

“Hearing” the Stage: The Auditory Narrative Mechanism and Cultural Politics in T. S. Eliot’s Drama

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Abstract: This article examines T. S. Eliot’s dramatic works, focusing on *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party*, through the lens of auditory narratology and cultural politics. It proposes a three-tiered model of Eliot’s stage soundscape: sacred, secular, and disruptive, to analyze how sound functions as a narrative and ideological mechanism. The study argues that sacred sounds, Latin liturgical chant sung by an unseen choir and the ritualized utterance of the chorus, construct ecclesiastical authority through ritualized repetition; secular sounds, including telephone rings, doorbells, and the gramophone, embed modern technological and consumer logic into religious narratives; while disruptive sounds, such as the knights’ sudden prose addresses and the vernacular cry of the Women of Canterbury, expose subjective anxiety and the fissures of power. By integrating close reading with cross-media comparison, this article demonstrates that Eliot employs auditory narrative as a sophisticated apparatus for the imaginative restoration of mid-twentieth-century British religious and cultural crisis, while also anticipating the complex turns of “sound politics” in postcolonial contexts.

1. Introduction

In the visually centered paradigm of modernist studies, T. S. Eliot’s drama has often been reduced to what one might call “a liturgy of language,” with critical attention focused almost exclusively on the verbal texture and theological content of his plays. From the earliest reviews of *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935)^[1] to contemporary scholarship, the dominant critical approach has treated Eliot’s dramatic soundscape—the liturgical chants, choral voices, and mechanical noises that punctuate his stage directions—as mere atmospheric decoration, subordinate to the theological arguments encoded in dialogue. Yet Eliot’s meticulous stage directions regarding off-stage choirs, telephones, and doorbells constitute a systematic auditory grammar that demands critical attention in its own right.

This article argues that Eliot constructs what can be termed an “audionarratology”^[2], a hidden syntax of sound that operates alongside and sometimes against the verbal narrative. The term “audionarratology” draws on the emerging field of auditory narrative studies, which examines how sound functions as an active narrative device rather than passive background. In Eliot’s drama, sound does not merely accompany the action; it structures dramatic time, encodes ideological positions, and generates affective responses that the verbal text alone cannot achieve. The auditory dimension of Eliot’s theater is not supplementary but constitutive, operating as what Pierre

Bourdieu^[3] might recognize as a form of cultural capital distributed through acoustic means.

The choice of *Murder in the Cathedral*^[1] and *The Cocktail Party*^[4] as primary texts is deliberate and strategic. The former, first performed in 1935 in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral, represents the apex of Eliot's engagement with medieval Christian drama and its auditory rituals. The cathedral precinct setting itself was an acoustic environment of extraordinary complexity, where liturgical chant and architectural reverberation created what R. Murray Schafer^[5] would recognize as a highly structured soundscape. The latter, premiered at the Edinburgh Festival in 1949, marks Eliot's successful adaptation of classical Greek tragedy to a contemporary drawing-room setting, where the clash between sacred and secular auditory regimes becomes particularly pronounced. Together, these two plays span the critical period of Eliot's dramatic career and illuminate the evolution of his auditory poetics from the explicitly liturgical to the subtly subversive.

This study addresses two interrelated research questions: First, how does Eliot deploy sound as a narrative mechanism in his dramatic works? Second, how does this auditory narrative participate in the cultural politics of empire and religion? Drawing on auditory narratology, soundscape theory, and cultural materialism, the article proposes a three-tiered taxonomy of Eliotic soundscapes: sacred sounds that construct ecclesiastical authority, secular sounds that encode modernity's incursion, and disruptive sounds that fracture the binaries between them. This framework allows us to move beyond the traditional theological readings of Eliot's drama toward an understanding of his theater as an acoustic battlefield where competing ideological forces vie for auditory dominance.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Auditory Narratology: From Sound Image to Sound Event

The theoretical foundation of this study rests at the intersection of auditory narratology and cultural politics. The term "auditory narratology" (audionarratology) refers to the systematic study of how sound functions as a narrative device within literary and dramatic texts. Drawing on the work of Chinese narratologist Fu Xiuyan^[6], this article conceptualizes stage sound not merely as atmospheric decoration but as a narrative force in its own right. Fu distinguishes between core and non-core sound events in narrative: a core sound event can signal and propel a decisive turn in the plot, for sound and event stand in a causal relation in which the event is the cause and the sound the effect^[6]. Within this framework, a staged sound is never neutral background; it is a functional element capable of advancing plot, marking transformation, and condensing symbolic meaning.

