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SUSPENSE RADIO SERIES, GOTHIC LITERATURE, AND THE

AMERICAN FAMILY

by

Kelly D. Kirkham

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2018

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ABSTRACT

Suspense Radio Series, Gothic Literature, and the American Family

by

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Utah State University, 2018

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My plan B thesis argues that the *Suspense* radio series, which aired from 1942-1963, served as a cathartic release for Americans during the Golden Age of Radio; the program accomplished catharsis by borrowing characteristics originating in 19th century gothic literature: sound effects, domestic space as setting, and the uncanny. The evidence I use in my argument includes radio show recordings, magazines, and published works from prominent radio scholars to analyze the effects of the *Suspense* program, specifically the 1960 season. Scholarly works include books and articles from Neil Verma, author of *Theater of the Mind* and assistant professor in Radio/Television/Film at Northwestern University; Tim Crook, author of *Radio Drama* and Senior Lecturer and Head of Radio at Goldsmiths College, University of London; and Michelle Hilmes, editor of *Radio Voices* and Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I argue that the three critical gothic elements examined reach this pinnacle achievement during the 1960 season of *Suspense* and resulted in a cathartic

effect for listeners, who faced economic and domestic uncertainty. Radio became a cathartic tool used to soothe listeners who faced the social and economic pressures of mid-20th century suburban America.

(43 pages)

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Kelly Kirkham

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INTRODUCTION

On July 2, 1939, the screeching call of Mrs. Aldrich blared across the airwaves as she called “Henryyyy, Henry Aldrich.” The awkward teenager replied “Coming Mother.” This familiar opening sequence for *The Aldrich Family*, a top ten radio program, helped create American family stereotypes. Sam Aldrich was a picturesque representation of dear old dad, and the Aldrich family soon became an icon for wholesome family values. Ilana Nash writes about the Aldrich family in *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-century Popular Culture*, explaining that the Aldrich family is an example of what she calls “centered averageness.” She writes that “the families in these tales occupy the default identity of American families in popular culture: white, Christian, and comfortable middle-class” (121).

American averageness could also be heard on the popular radio program *Father Knows Best*, which aired periodically between 1948 and 1960 on NBC and CBS. The pilot episode (aired Dec. 20, 1948) begins with an announcer setting the scene:

In an average town, Springfield, on an average street, Maple, lives an average American family, the Hendersons. The husband, Jim, is very much in love with his wife, Margaret, and they're both quite fond of their three children, Betty, Bud, and Kathleen. Which, I should say, is an average way for parents to feel. On this particular morning, which is an average sort of day, the Hendersons are ready for an average sort of meal, breakfast.

The Henderson and Aldrich families were fictional representations of the American family and a portrait of stability.

These wholesome examples, however, were not the only families featured on the radio during this time. The horror/suspense genre also thrived during these years. One horror program specifically, *Suspense*, excelled as a parallel to family programming like *The Aldrich Family*. *Suspense* first aired in 1942 and was designed to represent families who appeared to be average, but concealed unimaginable secrets. Many *Suspense* episodes featured what would happen if the stereotypical family was forced to combat corruption, deceit, and murder. In this thesis, I will argue that *Suspense* challenged foundational American stereotypes through methods found in gothic literature. By looking at the 1960 season of *Suspense*, I will analyze how the program reached the heights of popularity, and what listeners experienced as they tuned into the program each week.

The success of the *Suspense* program stemmed from the production team's ability to capture gothic elements and adapt them for the program's purpose. By injecting terror into stories of average families, producers ironically achieved a cathartic effect, or emotional release, for American listeners, creating a paradox of fear and relief. *Suspense* listeners in 1960 could dabble in the darker sides of American family stereotypes. These episodes set brilliant precedents of radio mastery for the last glory years of radio drama. I argue that the critical gothic characteristics used by *Suspense* include the uncanny through the use of sound effects and domestic space as setting. While other aspects of radio, such as delivery, topic, and audience may have changed throughout the years, the critical elements that ground my analysis remained. *Suspense* harnessed these characteristics to entertain and sustain for listeners throughout the duration of the *Suspense* program.

Suspense mastered the art of radio terror by becoming an anecdote to wholesome American values. My evidence includes *Suspense* episodes from the 1960 season, scholarly sources, and popular representations of the program in magazines. While many other programs moved to television, *Suspense* remained a steadfast example of the anti-stereotypical American family balancing the tension between expectation and real life. Listeners could experience the emotional turmoil of topics like infidelity, murder, and betrayal followed by a purge of these intense feelings as a release from growing concerns of the era. *Suspense* mirrored the concerns of a changing world through the lens of wholesome American family values when introduced to the uncanny nature of radio horror.

