The Guilty Fray of Sound in *Rope:*

Hitchcock’s *Rope* as an Auditory Adaptation of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Casual film watchers might not give as much heed to a film’s score and sound effects as to its plot and visual effects. However, sound plays an integral role in the way emotions of a story are portrayed and atmosphere is created. According to director Alfred Hitchcock, "careful use of sound can help strengthen the intensity of a situation" (qtd. in Cox and Neumeyer 19). Hearing, although perhaps not as intriguing to the casual viewer, has a “privileged place within embodied film theory” (Elliot 143) because, as viewers, we are faced with physical sound waves that “can be an insidious means of affective and semantic manipulation. . . [working] on us directly, physiologically” as well as influencing our perception (qtd. in Elliot 143). Whether there is a soundtrack, dialogue, or the sound of silence, the viewer is engulfed in an auditory world.

However, in literature, sound usually does not hold as privileged a position. Although literal sound effects are found in stories, and there are literary terms such as onomatopoeia to classify these sounds, aural effects typically don’t command a story the way that film does. For this reason, Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” is uniquely auditory focused because it is largely driven by the aural effects, real or hallucinatory, that the narrator hears and makes during the story. This unnamed narrator’s desire to kill the old man living with him is drenched in auditory descriptions, such as his obsession with the “dreadful silence of the old
house” (Poe 319) during the murder contrasted with the creaking of a lantern, the old man’s single shriek, and most notably, the man’s lingering beating heart that drives the narrator to confess his crime. Many critics have commented on the role that sound plays in the story. Clarke Frances argues that these sound “vibrations” that permeate his recounting of the story can be described as a function of gothic literature due to their psychological nature (Frances 206). Others see this experimentation with sound as intrinsically connected to the visual aspects of the story and refer to them as “sound images,” categorizing them with the visual terms of ekphrasis and hypotyposis (Toikkanen 33-53).

Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 film, Rope, also breaks apart from typical treatment of sound in film because it features no real soundtrack, with orchestrations only found during the beginning and ending credits. The only other music in the piece comes from the occasional radio noise in the background and the haunting piano melody played several times during the film by Farley Granger’s character, Phillip Morgan. This sparse soundtrack gives Rope a “silent” feel while still emphasizing dialogue and repeated sounds such as pouring drinks, doorbells, and phones ringing.

Some scholars have pointed out the similarities between Hitchcock’s Rope and Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” because of their plot and thematic similarities (Perry 119-123). Both stories take place solely in a confined living space during a short span of time. Each includes a man that has committed a seemingly illogical crime (driven by the ugliness of an eye or the alleged superiority over a being) and conceals the body in the house (under the floorboards or in a chest). Outsiders in both stories are then invited others into the house to socialize by the very spot that the murder was committed in hopes of “the wild audacity of [a] perfect triumph” (Poe 320). Phillip Granger’s paranoia and psychological trauma in the midst of these circumstances
parallels that of Poe’s narrator, which is unsurprising considering the influence that Poe had on Hitchcock. Hitchcock once wrote that “it’s because I liked Edgar Allan Poe’s stories so much that I began to make suspense films” (qtd. in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock* 104). Although scholars have mentioned the connection between the two works in terms of similar plot points, no one has yet discussed how *Rope* is an adaption of “The Tell-Tale Heart” due to its parallel of treatment sound. This is surprising due to the experimental nature of sound in both works. Both Poe’s unnamed narrator and Phillip are driven to madness by sounds on the crime scene and in return, create their own sounds as a release of their psychological guilt. The rest of this paper will focus on how the auditory elements of *Rope* are an adaption of “The Tell-Tale Heart” through the lenses of these works’ two characters.

