

# The Aesthetics of the Acousmatics in the Fall of the House of Usher

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**Abstract:** In close reading of the incarnations of acousmatic sounds as they are artfully employed in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, this paper attempts to elucidate Poe's maneuver of diverse soundscapes in creating a type of acousmatic aesthetics. The capacity of sounds in the construction of Gothic atmosphere, or as an beacon in depicting the nervous breakdown of the protagonist "Roderick Usher" will be examined specifically. Poe's sonic representations in *The Fall of the House of Usher* unfold panoramic and measured use of sounds, and the certain amount, though not tremendous, of ink has also presented scenes flourished with soundscapes and any less attention drawn to those perspectives would breed a want of understanding his subtle design in the flow of the novel. Several registers that sounds and voices have been endowed with in assuming the role of a necessary actor which appears in Gothic literature like acousmatic aesthetics, timbral sublime, excessive feelings, terror through disembodied sounds, obscurity are here to dissected to stress the wise manifestations of sounds in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

**Keywords:** The Fall of the House of Usher; Sounds; Gothic; Acousmatic aesthetics; Edgar Allan Poe

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## 1. Introduction

Voices and sounds, given their inherent traits of "sometimes" and the absence of "fixedness" compared with visual representations in a text(Passey, 2016, p. 199)<sup>[9]</sup>, bear undeniable value for Gothic writers to exert excessive or horror and terror feelings on readers. Serving as a powerful company to visual rhetoric, the acousmatic landscape is a frequently rendered technique in displaying the confluence between the humane senses and language structures, and in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the recurring narratives about psychological nervousness, terror brought about by sounds are given many Poe's words. According to Townshend (2005)<sup>[11]</sup>, for the Gothic genre, characters in the story are generally deprived of their power in wielding their visual faculty, leading to sounds prevailing over all other senses. Sensory deprivation is usually comparable with the formation of terror, especially in darkness, "the sounds had renewed their terror"(Radcliff, 1796, p. 101)<sup>[10]</sup>. Unpredictable is the sonic symbol that tracing or measuring it in textual structures or in the narrative level could fail which further triggers terror. Passey(2016) also states the fact that sounds could serve "the same effect as darkness" (p. 199)<sup>[9]</sup>, and it is unlikely to make limits of sounds in spatial or temporal scope, given the fact that sound may emanate from nowhere or somewhere. Acousmatic symbols impose excessive feelings swaying characters' physical or psychological states on both readers and the ones experiencing the sounds and thus constructing the uncanny in Gothic.

Fielding(1821)<sup>[5]</sup> describes the excess of sensibility which necessitates the most proper presence of sounds, underlying the ludicrousness of the sublime structure in Gothic genre. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, ever since it revealed itself in 1839, has garnered tremendous attention in the field from a great range of perspectives. In the elaborate unfolding of the Gothic tale, Poe has borrowed elements from productions by main Gothic writers like Walpole, Radcliffe, and others (Cook, 2012)<sup>[3]</sup>.

Researches concerned with Poe's strategies of shaping characters have witnessed blooming augment in recent years. Marita Nadal proposes that the transgenerational or "repressed" burdensome recollection which demonstrates little possibility of recovery using deliberate means has the potential to alter the living presence of Roderick Usher (cited in Weisheng, 2018)<sup>[13]</sup>. As for lady Madeline, her uncanny return from her tomb has been interpreted as disavowal of the fatherhood-dominated world endorsed by her brother Roderick Usher. In Hirsch and Thompson (1973)<sup>[7]</sup>, the modification constructed through raising schism between reason and unreasonableness to creating the Gothic tale by Poe in his work *The Fall of the House of Usher* has also been given analysis. Typical Gothic elements featuring a past malediction, a haunted mansion, a physically and psychologically trapped lady, the uncanny return of a corpse are all Poe's strategies in mediating the layout of terror in the tale. The effect of acousmatic sounds can be added to this list. Though intangible could be the sounds which feature fluidity, acousmatic sound possesses strength so powerful that Poe has drawn on its intangibility and many other traits in the generation of excessive feelings and terror. In what follows, the paper will provide a reading of Poe's artistic maneuver of sounds in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, not as a simple complement to visual landscapes but as a textual representation of acousmatic aesthetics, the sublime and excess feelings.

