

Deceptive Echoes in Christie’s “The Mystery of the Blue Jar”

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Abstract

This research article examines and analyzes how Agatha Christie employs deceptive sound as a central narrative device in her short story “The Mystery of the Blue Jar.” Christie constructs an acoustic illusion that shapes perception, directs suspicion, and manipulates both the protagonist and the reader. The repeated cry, “Help! Murder! Help!” functions not only as a mysterious disturbance but also as an engine of psychological tension. This research employs Sound Studies and Cognitive Narratology as tools to explore how Christie turns hearing into an unreliable sense. The protagonist believes in the authenticity of the cry because sound seems immediate, vivid, and commanding. Yet the story gradually exposes the instability of auditory perception. This instability becomes the foundation of narrative suspense. This study relies on qualitative close reading of the primary text, supported by selective secondary criticism related to sensory studies, narrative cognition, and detective-fiction techniques. The analysis portrays how Christie employs repetition, isolation, sensory contradiction, and controlled auditory staging to produce confusion. The cry becomes a tool of manipulation rather than a clue to real violence. Through this technique, Christie portrays how sound influences human cognition easily, especially when the listener expects meaning and danger. It becomes an instrument of deception as powerful as visual misdirection.

Keywords: Deception, narratology, perception, sound, suspense

Introduction

This research explores the deceptive echoes in "The Mystery of the Blue Jar" (*MBJ*) to find how acoustic deception generates fear, uncertainty, and cognitive confusion. The story employs the sound, specifically the deceptive echo, as a narrative strategy. Agatha Christie often builds mystery from what characters see, but in *MBJ* she builds it from what they hear. She constructs suspense almost entirely through sound. The story opens with a disembodied cry of "Help! Murder! Help!" (Christie 3) that only the protagonist hears. This repeated auditory intrusion becomes the central mystery. It unsettles him. It destabilizes the narrative. It creates ambiguity, tension, and psychological confusion. Christie turns sound into a tool of manipulation rather than a neutral sensory detail. Thus, it raises a question: how hearing can be trustful? She employs this cry as an acoustic disturbance that blurs the line between perception and deception. Sound theorist R. Murray Schafer asserts "hearing is the most easily deceived of the senses" (9) as it leaves no lasting trace. Christie employs this instability to her advantage. The auditory illusion in the story lacks visible origin, body, and physical evidence. It becomes what Don Ihde analyzes as an "ambiguous auditory phenomenon that demands interpretation" (27). Within this ambiguity, the protagonist becomes vulnerable to narrative manipulation.

This research employs cognitive narratology to study how readers process such acoustic ambiguity. Herman adduces, "readers construct meaning by mentally simulating the sensory experiences of characters" (142). When Christie provides the protagonist a sound that only he can hear, she forces readers to participate in his confusion. They mentally simulate the echo. They anticipate its source. They enter the uncertainty the fabricated sound creates. The narrative thus becomes a cognitive trap. It manipulates the readers and characters in similar ways. Christie stages the sound what Michel Chion finds it an auditory cues in narrative "sound can misguide, direct, or structure expectation" (54). The cry in the story does not sound supernatural. Christie engineers it. She employs it as a device in a larger act of deception. She introduces this constructed auditory event to expose how sound easily manipulates sensory perception when it becomes a narrative weapon.

MBJ also engages with psychological vulnerability. The protagonist begins to question his own sanity when others deny hearing the cry. Makinen makes a study how Christie's mysteries often depend on "the tension between perception and deception" (44). In this case, that tension takes explicitly acoustic form. The "voice" becomes a psychological instrument designed to destabilize consciousness and to create fear.

This research explores the acoustic illusion that functions as a narrative strategy in Christie's story. It analyzes how sound constructs suspense, manipulates interpretation, and produces cognitive misdirection. It explores how the protagonist's and the readers' trust in the auditory senses becomes the basis for the deception. Through the combined lens of sound studies and cognitive narratology, the 'hearing' constructs, stages, and weapons the story like 'seeing'. Christie transforms sound into a deceptive narrative strategy. She demonstrates how sound never remains innocent; it narrates deeply, and it

deceits deeply. She also examines how acoustic misdirection affects reader perception. Through this lens, the story reveals the power of sound to construct fear, misread reality, and produce narrative tension.