It is important to note that in Hitchcock’s film the murder happens in the first scene, and in Poe’s story the narrator foretells that he will kill the old man in the second paragraph. Therefore, the suspense of these stories does not hinge on whether or not they will commit the murder as much as how their guilt and psychological trauma will propel their getting caught, through the sounds they hear and the sounds they make. In the opening of each text, the audience is immediately introduced to the importance of sound as a function of the story. In the first paragraph of “The Tell-Tale Heart” the narrator invites the audience to “Hearken!” to his tale (Poe 317). This draws the reader’s attention to the importance of listening, especially as he calls it a “story,” which suggests an oral tradition of listening (317). This invitation applies to both the quality of his voice, as he wants to demonstrate how “calmly” and “healthily” he “can tell you the whole story” (317), and also to the other auditory elements in the story, such as the beating of the heart. The narrator admits in this first paragraph that he “heard all things in the heaven and in the earth” as well as “many things in hell” (317). Thus, this invites his audience also to pay
attention to the other sounds introduced in the story, so that they can “listen” and discover the sounds from heaven, earth, and hell that he is hearing. It is only after the narrator invites the reader to “hearken” that he extends the invitation to “observe” showing how the auditory elements in his story play as significant a role as the visual aspects, if not even more so.

In the first several minutes of Rope, a similar call to “hearken” is given as the audience hears David’s murder before seeing it. Rope begins with the opening credits rolling over a shot of the street outside the apartment. A glorified version of the piano piece Mouvements Perpétuels no. 1 plays (the significance of which will be explored later in the paper) followed by a couple of establishing sounds such as the honking of car horns. However, these expected sounds are interrupted immediately by the noise of a two-second scream that occurs as the camera zooms in on the curtained window. This scream, coming from the murder victim, David, immediately draws in the attention of the viewer. The shot cuts to inside of the apartment, where it is almost completely silent for seventeen seconds as Brandon and Phillip strangle David. Thus, the viewer follows Poe’s pattern of hearkening to the sound of the scene, and then observing to see what happens next.

This reliance on sound is further exemplified as in both stories the murder takes place in a dark setting, impairing visual awareness. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the shutters of the old man’s room are closed, making it “black as pitch with the thick darkness” (Poe 318). The narrator’s lantern shines only on the man’s eye, the only thing he sees in the room. Therefore, the narrator must rely on his sense of hearing. Similarly, the old man cannot see in the dark and so when he hears the narrator in the room, the narrator imagines him justifying the sounds as “nothing but the wind in the chimney,” “a mouse crossing the floor," or "a cricket which has made a single
chirp” (318). Even after the old man has been murdered, the narrator works while the hours are dark, for by the time he finishes it is “still dark as midnight” (320).

Likewise, in *Rope*, the curtains are drawn in the first scene, so that the room has an eerie, dark lighting. After David falls limp, Brandon puts his hand on the victim’s chest to listen for the heartbeat, just as occurs in “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Because Brandon and Phillip would not be able to visually tell if David were dead, they must rely on the sound of David’s heart. After the murder, Brandon turns on a lamp, which Phillip commands him to turn off; as he wishes to stand in the dark to fully comprehend the weight of the crime they have just committed. This again deemphasizes the visual aspect of murder, while focusing on the sounds that have followed their crime. The next minute and a half feature very little dialogue and the audience is tuned in to the sounds of Phillip and Brandon’s breathing and the silence permeating the room. Some of these sounds of near silence, as Cox and Neumeyer point out, are associated with the psychological reactions that the characters have to the murders: “In the opening few minutes, for example, Brandon’s sigh and exhalation of the cigarette smoke are fundamental to the slow release of tension, being coded sounds with which we associate very readily” (Cox and Neumeyer 23). While Brandon’s sigh display his relief and pride of murdering David, Philip’s inability to speak that permeates this scene cues the audience into his much more guilty response.