Equally important is the distinction between the "sound image" (shengxiang) and the "sound event" that informs Fu Xiuyan's study^[6]. A sound image is static and descriptive, functioning as aural atmosphere; a sound event is dynamic and performative, actively producing meaning through its temporal unfolding. In *Murder in the Cathedral*^[1], the Latin chant does not simply create a cathedral atmosphere; it performs the work of ritual framing, marking the approach of violence and the closure of martyrdom. Each chant is an event that produces effects in the dramatic world and in the audience's experience. This distinction allows us to treat Eliot's soundscapes as active agents rather than passive settings.

2.2 Cultural Politics and the Acoustic Field

The cultural political dimension of this analysis draws on Pierre Bourdieu^[3]'s concept of the "linguistic market," which suggests that the value of any utterance, or, by extension, any sound, is determined by the power relations within a given social field. In Eliot's drama, the auditory field becomes a site of negotiation between religious authority and modernity's disruptive forces. Each sound event carries ideological weight, and the distribution of acoustic space among competing

sound regimes mirrors broader struggles over cultural hegemony. The distant choir's claim to auditory supremacy in *Murder in the Cathedral*^[1] is not merely aesthetic preference but a political assertion of ecclesiastical dominance over the soundscape.

This study also incorporates R. Murray Schafer^[5]'s soundscape theory, particularly his foundational concepts of keynote sounds, sound signals, and soundmarks. While Schafer's framework was developed for environmental sound studies, his emphasis on the cultural embeddedness of acoustic experience proves productive for analyzing staged soundscapes. By synthesizing these theoretical resources, the article constructs a model in which sacred sounds (Latin chant and choral liturgy), secular sounds (telephones, doorbells, the gramophone, a music-hall song), and disruptive sounds (prose rupture and vernacular outcry) form a dynamic system through which Eliot's cultural politics are acoustically enacted.

3. Sacred Sounds: Ritualization and Liturgical Time

3.1 The Distant Choir: Latin Chant as Sacred Frame

In *Murder in the Cathedral*^[1], the most acoustically consequential stage directions concern not any visible sound-maker but an unseen one: a choir singing in Latin "in the distance." At two structural moments the published text specifies this disembodied liturgical voice: as the knights close in on Becket, the Chorus's chant overlaps with "a Dies Irae ... sung in Latin by a choir in the distance," and the play closes "while a Te Deum is sung in Latin by a choir in the distance"^[1]. The 1935 first edition extends this frame further: Part II opens with the three priests' speeches introducing the sung introits of St. Stephen's Day, St. John's Day, and Holy Innocents' Day, embedding the action within the sanctoral calendar of the Christmas week. The sacred soundscape is thus not incidental music but a liturgical frame that positions Becket's death within the church's own temporal order.

The choice of an unseen, distant choir is itself an acoustic claim to authority. Because the Latin voices cannot be located on stage, they acquire an omnipresent quality, as if emanating from the cathedral's stones themselves. The audience does not watch the source of sacred sound; it is immersed in it. This framing device reconstructs, for a modern theatrical audience, something of the medieval acoustic environment in which the liturgy structured collective time, an environment that Eliot, writing for performance within the precincts of Canterbury Cathedral, could expect his first audience to inhabit quite literally.

3.2 The Acoustic Authority of Gregorian Chant

The Latin chanting that frames *Murder in the Cathedral*^[1] operates through what this study calls "acoustic authority." Rendered off-stage at the play's structural junctures, sung by an unseen choir "in the distance," the Latin liturgy produces an omnipresent yet invisible soundscape. Drawing on Michel Foucault's account of pastoral power^[7], the article argues that this disembodied sacred voice functions as a mechanism of spiritual guidance and discipline: it reaches the auditor's consciousness without being locatable, creating what Foucault analyzes as a pastoral modality of power, in which authority operates through care and direction rather than overt coercion^[7]. The audience, like the dramatic characters, is subjected to an auditory regime that operates below the threshold of conscious resistance.

The use of Latin rather than English is itself a significant acoustic choice. Latin, as a liturgical language inaccessible to most lay audiences, creates a sonic barrier between the sacred and the secular. Its acoustic texture, with the sustained vowels, the monophonic melody, and the absence of rhythmic variation, produces a sense of the sacred as acoustically other. This otherness is not

merely decorative but functional: it constructs the church as a realm apart, governed by its own acoustic laws and immune to the encroachments of modernity.

3.3 The Mythology of Sacred Repetition

The recurring Latin chant, from the introits of the first edition's Part II to the Dies Irae before the killing and the Te Deum at the close, constitutes what Roland Barthes analyzes as the rhetoric of myth: a set of fixed, regulated, insistent figures through which an ideological order presents itself as natural^[8]. Each recurrence reinforces the equation of ecclesiastical ritual with cosmic justice, naturalizing a political theology of unified Christendom. This auditory myth operates precisely through its redundancy: the more regularly the sacred chant returns, the more invisible its ideological work becomes. In this sense, the sacred soundscape of *Murder in the Cathedral*^[1] is not merely setting but argument, a sustained acoustic plea for the restoration of a unified Christendom.