GOTHIC INSPIRATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Overview and Historical Background

Before organized radio stations took over the airwaves, hobbyists let their imaginations run riot over the unexplored dimensions of radio. Because early radio reception was spotty at best, listeners often conjured ideas of ghosts, spirits, and extra-terrestrials to explain unfamiliar sounds through the airwaves. Listeners purchased additional tools like the Radio Master Wave Interceptor to try to boost reception, but saw little success. It would take years of technological developments before listeners knew where the broadcast was coming from or who was speaking. Listeners commonly imagined that voices heard on the radio were miles, or even worlds, away and imagined voices floating through the boundaries of space and time to reach their ears through the new and exciting electronic equipment. Radio scholar Neil Verma writes that “artists and spiritualists attempted to use the medium to build new sorts of music or speak to the dead” (100). However silly, early, unorganized efforts of radio began a path that would change the radio forever. Once radio stations became organized, modern radio took shape, producers realized that spooky stories on the airwaves mattered to listeners, and the serious horror genre blossomed.

In the early 1930s, producers and writers began creating shortened radio adaptations of gothic tales. They aspired to have the romance and horror of the gothic presented in a short amount of time, leaving space for the program’s sponsors. Verma explains, “CBS and NBC each aired versions of the Edgar Allan Poe story “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which was adapted “at least thirty more times from 1935 to 1953” (100). Radio

versions of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Washington Irving's "The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow" saw similar production numbers during the same time frame. Gothic radio adaptations found so much success that Edgar Allan Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Roget," an episode originally aired years earlier, was re-broadcasted as late as the 1960 season of *Suspense* (Episode #839—aired Feb. 7, 1960) as listener demand allowed for reruns of the most popular episodes.

In 1938, America was thrust into a new world of radio horrors as *Mercury Theater* broadcasted Orson Welles's sensational dramatization of aliens invading the Earth. Adapted from H. G. Wells's successful sci-fi novel published in 1897, the episode began as a regular evening music radio program which was interrupted by a fake newscast covering a developing story of a spaceship landing in a farmer's field. Many listeners believed the fictitious invasion to be real, which triggered intense audience reactions. Never before had a program inflamed and manipulated listeners to this extent. When asked in an interview if Welles felt he had unfairly taken advantage of the public during the episode, Welles replied,

I don't believe that I have, since it is not a method that originates with me. It is a method used by many radio programs. I'm terribly shocked by the effect [*War of the Worlds*] has had. I do not believe that the method is original with me or the *Mercury* program. ("George Orson Welles")

Earlier in the interview, Welles was accused of making the horror too real by placing it in an American town. He responded, "H. G. Wells uses local towns addressing an English audience. I was addressing an American audience, so the translocation was quite logical." Orson Welles was an expert at using methods of terror. He adapted the horror from an original novel and updated it for modern audiences. To do so, he borrowed methods that

worked well to create terror in the original novel and updated them for modern consumption. Jeff Porter writes in *Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling*, “[Welles] created the promise of a dominant narratorial presence only to deconstruct it” (63). Welles took a truly suspenseful story and incorporated the elements that created intrigue and fright only to reassemble the tale for his own purposes of terror. Reports of audience reaction to *War of the Worlds* fluctuate with the times; various scholars estimate anywhere from hundreds to thousands of phone calls to local authorities. The day after the program aired, headlines told of public outrage: “Fake Radio ‘War’ Stirs Terror Through U.S.”

Orson Welles’s sensational program became a significant event that marked radio as either pre- or post-*War of the Worlds*. Each program that followed the radio phenomenon was held to a new set of standards. While many programs had attempted to rouse listeners before 1938, Orson Welles had raised the bar. Jeff Porter discusses the transformation post-1938 as “an outburst of literary broadcasts [that] changed the sound of American radio” (3). Suddenly, a plethora of new programming was attempting to reach the star status of *CBS Mercury Theater*. Scholars refer to these exciting new programs by many different names: mystery, shocker, suspense, thriller, and horror. Welles’s hour of intensity added excitement to radio drama and accelerated the creation of new gothic inspired dramas, including *Suspense*. Communications scholars Joy Elizabeth Hayes and Kathleen Battles explain how vital *War of the Worlds* was for radio as a medium. Radio listeners experienced the “unidirectional power of mass media” represented in the program (3). Hayes and Battles write, “There is general scholarly

agreement that it stands as a testament to the dominating power of broadcast communication over audiences” (2).