In addition to the limitation of other senses because of the darkness of the murder scene, both Poe’s narrator and Phillip experience a heightening of the sense of hearing. Poe’s narrator describes that because of his madness, his “sense of hearing [was] acute” (Poe 317). This causes him to be hypersensitive to his environment as the sounds of the beating heart grow increasingly “louder” (Poe 319). Likewise, in Hitchcock’s film, Phillip is constantly startled by noises that he hears. He also listens intently to the conversations happening in the room. For example, when
David’s father enters the party and mistakes Kenneth for David, Phillip breaks a glass because he is so frightened by this verbal name confusion. Throughout the course of the movie, Phillip becomes increasingly intoxicated which also heightens his sensitivity to sound and makes him prone to overreact at any conversation that hints at his suspicious behavior. Progressively throughout these stories, both Phillip and Poe’s narrator’s sensitivity to sound becomes unbearable as other people enter the scene of the crime. Specifically the noises that Poe’s narrator hears that are bothersome are the ticking of a clock, the sound of a drum, and the thump of the heart. Parallels of these three sounds are found in Hitchcock’s film as well, through the character, Phillip.

The first time that Poe’s narrator hears the beating of the old man’s heart, he describes it as “a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton” which is a sound that “[he knows] well” (Poe 319). This heartbeat, described as a watch, shows how the narrator’s paranoia over the crime he is about to commit is constantly on his mind, as rhythmic as the ticking of a clock In Rope, the equivalent of this disturbing, rhythmic ticking is found in the intense scene in which Rupert turns on a metronome while Phillip is playing piano. Just like Poe’s narrator is familiar with the ticking of the watch, Phillip, as a concert pianist, would know the sound of the metronome well, showing his paranoia at everyday objects. A metronome is used to keep time in music, another parallel to the watch. The metronome’s ticking could represent either David or Phillip’s heart. Either interpretation shows that the metronome builds the tempo of the scene and reveals Phillip’s psychological unraveling. He becomes increasingly more agitated while it is on before finally shouting “I can’t play with that thing!” and ceasing to play. Additionally, Rupert is surprised that Phillip is using a metronome commenting, “I thought only beginners did.” The double meaning of this line could imply Phillip’s psychological
immaturity in his inability to handle the tension of the aftermath of a nietzschean murder, as opposed to the smoother Brandon. Phillip’s nerves become even more evident in context of the metronome, which is meant to keep time, yet his playing tempo increases during the scene.

In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” after Poe’s narrator compares the heartbeat to the ticking of a clock, he describes it as “the beating of a drum” which “stimulates the solider into courage” (Poe 319). This sound represents “an active and aggressive impact in producing the rhythmic vibration” (Clarke 208). This rhythmic aggression in Poe’s story parallels the prominent role that Phillip’s piano, an equally percussive instrument, has in Rope. Phillip would not likely be familiar with the drum beats of war, but being a concert pianist, the piano would be second nature to him. His music provides a sort of echo chamber of his own guilt as he repeats the same melody to drown out the other conversations of the party. He becomes flustered by the sound of his own playing especially when Rupert appears to notice his mistakes. Phillip becomes increasingly agitated that he cannot keep the tempo of the piece, because the mistakes that he hears constantly remind him how he is not able to stay calm after the murder in the presence of others.

The last metaphor that Poe’s narrator compares with the beating of the heart is the “ringing” that he hears. At first, he believes the ringing just to be in his own ears but then he thinks it is happening externally (Poe 320). Unlike “The Tell-Tale Heart,” wherein the narrator constantly hears the beating of the old man’s heart which puts him on edge, in Rope we have no indication that Phillip is literally hearing the beating or ringing of David’s heart. However, in terms of emotional connection, Phillip constantly hears the chatter of party in which all of the members make up the reverberation of the “heart” of David’s life: his father, aunt, girlfriend, best friend, and former school teacher. In fact, in the closing credits, these actors are listed in
relationship to David such as “his father,” “his girl,” etc. Thus, these voices that Phillip is surrounded by are an extension of David himself and therefore when the characters say lines with double meanings, it drives Phillip into hysteria. For example, David’s aunt reads his palms and remarks, “These hands will bring you great fame”; David’s friend Kenneth wishes him well on his recital by saying, “I hope you knock ‘em dead”; and Rupert comments about Phillip’s piano skills that “his touch has improved.” These lines suggest irony because Phillip has helped to strangle David, and although David is now dead, his closest associations still ring of David’s voice through their dialogue, much in the same way that the ringing of the old man’s heart is a constant reminder to Poe’s narrator of the crime. Phillip is also often put on edge by the literal ringing sounds in the apartment, such as David’s mother constantly calling on the phone and the ringing of the doorbell as the guests arrive to the party.

