the cool and sophisticated Lisa, played by Grace Kelly. Even in *Marnie*, Tippi Hedren's role as the mysterious blonde and the main love interest of Mark, is gently countered by the brunette Lil, played by Diane Baker, a former sister-in-law with romantic designs on the same man. Hitchcock had a penchant for setting up triangles that consisted of two women with mutual interest in the same man; the woman in the supporting female role was always coded as less attractive than the woman in the leading role.

Annie, however, is more complex than these other secondary women characters and is a departure from their predictable plainness. It is likely that the actress Suzanne Pleshette, throughout her personal interactions with the director, was responsible for the colorful makeover

of a normally pallid character. In a 2012 interview with Pleshette and other actresses from Hitchcock films, she revealed that it was only when Hitchcock met her that he decided Annie would have a romantic relationship with Mitch (Garrett 87). Chameleon-like, Annie's identity seems to shift between different character types. On the one hand, she is an earth mother type, always appearing in simple colors and practical clothes, gardening, teaching, and helping prepare Cathy's birthday celebration. (It is in this persona that she expresses strong feelings for Mitch.) She stayed in Bodega Bay, because, as she puts it, "I wanted to be near Mitch," and confesses, "I still like him a hell of a lot."

On the other hand, Annie is far from demure. Not only does she drink (possibly to excess), but she also swears, chain-smokes, offers witty ironic commentary on the ongoing action—her husky voice exudes a dark, lusty sensuality. These bawdy traits offer a deliberate contrast to Melanie's more graceful breeziness and enable Annie to act on occasion as a foil for the leading female character. Because she embodies a different kind of sexual attractiveness, it is difficult for a theater audience to read Annie and her relationship to Mitch in the usual patriarchal terms. Annie is more than merely a disempowered and discarded former lover.

With respect to Melanie, Annie is not so much a Gothic double as a worthy opponent. Yet, she is also an ally. The script portrays Annie and Melanie as equally perceptive and intelligent. In their second scene together, the two women are framed filling the screen shot. They first look at a dead gull that has slammed into Annie's front door and then questioningly at each other. Before other characters suspect that anything is seriously amiss, Annie and Melanie are aware that the strange behavior of the birds is ominously uncanny. Later, when the birds attack at the birthday party, Annie looks meaningfully at Melanie and comments in a knowing tone, "That makes three." Of course, in the end, Annie lies splayed on the steps of her porch, a fate presaged by the dead bird at that same location in the previous scene. The grotesque position in which she is depicted is in stark contrast to the warm and sensual woman that she was in life. Annie's demise is unquestionably a severe punishment for a seemingly sympathetic character. Nonetheless, in the rivalry for Mitch's affections, one of the contestants has been slain. One can also read the violent death as a sinister warning for Melanie. The surviving woman may succeed with

Mitch, but as Annie's, and later Melanie's experience shows, bonding with Mitch is no guarantee of safety. In any case, Melanie ends up playing the dual roles of victim and heroine. Again, *The Birds* honors a tradition kept by many women protagonists in the female Gothic works that preceded it.

The character of Cathy Brenner, the principal child in the film, rounds out the group of four female characters, all connected to Mitch and all subject to the terror of the avian attacks. She too is caught up in coming social change, but Cathy is doubly beset by chaos in her family and in her community. She is growing up in a shattered and disordered family with a mother whose anxiety over functioning without a husband interferes with motherly care. As mentioned, Lydia relies on her grown son and on the memory of her husband, a patriarch who still looms over the family from his portrait in the living room. So Cathy, like Melanie and perhaps Annie, is also a metaphorical orphan. She relies on her brother Mitch to be a father figure and turns to her teacher Annie and friend Melanie for maternal nurturing. With the arrival of Melanie, the Brenner family seems to expand into two nuclear family units: both pairs, Lydia and Mitch and Melanie and Mitch, act as parents to her. Despite the proliferation of parental figures, Cathy seems unsure as to where to go for comfort. During the evening of the bird attacks, she first runs to Melanie, then to Lydia. In this respect, the Brenner household seems to prefigure the expansion of the concept of family in the communes and the blended families that are to come in later years. Like other members of the generation of baby boomer children growing up in the Kennedy era, Cathy is facing insecurities caused by the demise of the nuclear family arrangement. She is witnessing very different female role models: her mother, a male-dependent woman struggling to cope for herself, and Melanie and Annie who are more independent.

In addition to the domestic disorder of her family, Cathy is subject to the chaos and fear of the avian attacks on her community. A child cannot be protected in unstable times; indeed, we see her school, her outdoor birthday party, and finally, her house under attack. With all sense of security removed, she is a victim subject to a full display of horrors. Cathy sees Annie's corpse and must carry on alone in Annie's house until rescued by Mitch and Melanie. Later, the child braves the exodus from the Brenner home together with Melanie, one

of her would-be protectors, who has been gravely injured. Despite these traumas, she does not lose her grip on rationality. Rather than yielding to hysteria during her distress, Cathy appears to mature toward adulthood, albeit with a jarringly punctured illusion of childhood as a period of innocence.