Statement of the Problem

Most of Christie's works focus on visual clues, plot structure, or detective logic. Thus, it receives little attention on 'sound' as a deliberate narrative device. Here lies the problem. The mysterious cry for help from strange lady remains understudied from the perspective of auditory experiences. Christie constructs and engineers the sound. It forms an acoustic manipulation. Yet scholars do not examine how the fabricated cry functions as a cognitive trigger that misleads both the protagonist and the reader. There remains a gap in existing criticism on how acoustic deception generates fear, uncertainty, and cognitive confusion. Scholars do not analyze the story's auditory misdirection through sound studies, which view sound as unstable, ephemeral, and open to distortion. Therefore, this study attempts to explore how the story employs the sound, specifically the deceptive echo, as a narrative strategy in the story. It makes a study how Christie employs auditory illusion to manipulate perception, create suspense, and shapes the cognitive responses of characters and readers.

Research Questions

- a. How does Agatha Christie employ acoustic hallucination as a narrative device in *MBJ*?
- b. How does the deceptive sound influence the cognitive responses of both the protagonist and the reader?

Objectives

- a. To analyze how the repeated cry of "Help! Murder! Help!" functions as a constructed auditory event that generates suspense, misdirection, and narrative tension.
- b. To examine how Christie's use of staged sound shapes mental simulation, affects interpretive processes, and manipulates the perception of reality for both character and reader.

Review of Literature

Numerous works on Agatha Christie emphasize on plot, structure, and visual misdirection of the story. In this context, Julian Symons explores how Christie builds her suspense around "controlled revelation and carefully managed clues" (112). Her narratives often lead readers to focus on tangible evidence, creating a suspense through the careful timing of information. Her *MBJ* shifts its attention from the visual to the auditory, which leaves sound-based strategies unexplored. This view analyzes the visual patterns in her detective fiction. However, this emphasis leaves little space for the study of sound in her storytelling.

Merja Makinen makes a study of Christie's works through gender, deception, and narrative gaps. She analyzes how Christie constructs "tensions between what is perceived and what is real" (44). It explores the gap between sensory experience and objective truth but it does not examine sound as a narrative device. The sound's reality produces uncertainty for both character and reader. In the story, the protagonist hears a cry that no one else perceives. Christie deliberately plays with perception, yet her analysis does not extend to sound. This leaves a gap that the present study addresses.

John Curran makes a study of Christie's notebooks to trace her methods of clue-placement and misdirection. He examines how Christie often relies on "strategic disruption of expectation" (58) to mislead the readers. Her auditory misdirection aligns with this approach because the cry interrupts normal narrative anticipation. He finds how Christie experiments with unusual techniques. It destabilizes the reader's expectations without leaving visual traces. Curran's research demonstrates Christie's skill in misdirection. Still he does not analyze her use of auditory manipulation.

This researcher explores *MBJ* through a sound studies perspective. R. Murray Schafer postulates how "sound is the most ephemeral of the senses and can be easily distorted or staged" (9). Christie exploits this instability in her story. The protagonist hears a cry from no physical origin. His theory helps understand why Christie's unstable cry in the story creates cognitive confusion. Unlike visual clues, sound produce immediate effect with less verifiable, making it perfect for creating suspense.

Christie's *MBJ* introduces a phenomenology of listening. Don Ihde makes a study of a phenomenological approach to sound. He examines how ambiguous sounds require "interpretive participation" from the listener (27). This applies directly to Christie's protagonist, who must actively interpret the unexplained cry. The listener plays a central role. The readers must discern meaning from a potentially misleading auditory cue. Christie's story invites both protagonist and reader to participate in this interpretation, creating shared uncertainty and suspense.