The real intensity of these stories comes not only because Poe’s narrator and Philip hear noises, but that these noises “drive [them] to uncontrollable terror” through physical actions (Poe 319). Guilt, as explored in this paper, presents itself in physical sounds and the inner turmoil of these characters is manifest also in the sounds that they create as means of distraction. This is seen very clearly in the last four paragraphs of the “The Tell-Tale Heart” when, in addition to hearing the beating of the heart, the narrator engages in unusual activity to make his own noise. This occurs when the police officers enter into the narrator’s house. Although the narrator is initially calm and cordial with these men, he becomes paranoid that they will discover the murder. He starts creating non-verbal noises that he believes will distract them such as pacing on the floor with “heavy strides,” and swinging his chair and “grat[ing] it on the boards” (Poe 320). His efforts are like fighting fire with fire, because these sounds do not serve to distract the police officers, but rather drive the narrator into further madness, leading to his confession. Similarly,
Phillip also breaks out in non-verbal expressions of guilt, perhaps even more so than in Poe’s story considering how his partner, Brandon does most of the talking to the guests in the film. Throughout the film, Phillip gasps and breaks glasses twice, once on accident, and once in an agitated show of suspicion.

In addition to nonverbal sounds, in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator gives much detail about the quality of his voice, as his dialogue with the policemen contribute to the noises that he makes as means of distraction. He doesn’t tell what he actually said to the policemen until the final lines of the story, but he does mention that he “raved,” “swore,” and “argued” (Poe 320). The manner in which he does so is “in a high key” and with a “heightened voice” (320). In a similar way, Phillip’s voice in Rope becomes louder and higher pitched as the fear of discovery approaches. In an article discussing the various musical qualities in Rope, Cox and Neumeyer analyze tone and pitch of the male voices in Rope in order to show the psychological strain associated with Phillip’s dialogue:

The three most intense scenes are the opening ten minutes, the closing ten minutes, and the scene in which Rupert questions Philip as he plays the piano (at c. 46:00). These are all striking in their exclusive use of male voices, without the background of female voices as commonly used elsewhere. Within this register, Philip's voice is the highest, depicting his nervousness and emotional strain. Brandon, on the other hand, generally maintains a lower and more resonant pitch, indicative of his more confident and relaxed approach to the situation. Rupert also has a lower Voice, depicting him similarly as a more calm and confident personality. (Cox and Neumyer 20-21)

This contrast of Phillip to the other males in the film highlights how the tone of Phillip’s voice is connected with his nervousness and guilt over the murder. One example of this is when Brandon
tells the story about Phillip’s handiwork in strangling chickens. Phillip stands up and starts to yell at him, falsely asserting that he had never strangled a chicken. Phillip’s steady escalation of loudness and pitch is especially evident towards the end of the film, when Rupert is piecing the murder together. Phillip drunkenly erupts in shouting the famous line, "Cat and mouse, cat and mouse. But which is the cat and which is the mouse?"

Furthermore, Phillip’s piano playing can also be representative of his voice, considering how Alfred Hitchcock said that “to describe a sound effect accurately, one has to imagine its equivalent in dialogue” (qtd. in Weis 17). This is especially relevant considering Phillip’s status as a concert pianist; his instrument is an organic form of expression for him. There has been a great deal of scholarship analyzing both the song that Phillip plays during the dinner party, and the way in which it is performed (Clifton, Thomas, Weis, etc.). Phillip plays the first movement of Francis Poulenc’s *Mouvements perpétuels* on three different occasions during the film. The selection of this piece is significant because it was not written for *Rope*, but was recommended to Hitchcock by screenwriter, Arthur Laurents (Sullivan 144). Francis Poulenc was a modern composer and his piece is early-minimalist piano solo that matches the modern experimental feel of the film. The use of the piece in the film is “spare and incisive” (Sullivan 144), included just enough so that the haunting melody lingers in your head, but sparse enough that each moment that Phillip plays it, it is significant.