Many other programs had experimented with radio horror; the genre, however, was still in its early stages. *War of the Worlds* marked a gothic radio horror starting line. The debut *Suspense* episode, broadcast under the program title *Forecast*, featured elements seen in both gothic literature and *War of the Worlds*. The first episode sought to reproduce a similar audience reaction earlier achieved by Welles: “The Lodger,” originally adapted in 1927 by the already famous Alfred Hitchcock, aired July 22, 1940 as a hair-raising tale modeled after Jack the Ripper. Set in a small, family-owned inn, a mysterious guest rents a room, but is soon believed to be a serial killer terrorizing the town. The episode ends abruptly without revealing the killer’s identity or capture. *Forecast* producers received dozens of letters from frightened listeners demanding answers. In his book *Suspense: Twenty Years of Thrills and Chills*, Martin Grams Jr. explains the reaction:

Hitchcock ended the story with neither a happy nor unhappy ending. He did not reveal the true identity of the lodger, in an attempt to get the listeners to write in and ask for the outcome. The device worked, the responses were overwhelming. (4)

While the program invoked plenty of excitement, the response did not lead to more listeners. After the unsuccessful beginning, producers would not claim their space as masters of horror until the program returned two years later under the *Suspense* title.

After the outrage created by the first episode, *Suspense* producers worked hard to present a unique experience. Their creation would build a listener loyalty that would celebrate the gothic tradition for decades to come. In 1942, *Suspense* debuted yet again

with “The Burning Court” starring Charlie Ruggles and inspired by John Dickson Carr.

The episode began with a caveat:

Stories from the world’s great literature of pure excitement, a new series frankly dedicated to your horror and entertainment. Week by week, from the pick of new material, from the pages of bestselling novels, from the theater of Broadway and London, and the sound stages of Hollywood will reign the most remarkable figures ever known.

The announcer explained that the content of each *Suspense* episode was inspired by great literature and theater to create horror and entertainment. This would be true throughout the program’s twenty-year broadcast and would peak in 1960.

With a strong foundation and strict boundaries, *Suspense* soon dominated the dramatic horror schedule. To meet the demand, *Suspense* had an extended team of fifteen writers responsible for creating new content each season. By 1960, only one episode of the season was not written by a *Suspense* writer. The staff also featured ten producers and four directors, including Norman MacDonnell, William Spier, William N. Robson, and Bruno Zirak, Jr. *Suspense* aired over 900 episodes, some of which were later adapted into full-length films, including “The Hitch-hiker” and “Sorry Wrong Number.” John Dunning explains in *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (only available in parts online) that *Suspense* was governed by “unwritten rules.” He writes, “*Suspense* dealt with life or death situations” which were “established in the first few minutes. Then, through characterization and audio coloring, little touches were added to heighten the sensation of impending doom.” He continues, “That’s what *Suspense* was all about: The slow tightening of the knot” (584-585). *Suspense* director William Spier wanted to feature tales of “people in trouble” and human emotions “stretched to the breaking point” (585). Relief from the *Suspense* formula ended with relief for listeners at the last possible

moment, directly before the end of the episode, and provided a conclusion that enabled listeners to breathe a sigh of relief.

CATHARISIS: ANXIETIES OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY

An Audience for Terror

In the 1960 season, *Suspense* episodes reach a pinnacle of terror through sound effects, domestic setting, and the use of the uncanny, and by doing so became a very successful program in the horror genre. The program had mastered the art of entertaining and thrilling listeners. *Suspense* also managed to offer an alternative to light-hearted family programs such as *The Aldrich Family* and *Father Knows Best*. However, by 1960, elements threatened *Suspense*'s core audience. The nation was quickly changing, both economically and politically. Racial tensions were becoming an ever present concern as American faced violence while trying to push integration. International threats from Cuba and South East Asia forced divided opinions on how the country should proceed. Divorce and distance were straining family relationships as families relocated for better employment. More and more American listeners found themselves unable to identify with the American Dream. While it is impossible to know exactly why American listeners gravitated towards the gothic horror program of *Suspense*, I argue that the political, economic, and social climate created an audience for terror. Pressures to "keep up with the Joneses" stretched family budgets to the breaking point. Fast paces of life included travel, work hours, school and club activities, and keeping up appearances added new stresses. Many American listeners gravitated towards scary stories as a way to purge emotion or seek emotional renewal, which I will refer to as catharsis. While all of these elements led to uncertainty, *Suspense* focused on the threatened American family as terror-filled content for the program.