MBJ explores sound having a narrative manipulation. Michel Chion analyzes how sound can "misguide, direct, or reorganize meaning" (54) in any narrative form. In Christie's story, the staged cry performs exactly this function. It guides the protagonist and reader toward false conclusions. It reorganizes attention and expectation. His framework clarifies how Christie employs the staged cry to manipulate expectation and guide the interpretation. Christie designs a deliberate narrative device to manipulate perception and understanding.

Scholars like David Herman make a study of *MBJ* by employing a theory of cognitive narratology. It adds another layer of study to this story. He explores how readers "construct mental simulations of sensory experiences when engaging with

fiction" (142). He explores how sensory cues in fiction affect readers' cognitive processing. Christie's story relies on this process. This theory centers to understanding how her readers psychologically experience the deceptive cry. Readers hear the cry vicariously through the protagonist. They imagine its source, intensity, and location. Herman's framework explains how Christie manipulates cognitive processes to create suspense. The story becomes a shared psychological experience between readers and characters.

MBJ introduces a narrative immersion and mental modeling. Marie-Laure Ryan explores this story from a cognitive perspective. She asserts that narrative immersion depends on how readers "construct mental models" (87) from sensory details. Christie's acoustic deception challenges this construction. Readers attempt to reconcile the cry with visible evidence. The mismatch between auditory information and physical cues heightens tension. Ryan's ideas help express how sound can create immersive and unsettling narrative experiences.

Christie's *MBJ* analyzes suspense through unreliable perception. Patricia Maida examines suspense in *MBJ*. It emerges when the story "withholds reliable perception" (61). This idea directly relates to Christie's manipulation of hearing. Acoustic instability heightens suspense. Christie withholds confirmation of the cry's reality. The protagonist cannot rely on his own perception. Maida's argument supports the view that Christie's acoustic misdirection central to generating suspense. Sound, rather than sight, becomes the unreliable medium driving tension.

MBJ explores knowledge, ignorance, and narrative control. Stephen Knight examines them in Christie's story "careful control of knowledge and ignorance" (103). The cry in *MBJ* embodies this principle. Readers know, the sound exists, but its source remains hidden. Both protagonist and readers experience uncertainty. Stephen studies the cultural role of detective fiction. He analyzes Christie's general technique, but his work does not analyze acoustic deception, specifically.

This study introduces its point of departure. It shifts critical attention from plot mechanics and character psychology to sound as a governing narrative force in Christie's *MBJ*. The above reviews examine mostly the perception, misdirection, immersion, and suspense in *MBJ*. However, no major scholar examines Christie's use of sound as a deliberate narrative strategy. Thus, the auditory misdirection in *MBJ* remains largely unexplored. This study fills that gap by analyzing Christie's stages of sound to manipulate perception, generate suspense, and engage readers cognitively through Cognitive Narratology and Sound Studies. The subsequent analysis aligns closely with the research questions. It demonstrates how deceptive sound destabilizes sensory reliability. It portrays how sound directs character movement. It further explores how sound shapes readers' responses. In doing so, this study fulfills its stated objectives.

Significance of the Study

This study examines the role of sound in Christie's *MBJ*. Here lies the significance of this study. Most researches focus on plot, character, or visual clues, but this study analyzes auditory deception. It analyzes how Christie employs sound to manipulate perception and create suspense. It deepens understanding of sensory manipulation in detective fiction. It offers a model for interdisciplinary literary analysis. Thus, this study portrays the narrative power of sound.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive approach to research to make a textual interpretation. This approach ensures a detailed understanding of how sound constructs meaning in the narrative. Agatha Christie's *MBJ* constitutes the primary source of study. The close reading of this text helps to identify all scenes involving sound, auditory description, and sensory confusion. Books and articles on Cognitive Narratology, Sound Studies, detective fiction, criticisms on Christie's texts, etc., constitute its secondary sources. These sources support the interpretation of auditory deception and narrative technique.