Debbie C. Olson's research on children in contemporary cinema demonstrates that adults in Hitchcock's films are often unable to protect children from the horrors of the modern world. The murderous uncle in *Shadow of a Doubt* stands out as a prime example. *The Birds* is no exception to the list of Hitchcock's films in which children are victims. Cathy and other children are terrified and wounded, and some are presumably killed by the birds. Jason McEntee adds that children in Hitchcock's American films (*Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Trouble with Harry*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *The Birds*) are generally depicted as “. . . vessels to mirror societal anxiety about the morally-dubious future . . .”(31). In other words, American euphoria at emerging victorious in World War II and being in the moral right is counterbalanced by an increasingly dark anxiety around nuclear proliferation and a possible nuclear holocaust. Americans in the Kennedy era also experienced a moral crisis around American expansionism in the early stages of the Vietnam War. Further unease arose from unrest around social changes for women and people of color, as well as from the deteriorating stability of the American nuclear family.

Women's roles will change dramatically in the 1960s. Cathy, if she lives, will be part of a generation of women breaking away from the limited paths available to the women of her childhood. After all, in their flight, the portrait of the family patriarch is notably left behind—he cannot help them now. Critics have noted the irony at film's end, when the members of the “family” crowd into Melanie's sports car with little but the clothes on their backs. Cathy, however, insists that they take the love birds by saying, “They haven't done anything.” Her argument has been read as a piece of childhood innocence surviving intact, as evidence of her continuing belief in love or, perhaps, the triumph of hope over experience. But, when considered within the terms of coming social change, her gesture seems both innocent and knowing. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act will reframe legal possibilities for people of color, as well as for women and other groups. Part of the reframing includes combatting prejudice by seeing individuals on their

own terms, rather than as stereotypes. Cathy exhibits this principle in her unwillingness to condemn the love birds and in her understanding that they are not of the same evil feather as the attackers. As Olson observes, children in Hitchcock's films often seem more knowing than the adults (216). By defending the caged pets with heroic determination, even during avian-induced trauma, Cathy probably saves the love birds' lives. In the end, like Melanie and Annie, she too is both victim and heroine in the tradition of the female Gothic.

In conclusion, in this Kennedy era female Gothic tale, the women feel the winds of coming change and find ways to grow and to challenge the frustrating stereotypes and limiting roles that gender has assigned them. Melanie, once a free-flying playgirl, dares to imagine a role as Mitch's partner, as a member of the Brenner family, and as a citizen in a community. Annie is not irrevocably alienated from the Brenner family by her position as a rejected girlfriend of Mitch; rather she assumes a unique role as honorary aunt in a non-traditionally reconstituted family, even as she also finds purpose in nurturing school children. Lydia, a widow utterly dependent on her husband's strength, departs from the folly of twisting her son into a vicarious version of her husband. She begins to discover within herself a personal capacity for nurturing. Cathy, after experiencing major devastation, including Annie's death and the destruction of the Brenner home, argues persuasively from an adult moral perspective to save the love birds. Granted, the characters all pay a steep price for their growth—Annie most of all—yet, they are, in classic female Gothic fashion, in the end, *both* victims and heroines. For however brief a time, they explore new feminine roles that are beginning to open for them in the Kennedy era.

There is much critical disagreement about the implications of the final scene of the film and about the likely future of the women. For example, Patrick O'Donnell sees the patriarchy as triumphant when he writes that "The nuclear family is redeemed, renucleated, though in an asymmetrical way . . ." (58). Lee Edelman asserts that ". . . the film concludes inconclusively . . ." with Melanie subdued after having been figuratively raped in the attic attack (253). Edelman suggests a cliffhanger aspect to the film's ending, by calling attention to what Hitchcock himself said in an interview with Francois Truffaut, in that there is an ominous hum in the soundtrack, as if the birds may strike at any minute (297). My conclusions, however, align with

those of Modleski who, in her analysis of Hitchcock films, takes issue with the idea that the repression of women in patriarchal cinema is total (120). I maintain that these women are *not* totally defeated by a patriarchy implacably reinscribing itself. From the perspective of the female Gothic, the surviving women may potentially begin new lives in a changing decade. That is, they may survive the very ambiguous final shots of the carload of characters moving stealthily through a landscape of thousands of birds, temporarily calm, but perched on every surface and ready for flight. Melanie, the adventurous Gothic heroine, with her seemingly supernatural ability to change others and herself, does indeed wind up injured and half mad, wedged within the confines of this unorthodox '60s family. However, I would not count Melanie out just yet. After all, this is the woman who, after a pointless dip in a European fountain, climbed out and launched an effort to fund a foreign child's education. She has survived several vicious bird attacks and, along with Cathy, represents hope. She may be down, but certainly not out.

If the Brenner car manages to creep out of danger, Melanie and Cathy may participate in the coming revolutionary changes for women in San Francisco, the epicenter of social change in the 1960s. In the end, after all, that is where they are headed.

NOTES

¹ With "the long 1950s" I refer specifically to 1946-64, i.e., from the end of World War II through the Kennedy presidency.

² The term "female Gothic" was coined by Ellen Moers, author of *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Oxford UP, 1976). The designation has been much contested over the last several decades—and rightly so—because it fails to acknowledge either the plurality of gender, or the intersectionality of gender with race, ethnicity, class, and other factors. Yet, no more appropriate term has emerged to take its place, so I use female Gothic to refer to a genre stretching back over two centuries in the Anglo-American tradition.

³ The wave metaphor was first suggested by Martha Weinman Lear. "The Second Feminist Wave." *New York Times*. 10 Mar., 1968, section SM, p. 24.

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