Americans faced a plethora of tension and concerns about the future.

Entertainment, specifically the *Suspense* program, created a way to purge these emotions. The term catharsis is complex and offers many different definitions throughout literature. Catharsis is defined in *A Practical Introduction to Literary Study* as “emotional renewal through vicarious participation in the events depicted” (Brown and Yarbrough 97). Similarly, *The Norton Anthology of Drama* explains that *katharsis* is a release “of those stirred-up emotions—particularly fear and pity—and that dramatic art thus served a socially therapeutic function (Gainor, et al. 12). The expression of pity and fear is also present in *A Handbook to Literature* which says that catharsis is “through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Holman and Harmon 75). For the purposes of this thesis, I will draw on these definitions to define catharsis as an emotional renewal through participation in fictional events both socially and individually. I argue that *Suspense* created a venue for the release of listeners’s excess emotions through dramatic fear portrayed on the radio, and that the American public during the 1960s still represented an audience that appreciated these efforts.

One of the new dramatic traumas most important in the *Suspense* series was a play on the changing domestic relationships. In 1960, the American family was standing on the precipice of change. In his essay “The American Family Transformed,” David A. Hamburg explains

Until 1960 most Americans shared a standard set of beliefs about family life. A family should consist of a husband and wife living together with their children. The father should be the head of the family, earn at least half of the family’s income, and give his name to his wife and children. The mother’s main tasks were to support and facilitate her husband, guide her children’s development, look after the home, and set a moral tone for the family. (60)

The nuclear family represented a significant portion of the U.S. population. Families lived in modest homes on the outskirts of cities. The suburban demographic “accounted for most metropolitan growth during the century,” according to the US Census Bureau (Hobbs and Stoops 14). The baby boom after WWII resulted in record-breaking numbers of families with children. “The group under age 5 was again the largest, with a population of 16.2 million” (Hobbs and Stoops 54). The US Department of Labor states that average wages hit an all-time high in 1959 before slowly falling again in 1960 (*Employment and Earnings*). The economy had been on the rise in 1959; however, 1960 looked as if it the economy would once again recede towards desperate times. The representation of a stable American economy was the American family, consisting of fathers who worked for decent wages and mothers who stayed home with children. Suburban life was the fulfillment of the American Dream, and consumerism was the way to reach affluent status. However, many Americans did not see suburbia as an answer to their concerns. Many instead sought out entertainment that explored the darker sides of American life.

While not all families chose the darker side of entertainment in radio horror productions, those who did sought out one thing: terror. Television often overlooked real threats to family life in 1960 and focused only on problems that could be fixed by dear old dad with mom smiling supportively; however, radio programs like *Suspense* manipulated these threats to become a terrifying new expression of the gothic. Producers of the 1960 season redirected programming to focus on the domestic and speak directly to the unsatisfied homemakers and exhausted fathers found in suburban America. *Suspense* took goals of affluence and applied the theory of the uncanny to create real terror in a way that comforted listeners who faced similar pressures. Anxieties about the fluctuating

family and economy led many Americans to turn to television, film, and radio to escape widely held concerns. The only problem was that entertainment was also changing.

Suspense was “the last of its breed, held over from the golden age,” according to Jim Cox, author of *Say Goodnight Gracie-The Last Years of Network Radio* (159). *Suspense* clung to its audience in 1960 by becoming an option for listeners who didn’t buy into the television representation of wholesome radio programming. *Suspense* listeners understood that not all problems could be solved at the end of each episode. Television had created a visual representation of the stereotypical family, instead of only what they sounded like on radio. However, Americans who tuned in week after week began to notice that they did not match the representations they saw on the screen. Fear of war and conflict created an uncertainty for many Americans who needed a way to release anxieties about the world. *Suspense* became a way for many Americans to experience commonly held anxieties and concerns. The program became a type of catharsis for those who needed it most. Not every American believed that their lives matched episodes of *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Suspense* became an option for those who preferred intensified entertainment. By looking at what the program achieved for listeners, and how *Suspense* accomplished these feats, it becomes apparent that this horror program soothed listeners just as often as it terrified them.