This research employs close reading as its main analytical tool. This tool helps to analyze how sound shapes narrative meaning, suspense, and cognitive engagement in the story. It allows researchers to examine language, repetition, and structural placement of the cry "Help! Murder! Help!" Short passages help to analyze the narrative effect, character perception, and reader response. This study compares the findings with insights from secondary sources to establish critical connections. It makes analysis on the basis of identification of auditory cues like locating all instances of sound or implied sound in the text. Cognitive Narratology helps to analyze how readers mentally simulate the protagonist's auditory experience. Sound Studies analyzes how Christie employs sound as an unstable and manipulative sensory mode.

Limitations of the Study

This study limits to a single short story *MBJ* by Agatha Christie. So, it restricts the breadth of textual evidence. The interpretive and qualitative analysis may not capture all possible reader responses. The secondary sources of study on Sound Studies and Cognitive Narratology may not address Christie directly. The research does not include empirical data or audience studies, so it infers cognitive effects rather than the measured. It cannot generalize the findings to all detective fiction. The study focuses on sound, so other elements such as character psychology or setting receive less attention. These limitations, however, do not reduce the value of examining auditory deception in the story. The following analyses attempt to draw the gist of this research.

The Echo as an Engine of Psychological Manipulation

Christie employs the startling call "Help! Murder! Help!" (3), the first auditory shock in the story. This echo becomes the story's first deceptive clue. It signals how the mystery originates not from sight but from hearing. It breaks the calm of Christie's setting and "unsettles Jack" (Christie 45). It breaks the quiet atmosphere of the golf course. Jack hears the cry as "clear as daylight" (Christie 45) and feels forced to respond. The repeated echo creates a sense of compulsion. It acts like a stimulus that demands obedience. Jack begins to "race into the woods" (Christie 46) every time he hears it. The echo becomes a psychological trigger. It creates a conditioned pattern of submission. Christie presents the echo as a tool that rewires Jack's reasoning. Other characters do not confirm the voice. This heightens Jack's internal doubt. He fears his senses. He begins to think "there must be something wrong" (Christie 48) with him. Christie manipulates the reader's mind through the same uncertainty. The echo blurs the line between manipulation and madness. Its presence forms the core mechanism of psychological control in the narrative.

Unreliable Hearing and the Construction of Illusion

Jack's hearing of the echo in the story remains the center of uncertainty. Christie explores how he hears the cry "as if spoken into his very ear" (46). The intensity produces a false sense of realism. The illusion becomes believable. Jack's perception isolates him from others. He tells the golfer about the sound, yet "the man hears nothing" (Christie 47). This contrast deepens the mystery. Christie employs his unreliable hearing to question sensory trust. The narrative creates a gap between what he hears and what remains real. Jack enters a cycle of doubt. He wonders if he "is going mad" (Christie 48). This unreliability shapes the plot. It builds suspense. The reader falls in trap of Jack's limited perception. Christie's technique portrays how illusion can strengthen auditory uncertainty. Hearing becomes both a narrative resource and a thematic puzzle.

The Echo and the Theme of Performative Fear

Fear appears first through Jack's startled reaction. He freezes as "the cry rings across the forest" (Christie 45). The fear seems instinctive. Yet it becomes performative as the story progresses. Jack expresses his fear even when he does not fully feel it. He repeats the actions like of a frightened man. Christie employs fear as a script. Every echo leads to the same emotional performance. Jack becomes predictable. Expectations shape his movements rather than reality. Christie finds how Jack feels "driven to investigate" (49) though he no longer believes he may find anyone. This reveals a behavioral loop. Here, the echo becomes the cue. Fear becomes the response. Christie critiques how repetition can cultivate fear. Repetition intensifies the psychological strain. It suggests pattern, and pattern suggests meaning. The echo orchestrates Jack's actions like a stage director. Fear becomes a performance rather than a spontaneous emotion.

The Manipulative Motive behind the Echo

Christie introduces echo in the story as not supernatural but it originates from human. Deception becomes the motive behind it. The old man in the story employs it as part of a planned psychological trap. He needs Jack to come at predictable times. Christie hints at this manipulation when Jack notes that the voice sounds "exactly the same each day" (Christie 50). The unnatural consistency signals orchestration. The golfer's skepticism further raises suspicion (Christie 47). The echo leads Jack away from the house. It portrays a manipulative intention. Christie explores how human agent can control psychological devices. The old man creates a false crisis to exploit Jack. The echo acts as a weapon. It analyzes how auditory cues engineer behavior. Christie finds that manipulation often hides behind the illusion of urgency.