The Cocktail Party^[4], while set in a secular drawing room, continues this deployment of sacred sound in an attenuated, ritual register. Act II closes with a libation spoken in liturgical antiphony—"Let them build the hearth ... Protect her in the silence"^[4]—a ceremonial rhythm that momentarily transforms the consulting room into a chapel. The sacred here persists not as institutional chant but as improvised ritual within secular modernity, suggesting that liturgical patterns of utterance survive even where ecclesiastical authority has withdrawn.

4. Secular Sounds: Modernity's Auditory Colonization

4.1 The Telephone and the Disembodied Voice

The telephone, which rings five times during *The Cocktail Party*^[4], represents the most insistent form of secular sound. In Act I, two calls interrupt intimate conversation: the first breaks into Peter's account to Edward of the transcendent experience he shared with Celia ("There was something real. But what is the reality..."), and the caller proves to be Celia herself; the second, Alex's rambling call about food, cuts across Celia's demand to know what has happened to Edward, who explodes, "Damn the telephone"^[4]. In Act II, three more calls structure Reilly's consulting room: the house-telephone announces Edward's arrival, interrupts Edward's plea to be sent to a sanatorium, and finally summons Reilly to Julia's call as he lies down to rest^[4]. The telephone epitomizes what this article calls the disembodied voice, a technological separation of sound from the human body that renders the speaker at once present and absent. The implications extend beyond dramatic convenience: if voice can be technologically detached from body, then the divine voice, too, becomes subject to what may be called "call forwarding"—transferable, dispensable, and ultimately secularized.

The five interruptions form a structural pattern. In the drawing room, the telephone functions as an ironic device that punctures intimacy at the threshold of confession; in the consulting room, it marks the bureaucratic rhythm of the psychiatric practice, translating spiritual crisis into appointment slots. Notably, the play's genuine spiritual climax, Celia's account of her vocation and her choice of the "unknown" way, proceeds without a single telephone interruption, as if authentic revelation required a space insulated from technological mediation. This distribution suggests that modern technology does not merely coexist with sacred sound but actively defines the secular spaces it controls.

4.2 "One-Eyed Riley" and the Gramophone: Live Voice against Mechanical Music

The only music actually performed in *The Cocktail Party*^[4] is not liturgical but communal: in the

opening scene, the Unidentified Guest entertains the party with “One-Eyed Riley,” an Irish music-hall ballad sung live to the assembled guests. The song’s raucous, convivial energy cuts across the strained politeness of the gathering, and its singer, later revealed as Reilly, the play’s guardian figure, introduces into the drawing room a voice that belongs neither to sacred chant nor to polite conversation. Against this live voice the play sets mechanical music as a figure of emotional evasion. Edward dismisses “a better way of passing the evening / Than listening to the gramophone,” while Lavinia retorts, “We have very good records / But I always suspected that you really hated music / And that the gramophone was only your escape / From talking to me when we had to be alone”^[4]. The gramophone here is no neutral appliance but the acoustic emblem of a marriage conducted at arm’s length: music mechanically reproduced precisely so that nothing need be said.

Together, these secular sounds constitute what the article identifies as an “auditory colonization” of sacred dramatic space. They do not merely provide realistic background; they actively restructure the acoustic power relations of the stage, introducing into Eliot’s religious narratives the logic of modern consumption, technological mediation, and mass reproduction. The tension between sacred and secular sound regimes becomes, in this analysis, a sonic enactment of the broader crisis of religious authority in mid-twentieth-century Britain.

5. Disruptive Sounds: Register, Outcry, and the Fissures of Power

Between the sacred and secular soundscapes of Eliot’s drama lies a third category that this article terms “disruptive sounds”: acoustic phenomena that refuse the binary logic of religious versus modern, including sudden shifts of vocal register and vernacular outcry. These sounds function as what Jacques Derrida might call the “supplement” of Eliot’s auditory system^[9]: they are excluded from the dominant acoustic order yet constitutive of its limits and contradictions.

5.1 Prose as Rupture: The Knights’ Address

The most violent acoustic disruption in *Murder in the Cathedral*^[1] is not a sound effect but a change of register. The stage direction is stark: “The Knights, having completed the murder, advance to the front of the stage and address the audience”^[1]. What follows is a sudden descent from liturgical verse into modern, colloquial prose, as the four knights coolly rationalize the killing in the idiom of twentieth-century political apology. The sacred soundscape of chant and chorus is broken not by noise but by bureaucratic speech; the audience, moments earlier immersed in the Latin *Dies Irae*, is now buttonholed by murderers speaking the language of the committee room. Drawing on Theodor Adorno’s aesthetics of negativity^[10], the article reads this rupture as a negation internal to the sacred order itself: the prose address exposes how easily the vocabulary of power can simulate reasonableness, and it denies the audience any comfortable retreat into ritual distance. The fissure of power is heard, not seen.