Terror as Catharsis

Suspense producers began to make subtle programming changes at the tail-end of the 1950s to turn towards the domestic space as a location of fear. These changes provided a method to maintain a grasp on the *Suspense* audience by appealing to listeners

in new ways. I argue that *Suspense* fascinated listeners for three distinct reasons. First, the program reaffirmed that fear is normal and often appropriate. Second, *Suspense* recognized that for many people the home is not a setting for comedy and happy endings, but is instead a site of fear and terror. Third, the program soothed anxieties by heightening emotion leading to a sometimes traumatic ending that allowed listeners to purge their pent up emotions. *Suspense* became cathartic for listeners because the program featured extreme, uncanny entertainment while also shining light on fears widely held by listeners.

In the 1960 season of *Suspense*, the faceless monster lurking in the shadows transformed into a family member in the domestic household. In earlier seasons, *Suspense* mostly featured villains from outside the home for terror. Most often the subject matter was exotic and featured paranormal terrors of ghosts and ghouls. For example, episodes during the 1956 season feature international espionage (Episode #657—“The Music Lovers”), pirate adventures (Episode #656—“The Treasure Chest of Don Jose”), and big game hunters (Episode #644—“Game Hunt”). Whether a lion or a Ghost pirate, these episodes featured monsters of epic proportions and escapist destinations. Very few episodes took place in the family home or showcased villains from within the family. By 1960, domestic terror had reached a critical mass and almost every episode created fear and terror out of family situations and relationships.

Suspense captivated listeners by taking the monotony of their everyday life in suburban America and creating extreme situations too outlandish to be considered plausible. For example, “Ivy’s a Lovely Name for a Girl” (Episode #873—aired October 2, 1960) begins with the caveat “Not many of us rob banks, traffic with the supernatural,

or commit murder. Most of us play our part in one of the most suspenseful dramas man can experience: the birth of a baby.” This episode equates parenthood as more terrifying than ghosts and death. The horrific setting has become a home, fully furnished with a pregnant mom and nervous father. The villain is no longer a murdering spirit. Instead the 1960 season features a monster in the form of a newborn baby, road traffic, and a storm. In 1960, *Suspense* producers ignored the typical ghostly horror stories and instead chose to focus on a somewhat everyday occurrence of childbirth as a method of terror.

Suspense confirmed that real-life events held an appropriate level of fear, just as many new fathers are scared about the birth of a baby. However, *Suspense* took this fear and pushed it to its limits as a cathartic way to experience anxiety. In “Ivy’s a Lovely Name for a Girl,” the expectant mother has gone into labor and the family is stranded during a storm while trying to make it to the hospital. The episode ends with a successful birth, although the suspense occurs as the father tries to save his young son who has gone out to search for help in the median of the freeway. As cars fly by the young boy, radio listeners are captivated by the terror of the expectant father, desperate to save his son from the cars blinded by the rain of the storm. As the episode ends, listeners can take a deep breath and experience relief from their intense state of emotion.

By focusing of the domestic space as a location for fear, the 1960 season of *Suspense* proved that not all homes are happy. The small adjustment to setting allowed listeners to experience domestic topics under the disguise of horror. Often these episodes combined home life with outside influences that cause disruption. For example, family and money or marriage and infidelity are often paired topics. “The Long Night” (Episode #835—aired Jan. 10, 1960) features a young married couple who farms for their living.

The setting is a familiar farmhouse which is transformed to emphasize common social problems. A young wife is frustrated by her husband's unwillingness to share the wealth from the farm's production so she can buy nice clothing. A murderer escapes from a nearby institution and is prowling through the farmlands. The man who is thought to be the murderer holds the family hostage. However, the conclusion reveals that the escaped murderer was caught soon after fleeing, and the man holding the family hostage is the young wife's lover, come to rob the husband and run away with the wife. "The Long Night" emphasizes that a home can quickly become a place of fear and terror, even though the majority of popular programming doesn't maintain the sentiment. For example, a husband who fears his wife is unfaithful while he's away at work can experience "The Long Night" and feel relief at the resolution of the episode. He can relate to the parts of the story that echo his own life, but the story becomes cathartic through the heightened emotions involved. Listeners experience an emotional release when they identify with characters and who vicariously experience fear.