The Echo as a Tool for Spatial Control

The echo directs Jack's movement. Christie finds how Jack runs "unthinkingly in the direction of the voice" (Christie 46). The urgency leaves him no time to question the direction. The echo becomes a geographical guide. It shapes his physical position. Christie employs this device to structure the plot spatially. Jack's location becomes predictable. He always ends up away from the Blue Jar house. The echo controls territory. Sound becomes a map. Christie turns the forest into a controlled grid of movement. She positions Jack exactly where she wants him. This forms a silent entrapment. Christie's employment of sound to move characters becomes unusual in detective fiction. The echo creates invisible boundaries. Jack's sense of place becomes distorted. He follows sound more than the logic.

The Collapse of Rational Interpretation

Jack advances towards the echo with logical assumptions. He wonders someone must be "in danger" (Christie 45). His reasoning appears normal. But as the echoes repeat, his rationality weakens. Christie finds him "confused and troubled" (Christie 48). He loses the ability to interpret events objectively. The narrative shows rationality collapsing under emotional strain. Jack's belief system shifts. He begins to doubt himself. He wonders if "he needs medical help" (Christie 48). This marks his psychological deterioration. Christie uses this collapse to build a tension. The reader observes the gradual erosion of logic. Jack's inner conflict becomes a tragic. He cannot reconcile sound with evidence. The collapse reflects a key theme: reason becomes fragile. Christie analyzes how the mind can lose coherence under repeated sensory stress.

The Climactic Moment of Revelation

Readers find the full meaning of the echo as soon as the author uncovers the deception. Christie finds how the echo "cleverly trapped" (Christie 53) Jack. It becomes the turning point. It becomes a symbol of betrayal. Jack learns that the old man employs the voice to lure him away. Theft and trickery become the motive. The revelation reshapes the entire narrative. All the earlier uncertainties become clear. Christie exposes

the human cunning behind the auditory illusion. The moment of revelation also becomes a moment of empowerment. Jack understands the truth. He regains agency. The echo loses its hold over him. Christie transforms confusion into clarity. The story resolves through intellectual awakening. The revelation affirms detective logic. Truth breaks illusion. Christie portrays the climax to restore balance between perception and reality.

Conclusion

This study finds the role of echo in Christie's *MBJ*. It examines the auditory deception. It explores how sound functions as a narrative strategy. The repeated cry, "Help! Murder! Help!" does not portray an atmospheric detail, but a constructed acoustic illusion meant to mislead both the protagonist and the readers. Through close textual analysis, the research demonstrates how the cry manipulates perception, destabilizes rational interpretation, and exerts psychological pressure. The protagonist's hearing becomes the site of vulnerability. His repeated journeys into the woods reflect how sound can drive action more powerfully than visual clues or rational deduction. The narrative exploits the ephemeral, untraceable nature of sound to generate suspense, emotional turmoil, and ultimately, revelation of manipulation. As the story resolves, the cry reveals a 'trick', exposing human cunning rather than supernatural horror. This confirms how Christie employs sound like a narrative, tool, trap, and plot engine. Thus, this study fills a neglected gap in Christie criticism. It explores the detection-fiction techniques beyond the visible clues and logical puzzles. It examines how auditory deception can operate at the level of sensory experience, cognition, and narrative structure. It analyzes how the hearing can be as unreliable and manipulative as vision in literary fiction. This study introduces several paths worth exploring for future scholars. They may explore Christie's other stories (or her contemporaries) to study the acoustic deception. They can make comparative studies like how does sound function in detective fiction in different cultural contexts? They may employ empirical methods like reader-response studies, or small experiments, to test how modern readers actually respond to narrative sounds, etc. Finally, they may integrate sound theory, narratology, and psychology to build a broader theory of "sensory misdirection" in fiction.

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