Because *Mouvements perpétuels no.1* is a piano piece, it gives Phillip’s character a paradox, because on the surface, classical piano music seems calming and refined but the piece is played with the same hands that have just murdered. Hitchcock commonly created this “surprising paradox” in his films by “charac[her]iz[ing] his villains as cultured and well-mannered and then proceed[ing] to expose the superficiality of their refinement” when they
espouse unusual philosophies or actions (Weis 91). This is in complete alignment with Poe’s narrator who wants to convince his readers and the police officers of his sanity and confidence, while the nervous words that he speaks actually give him away. Likewise an analysis of Phillip’s dialogue, as expressed through his choice of song, reveal his guilty conscience. Historically, the piece Phillip plays, *Mouvements perpétuels no. 1*, was composed for school children and therefore has a “happy regressive child-like” main theme that is repetitious and “nondirectional and nonconclusional” (Thomas 283). However, mixed in with this theme is a dissonant version of the opening melody which gives the piece a constant back and forth movement between a bright and an eerie sound, as facilitated by its lack of key signature.

The beginning of the movie plays a full orchestrated version of the piece, but inside the apartment Phillip plays it alone on the piano. In light of comparing the nature of the piece with Phillip’s part in murder, then the beginning full orchestrations would show the glorification of murder, according to Nietzsche’s philosophies, while the rest of the pieces Phillip plays are fragmented and repetitive, de-glorifying murder and showing the breakdown of his psychological state. The piece itself also moves between positive, major keys, and negative ones, revealing Phillip’s swing of emotions from comfort that their murder is concealed to the insecurity that comes with the possibility of discovery; “a superb example of a Hitchcockian musical performance acting as a barometer of guilt and anxiety” (Sullivan 146).

Not only does the composition of the song reveal guilty aspects of Phillip’s character, but the way in which he plays it is also significant. Although Phillip is a budding concert pianist, his interrogative conversation with Rupert causes several mistakes on Phillip’s part. He stops and starts the piece over several times. Because “guilt in Hitchcock’s world will usually manifest itself through a person’s lack of control (Weis 97), Phillip’s inability to control his fingers shows
his nervousness coming through. This is ironic, because similar to Poe’s narrator thinking that his sounds will distract his house guests, Phillip’s playing, which should showcase his normality, actually serves as an incrimination in his fidgety and agitated state.

While some, such as Gary Thomas, have interpreted this to be a manifestation of the queerness of Phillip’s expressionism (Thomas 283), I assert that it also reveals the internal turmoil that Phillip is experiencing. Just as the music “perpetually moves” between bright and dark sounds, Phillip moves psychologically from a place of security, trying to put on an air of normality for the party, all while balancing the constant guilt of the murder and the threat that David will be discovered. In the words of Jack Sullivan, “Phillip’s guilt ridden mind is traveling in futile circles, falling back on itself” (Sullivan 145).

According to Shai and Jacobwitz, Phillip’s playing the piano is a “secondary form of expression, mostly something to hide behind” instead of a “major form of expression” (Shai and Jacobwitz 41). Tragically this form of expression will never be fully realized as he will likely never play his debut in Town Hall. I would disagree that Phillip’s expression on the piano is merely only something he does “when he has nothing else to say (Shai and Jacobwitz 41). Rather, Phillip’s music indeed becomes a major form of expression. In fact, Hitchcock himself in an interview stated that one of the main purposes of music is “psychological,” used to “express the unspoken” (qtd. in Weis 90). When characters do not express their thoughts in words, “you [can] get at the underlying idea with the right background music” (qtd. in Weis 90).