Infidelity is also the theme in "Bitter Grapes" (Episode #851—aired May 5, 1960). A frustrated housewife suspects her husband has been unfaithful. She plots to poison him after learning that she is suffering from a terminal illness. In the end, it is discovered that he wasn't cheating after all. Instead, he was working nights on a second project to earn more money for the household. She then races the clock to keep her husband from eating the poisoned dinner she left for him. "Bitter Grapes" creates a parallel of a bored housewife with too much imagination to listeners who are searching for excitement. She is consumed by the pressures of suburban life, which leads her to take drastic measures. Her hypochondria explores the risk of mental illness often

encountered by bored, unproductive, and completely restricted housewives. Suburban listeners experience elements that parallel their own lives. The fantasy creates a catharsis for listeners who face concerns of infidelity, financial issues, and both mental and physical illnesses. Listeners experience a surge of emotions as they witness the terrifying, yet extraordinary, consequences of terrible choices. At the end of the program, listeners find relief through the heightened fear. *Suspense* created an outlet for listeners to become frightened and find relief when the program ends.

Themes of bored women, illness, and infidelity continue in “Sorry Wrong Number” (Episode #840- aired February 14, 1960). Agnes Moorehead dials a phone number and overhears a murder plot. She calls the operator and describes what she heard:

Operator: (FILTER) Your call, please?

Mrs. Stevenson: (UNNERVED AND BREATHLESS) Operator, I’ve just been cut off.

Operator: (FILTER) I’m sorry. What number were you calling?

Mrs. Stevenson: (RAPIDLY) Why, it was supposed to be Murray Hill 7-0093 but it wasn’t. Some wires must have crossed -- I was cut into a wrong number and I -- I - I’ve just heard the most dreadful thing -- something about a - a murder and -- operator, you simply have to retrace that call at once!

Operator: (FILTER) I beg your pardon? May I help you?

Mrs. Stevenson: (FRANTIC) Oh, I know it was a wrong number, and I had no business listening, but these two men -- they were cold-blooded fiends -- and they were going to murder somebody, some poor innocent woman, who was all alone in a house near a bridge and we’ve got to stop them -- we’ve got to --

Operator: (FILTER) (PATIENTLY) Uh, what number were you calling, please?

Mrs. Stevenson: Well, that doesn’t matter. This was a wrong number. And you dialed it for me. And we’ve got to find out what it was immediately! (Roberts).

The episode’s transcript shows the importance of filtering, or making the sound seem far away through audiopositioning, as well as the emotional imbalance of the character

through queues like “breathless” and “panicked.” The operator’s patience is thinning while Mrs. Stevenson’s nagging brings listeners to the edge of exasperation. The episode’s focus on sound is crucial for the resolution of the tale. Mrs. Stevenson realizes that she is the intended victim as the episode ends with the following stage directions:

As Mrs. Stevenson becomes incoherent with fear and begins to scream, a train approaches and roars over a nearby bridge... As it fades, we hear a body thump on the floor... Then it passes and we hear the phone still ringing at the other end... The telephone is picked up.

Mrs. Stevenson loses her life because of her dependence on her home and the lack of agency she possesses as a disabled woman. These are two sentiments echoed throughout suburban housewives. Listeners could relate to Mrs. Stevenson’s loneliness and lack of mobility. By relating to the characters and situations within the 1960 episodes of *Suspense*, listeners could confirm that some situations in the household require an appropriate amount of fear. However, once the episode concludes, listeners find an emotional release through the entertainment of the darker side of radio.

A long-standing assumption on radio is that the bad guy never wins, and *Suspense* followed this unwritten rule for many years of the program. John Dunning writes in *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* that since the beginning of the program, it was essential to William Spier that “the bad guy never got away” (185). However, I argue that by 1960 this is no longer the case. In the early years, *Suspense* producers knew precisely how far they could push terror while maintaining a pleasant relationship with listeners, but by 1960, radio listeners needed more. Barbara Weeks published an article in *Modern Television and Radio* in 1948 titled “It’s Murder!” In the article, she explains overhearing her children playing an imaginary game based on the dramatic horror radio

show *Inner Sanctum*. The mother is initially concerned, but then calms when she realizes that in radio programs, the tradition states that good will always triumph over evil. However, twelve years after this story published, Weeks assumption would be wrong. In “Sorry Wrong Number,” Mrs. Stevenson is brutally murdered while the telephone operator tries to connect her call. In “Zero Hour,” Mr. and Mrs. Morris are killed by aliens as their child laughs in the background. In “Sleep is for Children,” a mother and her child witness their neighbor’s brutal murder. In “Bitter Grapes,” Mrs. Blake ends the episode at her dying husband’s hospital bed, regretting her vengeful decisions.