5.2 The Vernacular Cry: “Clear the air! clean the sky!”

If the knights’ prose disrupts from the side of power, the Women of Canterbury disrupt from the side of suffering. At the moment of the killing, the stage direction reads: “While the Knights kill him, we hear the Chorus”^[1]. The murder is never presented in silence; it is acoustically covered by the women’s vernacular chant: “Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind!... We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean”^[1], a sustained cry of pollution and purification whose power lies in its semantic intensity rather than in wordless noise. This is the voice of the poor women of Canterbury, neither Latin clergy nor male knightly authority: a communal, female, vernacular voice that claims the moment of martyrdom as its own experience. Between the Latin chant of the distant choir and

the prose of the knights, the Chorus's cry constitutes a third acoustic order, one that registers, in the body of the language itself, the social cost of sacred violence.

6. Cross-Media Perspectives: From Stage to Broadcast

Murder in the Cathedral^[1] migrated to the microphone almost immediately: the BBC broadcast a radio production in January 1936, produced by Barbara Burnham, and Eliot, listening in, wrote approvingly of the performance; a second BBC production followed on the Home Service in 1941, with Robert Speaight, the original Becket. The play was also a pioneer of television drama: in 1936 the BBC mounted what has been described as its first television drama production with scenes from the play. In these early broadcasts, the play's defining acoustic device, the unseen choir singing in Latin "in the distance," found a natural home, for radio is a medium in which all voices are, by definition, disembodied. A different kind of technological preservation came in 1953, when the Old Vic production directed by Robert Helpmann, with Robert Donat as Becket, was recorded at Abbey Road Studios and issued on disc, fixing one celebrated interpretation of the play's vocal score for later listeners.

Conversely, a recent London revival of *The Cocktail Party*^[4], the 2015 production at the Print Room at the Coronet, directed by Abbey Wright, with music and sound by Gary Yershon, demonstrates how contemporary sound design can reactivate Eliot's acoustic dramaturgy. Reviewers noted the production's electronically adjusted cocktail-bar piano music and its use of dramatic audio to mark scene transitions^[11]: the secular soundscape of the play, which the text supplies only sparsely (doorbells, a telephone, a burst of song), was amplified into a continuous designed environment. Where Eliot's text relies on a few precisely placed interruptions, modern stagecraft tends toward saturation; the revival thus throws into relief the economy of the original, in which a single ring of the telephone carries more narrative weight than a wash of incidental sound.

These cross-media adaptations demonstrate the portability and adaptability of Eliot's auditory narrative framework. Whether carried by early BBC microphones or redesigned by contemporary sound artists, the three-tiered soundscape of sacred, secular, and disruptive sounds remains recognizable and effective. This persistence suggests that Eliot's acoustic dramaturgy addresses something fundamental about the organization of auditory experience in modernity, a structural feature that transcends the specific historical moment of its creation.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that T. S. Eliot's dramatic works deploy a sophisticated auditory narrative mechanism through which cultural politics are acoustically enacted. The three-tiered model of sacred, secular, and disruptive sounds provides a framework for understanding how Eliot's stagecraft operates not only through language but through the systematic manipulation of the acoustic field. Sacred sounds (Latin chant sung by the distant choir, the introits of the Christmas week, the liturgical antiphony of the libation) construct an auditory regime of ecclesiastical authority. Secular sounds (telephones, doorbells, the gramophone, a music-hall song) introduce the logic of modern consumption and technological mediation, colonizing the acoustic space that sacred sounds claim as their own. Disruptive sounds (the knights' colloquial prose and the vernacular cry of the Women of Canterbury) fracture this binary, exposing the anxieties and power gaps that the auditory system attempts to conceal.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond the specific case of Eliot's drama. The article suggests that auditory narrative deserves recognition as an independent object of cultural-political inquiry, capable of revealing ideological operations that verbal analysis alone might miss. The soundscape of mid-twentieth-century British drama, in this account, is not merely background but

battleground, a site where the forces of tradition and modernity, empire and resistance, sacred and secular, compete for acoustic dominance.

The methodological framework developed here, the three-tiered taxonomy of sacred, secular, and disruptive sounds, may prove transportable to other contexts where the auditory organization of dramatic space carries ideological significance. Future research might extend this framework to the drama of W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, or contemporary playwrights working with immersive sound design. What this study has sought to demonstrate, above all, is that when we attend to what Eliot's characters hear—and what his audiences are made to hear—we discover a dimension of his dramatic art that has been hiding, quite literally, in plain sound. The auditory turn in literary studies is not merely a methodological innovation but a necessary corrective to the visual bias that has dominated our understanding of modernist theater.

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