Thus far, I have discussed that many of the auditory effects in “The Tell-Tale Heart” find foothold in Rope. Acknowledging these similarities, I must also discuss how there is an auditory deviation in the ending tones of the pieces. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator, convinced that the police officers hear the sound of the beating heart, tears up the floorboards to reveal the heart
that he has hidden (Poe 320-321). Thus, he creates a physical sound, in his screaming and ripping of the floorboards, as a final manifestation and revelation of his guilt. In Rope, the two murders do not explicitly confess. Rather, their former teacher, Rupert catches on to their suspicious activity and opens the chest himself to find David’s body. However, Rupert is not a purely innocent character in this story, as he is the one that taught the men the nietzschean philosophy that inspired their murder. His guilt, too, drives him to create a physical sound. Instead of going to get the police, Rupert bangs open the window and fires three gunshots. This not only alerts the police, but connects him to the scene of the crime.

In Rupert firing the ending gunshot, he breaks the dichotomy between the noises inside and outside. Since the film is shot completely within the confines of one apartment, the majority of the sounds heard in the film are those created within this environment. After the first shot of film which establishes the outside world, the apartment becomes a practically silent to the noises outside of the apartment. Brandon’s philosophical experiment is in a vacuum, one in which he tries to manipulate all that happens inside. However, this “increasingly sealed life of fancy” (qtd. in Weis 134) is occasionally threatened by sounds from the outside world, such as the ringing of a phone call from David’s worried mother or the ringing of the doorbell that puts Phillip on edge when Rupert comes back to the apartment after the conclusion of the party. It is only after Rupert reenters the apartment and starts to piece together the details of the murder, that the outside noises of cars honking start to become increasingly heard inside the apartment, showing the breakdown of the murders’ philosophical interior world to an “external reality” (Weis 130). Once Rupert opens the window to fire off the gunshots, the floodgate of outside noises enters the apartment, with a gradual crescendo of pedestrians discussing the gunshots and the increasing intensity of the police sirens. In order to make these sounds effects realistic, Hitchcock went
through the effort of recording the passerby comments from six stories above and renting an ambulance to record from two miles away (Weis 130).

The last several minutes of the film, after Rupert fires off the gunshots, are not filled with dialogue, but with sound effects and music. The audience watches the characters each silently assume their positions, with Rupert placing a protective hand over the chest that contains David, Brandon getting a drink, and Phillip seated at the piano. Phillip plucks out a few last notes on the piano, a final resignation of his guilty conscience. He plays Mouvements Perpétuels, which as written in the score, doesn’t have a defined ending but stops and fades into nothingness (Clifton 68). Phillip’s repletion of the last two measures show that he is stuck in a “mechanistic loop,” suggesting the broken nature of his conscience as well as the repercussions of his guilt that will perpetuate into the coming years (Clifton 73).

At the time of Rope’s release, the film didn’t receive good ratings, partially because of its highly experimental nature. Hitchcock himself came to dismiss the film as an experiment and nothing more. In more recent years, the film has gained attention from film critics but it is still shrugged off by some. In one New York Times article, the film is dismissed on the premise that “Hitchcock is less concerned with the characters and their moral dilemmas than with how they look, sound and move, and with the overall spectacle of how a perfect crime goes wrong” (Canby). This quote shows how the film has been regarded as important in terms of sound, because so much effort went into how the movie did sound. This is logical, considering how Hitchcock said that "careful use of sound can help strengthen the intensity of a situation” (qtd. in Cox and Neumyer 19). He also stated that in his films, “music [has] to inspire the action” (qtd. in Weis 89). These two quotes summarize the points laid out in this paper; namely, that the aural effects found both in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and Rope give intensity to the guilty feelings of the
murders and in turn, these characters actively create sound as an attempted distraction from this overwhelming guilt. The comparison of these two texts in terms of auditory elements allows for a more holistic interpretation of the adaptation of the works.
Works Cited