## 2. The disembodied sounds, obscurity

Disembodied sounds maintain an important academic agency for researchers to interpret Gothic literature, especially for Radcliffe's works, disembodied voices are often "mistrusted and its source misplaced" (Foley, 2016, p. 4)<sup>[6]</sup>. The source of acoustic voices or sounds tends to be veiled not only by concrete things but also by the blackness of the nighttime (Wikle, 2020)<sup>[14]</sup>. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, one night after laying Miss Madeleine's body in the cellar for days, the narrator "I" was trapped into unspeakable horror and irrepressible psychological unsettling which was raised by disembodied sounds:

I know not why, except that an instinctive spirit prompted me- to certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals, I knew not whence (Edgar Allan Poe, 2015, p. 131).

The separation between sounds and their origins represented through textual format demonstrates the quality of being uneasy to readers, which is usually employed as a narrative strategy in strengthening the "supernatural excess" that penetrates the Gothic literature (Wikle, 2020)<sup>[14]</sup>. When the source of the sounds is out of reach, a certain fissure has been left for both readers and characters in the tale to strive to repair using their imagination which would sometimes lead the sourceless sounds to supernatural agencies like ghosts or specters. Poe's writing of the narrator in "Usher" experiencing sounds that are "low and indefinite sounds" or "I knew not whence" (Edgar Allan Poe, 2015, p. 131)<sup>[4]</sup>, specifically highlights the very effect of splitting the soundscape from its sight in stimulating the imagination to complement the sensory deprivation caused by the asymmetrical relations between acoustic registers and sources. As per Burke (1767)<sup>[2]</sup>, supernatural entity or appearances will be allowed to be envisaged by imagination as long as the sight is withheld, and accordingly, Poe has wielded the strategy to endow the very existence of disembodied voices with the attribute of varied accounts, and has provided the gap for readers to fill in with their imagination. That readers being required to imagine the soundscape, or to put together memories of sound explains the inherent Gothic attribute of the texted representation of sound.

Disembodied sounds abound in the flow of the narration. In a scene when the narrator seeks to comfort the unsettling mental disorder of the protagonist Roderick in a "tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night" (Edgar Allan Poe, 2015, p. 132)<sup>[4]</sup> via reading a story in the book "Mad Trist", "the echo of the very cracking and ripping sound" was heard after the narrator finished a part of the story, and this sound is described as "stifled and dull". Poe's use of disembodied acousmatics resonates with Ann Radcliffe's implement of obscured sounds. In Radcliffe's novels, obscurity has been applied as the instrumentality for sound to untap its potential in creating sublime terror (Foley 2016<sup>[6]</sup>; Passey 2016<sup>[9]</sup>). Obscured voice or sound solidifies its role as an indispensable part of the

“narrative fabric, representing dark, echoing, and terrifying environments” in Radcliffe’s Gothic novels (Wikle, 2020, p. 19)<sup>[14]</sup>, for example, in *A Sicilian Roman* (Radcliffe, 1796)<sup>[10]</sup>, the mother’s moans to his son’s ears when he is imprisoned in the vault tend to be imputed to supernatural origins, and thus might redouble the agony of the character’s physical enchainment. The acoustic presence whose source is misplaced as a means of intensifying the narrator’s feeling of “intense sentiment of horror (Edgar Allan Poe, 2015, p, 131)<sup>[4]</sup>” and Roderick Usher’s status of being “mental disorder” is the evidence of Poe’s rendering of obscured or disembodied sounds as auditory persecution. Roderick Usher is overwhelmed by recalcitrant mournfulness deepened with his excessively sensible faculty, on the edge of madness, every recurring sound, being the “rending of her coffin” or “the grating of the iron hinges”, would seismically drive his each sense to extreme stimulation.