The 1960 season of *Suspense* responds to the changing times with a changed program. Television often plagued the airwaves with optimism and light-heartedness, when oftentimes listeners wanted to hear death and disruption. The loyal listening habits of the *Suspense* audience towards the end of the radio era show that many listeners sought a reprieve from *The Aldrich Family* and craved a program that mimicked the darker side of suburban America. Dear old dad cannot fix the problems featured on the 1960 season of *Suspense*; the gothicism of these episodes is far too strong. Dear old dad is missing during the *Suspense* hour; perhaps he’s left for the train for work, or perhaps he’s already dead. *Suspense* was able to create these tensions through both gothic and psychological effects mastered over the duration of the program.

THE UNCANNY

The psychological concept of the uncanny, defined by Freud as “a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it” and is featured in almost every episode of the 1960 season of *Suspense* (15). The *Suspense* program utilized the uncanny as one of several gothic characteristics that pressure rational listeners to accept irrational fears, and by doing so presented an opportunity for catharsis. The uncanny is another complex term that greatly varies in definition. Freud’s essay *The Uncanny* explores “all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror” (1). Freud equates the uncanny to a “class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (2). However, the feeling of creeping dread and tension between knowing that your fear is based in reality or pure fantasy is the method that produced that led to an emotions purge for listeners. The program achieves the uncanny most prominently through the use of two radio effects: sound and setting. These effects can be clearly seen in the 1960 season of *Suspense*. The tension of the uncanny lies in knowing, yet also not knowing. The uncanny can also occur when a character experiences déjà vu. Freud writes that “an uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed (17).

Freud was not the first to write about the uncanny and its influence on popular culture, just as *Suspense* was not the first program to use the uncanny to advantage; scholars, however, have not recognized Freud’s influence when looking at the mastery of radio horror. *Suspense* producers create the uncanny by placing episodes directly in the

domestic household, especially in the 1960 season, to feature characters achieving mundane tasks. However, the tactic of manipulating the familiar began much earlier in the program. On September 2, 1942, the uncanny is introduced by Orson Welles in “The Hitch-hiker” (Episode #11—aired Sep. 2, 1942). In his introduction, Welles explains that Lucille Fletcher wrote the episode specifically for him to play because “it seems I do have a reputation for the uncanny.” He continues:

A story doesn't have to appeal to the heart, it can also appeal to the spine. Sometimes you want your heart to be warmed and - sometimes you want your spine to tingle. The tingling, it's to be hoped, will be quite audible as you listen tonight . . . to 'The Hitch-Hiker.'

After this introduction, the uncanny would become a significant aspect of *Suspense* throughout the next two decades. The off-air roots of the uncanny began a hundred years earlier when gothic literature often used the uncanny to demonstrate how familiar places and situations can change into objects of terror. Familiar situations and settings are especially prominent at the program's peak season in 1960. The setting becomes perverse for listeners when the humdrum lives of characters are similar to their own. For example, in “Zero Hour” (Episode #834—aired Jan. 3, 1960), the scene opens with an ominous voice describing the innocence of children playing before becoming corrupted by outside forces. The familiar action of children playing is relatable, thus creating a possibility for the uncanny. Mrs. Morris' daughter collects household items like a colander and a hammer to take them under the rose bush in the yard to report back to the Martians, who are waiting for the items to accomplish complete destruction. The episode ends with Martians taking over the world and murdering all of the parents in the community. A

childhood belief in Martians is uncovered and forces listeners to confront an old, repressed fear.

The uncanny can also be seen in “Sleep is for Children” (Episode #843—aired Mar. 6, 1960) when a stubborn child repeatedly locks herself in the bathroom when frightened. When her mother’s life depends on whether or not the child opens the door, listeners experience a repressed fear of strangers and the dark. Another example of the uncanny occurs in representations of thunderstorms in “End Game” (Episode # 864—aired Jul. 31, 1960), aliens in “Report from a Dead Planet” (Episode # 861—aired Jul. 10, 1960), and time machines in “Time on my Hands” (Episode #872—aired Sept. 25, 1960). Each of these episodes creates fear by setting a scene that is familiar to listeners before the uncanny is released and childhood fears are confronted to create terror. Freud describes this representation of the uncanny as “when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (15). The uncanny then becomes a tension between our adult minds and our childhood imaginations. The tension exists in the space between where our adult minds understand that a threat is imagined; however, the threat still exists.