### 3. Timbral sublime, excess of feeling

Aesthetic theory of contemporary Gothic has perennially been acknowledged alive in Poe’s works which involves the mechanism of sublime and delight analogous with Burke’s theory and others’ from the period (Cook, 2012)<sup>[3]</sup>. Edmund Burke is widely recognized as the most authoritative esthetician of the Gothic sublime in the eighteenth century, and his treatise explores the essence of sublime which has demonstrated vast potential in enlightening considerable ensuing readings (Wikle, 2020)<sup>[14]</sup>. Burke (1767)<sup>[2]</sup> described sublime in novels as a synchronous sensory experience of terror and joy brought about by overwhelming or excessive feeling of fear, or by breathtaking magnificence of sights. The sublime landscape in *The Fall of the House of Usher* has already attracted researchers’ efforts. Zimmerman (2007)<sup>[15]</sup> states the narrator’s nascent fear rising from approaching the sickening ambience of the House of Usher and its cursed surroundings all suggests the implication of sublime. Evidences have that Poe’s detailed erudition and awareness of Burke’s work *Enquiry* have accompanied the release of most of Poe’s works (Ljungquist, 1984)<sup>[8]</sup>, in this sense, Poe wisely resorts to Burkean sublime in the narration of the “Usher”, combining with primary Burke’ concepts to construct the environs of terror and apocalyptic sublime (Cook, 2012)<sup>[3]</sup>. Poe addresses acousmatic landscapes in details which can be told from the great amount of inks in the tale in rendering sounds to achieve sublime. “The noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood”, and “harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming” coincide with Burke’s claim in his treatise *Enquiry* (Burke, 1767)<sup>[2]</sup> that the volume of sounds, or loudness, is integrally entwined with sublime, and steep deafening sounds are capable of overwhelming the subject, and of bringing halt to actions, and filling it with feeling of terror. Burke also enumerates a few natural activities that could stimulate sublime and excessive sensory feeling, such as the sounds of rolling thunders, storms, and cascade. In the “Usher”, the narrator and Roderick is over-whelmed by hearing oppression triggered by the timbral sublime when exposed to horrified, helpless encounters from the untraceable, and usually loud acoustic presence evoking an excess of sensory experience, and redoubling the horror atmosphere engulfing the protagonists and readers. Acousmatic representation possesses the capacity to breed sublime when endowed with the combination of qualities of loud or low, sharp or solemn, short or long, among which sublime can be best called upon when the sound is intensifying, loud and prolonged (Alison, 1790)<sup>[1]</sup>. The extreme loudness emanating from the subjects that “rattled” when the narrators stepped into the mansion of Usher progresses with the narration all the way to the “superhuman energy of his utterance”, “low moaning cry” accompanying the uncanny return of lady Madeline. Roderick Usher hears the impending steps of his sister lady Madeline beyond the storm who then enters into the room and dead thus are the twins. The narrator’s choosing of words, as in “morbid acuteness of senses”, “anomalous species of terror”, in depicting the mental status of Roderick Usher may carefully express the subtle influence that sounds have exerted on him. The horrible recognition achieved by Roderick’s concluding marks verifies the validity of his acute sentence in the insight of his sister’s resuscitation from the grave (Cook, 2012)<sup>[3]</sup>. The acousmatic sublime finally reaches its climax in backgrounding the the collapse of the house into the tarn with the narrator’s bare escaping.

## 4. Conclusion

The close reading of “Fall” in this paper attempts to illustrate the role that acousmatic representation has played in the progression of the story and in constructing a Gothic excessive feeling. The disembodied or obscured sounds, and timbral sublime, by which Poe has successfully demonstrated an acousmatic aesthetics, has been launched and resorted to in assisting the mysterious breakdown of both the traumatic tailspin of Roderick and the demise of the mansion. The unbridled terror of lady Madeline’s reanimation from the tomb, along with the uneasy status of the protagonists has been generously accomplished through the sublime and excessive feelings informing the readers watching the collapse of the house and the family. Poe’s multiple recurring elements of sounds, from the narrator hearing a low fuzzy sound, to Roderick’s shriek, to Madeline’s dying groans, could reasonably conclude that Poe is engaging with a soundscape in terrifying his readership. Poe’s sonic landscape are not merely a supplement to visual environment, but a means of understanding aesthetics from an acoustic perspective, and of expressing excessive feeling entangled with the Gothic genre in its capability to stimulate imagination.

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