Freud’s theory of the uncanny explains how *Suspense* held radio domination for over 900 episodes. *Suspense* producers manufactured, packaged, and distributed the uncanny once a week for listeners to experience. Producers created a parallel of real life on the radio as a familiar environment as a stage to unleash the uncanny. The strange and chilling narratives, untethered to any particular time or place, represent a collaborative experience held by many American listeners during the time. The uncanny allowed *Suspense* to emerge as a program to be reckoned with on the airwaves in 1960. With the

uncanny and other gothic characteristics borrowed from great literature, *Suspense* became a pinnacle program of terror.

GOTHIC INSPIRATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Sound Effects

Among the strategies used by *Suspense* to exploit gothicism, sound effects, specifically disembodied voices and audiopositioning, was one of the most prominent. Culminating in the 1960 season, the *Suspense* program is often recognized for its pioneering work with sound. Sound effects made it possible for *Suspense* to create a tradition of using available technologies for a fully-engrossing experience. *Suspense* producers used sound to display distance, time, and action in ways that were unparalleled at the time. “Haunting sounds lie at the root of both gothic fiction and the modern habit of ghost seeking,” writes gothic expert L. Andrew Cooper. *Suspense*’s use of sound creates an experience that belongs entirely to the listener, rather than a shared visual experience like film and television. *Suspense* invokes an intimacy that is unique to radio and literature, which are media capable of individually imagined narrative.

In the early years, *Suspense* relied on a collection of gothic literature to make the series successful and sound made this possible; however, by 1960 *Suspense* producers were building on a longstanding tradition of sound as well as content. Their efforts stemmed from the ideas that gothic literature often used sound as a rhetorical tool, whether it was the moaning turret in *Jane Eyre* or the sounds of the howling beast in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Angela M. Archambault explains that sound in gothic literature is something that is “unable to be confined” and an “elusive ‘thing’ to control.” She writes,

Gothic novelists Radcliffe, Lewis, and Maturin experiment with its

potential as a menacing device that elicits terror. Orchestrating dissonance, cacophony, blasphemous chants and disembodied voices seems a choice occasion indeed to celebrate the chaotic force and contagion for which the genre is so well known.

Archambault explains that gothic literature and sound are dependent on one another.

Therefore, as the chaos of gothic literature exploded across the airwaves during the *Suspense* program, the sound effects used had to be dramatic and advanced to accelerate the terror.

The first significant sound effect I will analyze within the 1960 season of *Suspense* is disembodied voices, a term used by many radio scholars including Neil Verma, Michelle Hilmes, and Edward D. Miller to discuss sound within horror and suspense genres. Disembodied voices describe the effect of radio voices as ambient sounds unconnected to a physical body. Allison McCracken explains disembodied voices as she summarized work by Kaja Silverman when she writes, “As film scholars and radio historians have shown, the disembodied voice has long had the potential to discomfit listeners because it foregrounds the unnatural separation of the voice from the body” (184). Hearing a voice you cannot see is a paranormal effect that is often used in gothic literature and easily transformed into broadcasted radio horror.

Suspense producers took advantage of disembodied voices in many episodes in the 1960 season including “Sorry Wrong Number” (Episode #840—aired Feb. 14, 1960), when Mrs. Stevenson hears disembodied voices through the telephone when home alone. The disconnected voices discuss a murder that will take place that evening. Through telephone interference and static, Mrs. Stevenson can hear them, but they cannot hear her. The bad telephone connection in the background and Mrs. Stevenson’s cries in the

foreground creates a distance and eerie effect for radio listeners. Mrs. Stevenson works feverishly to prevent the murder, not knowing that the person the men are planning to kill is her. Similarly, in “Bitter Grapes” (Episode #851—aired May 5, 1960), Mrs. Blake hears the voice of her loyal husband on a record player when she is overcome with guilt for planning his death. It is the sound of his voice, transcending space and time on the record player that wracks her with guilt. She knows that she is hearing a voice from a time before she condemned her husband to death and yearns to return to that state of innocence. Both examples use disembodied voices to create a chilling representation of space and time.

While the supernatural wasn't the focus of the program, especially during the 1960 season, disembodied voices added a paranormal effect to add to the eeriness of the program. Edward D. Miller explores the connection between voices and physical bodies in his book *Emergency Broadcasting and 1930's American Radio*. He writes that we must understand disembodied voices in two ways:

First, this voice is itself an entity that can be thought of as having texture and consistency. Second, the listener, in hearing the vocal disembodiment, imagines a specific body. Depriving an auditor of the source of the voice provokes a fantasy of the original body. This is part of our cultural training; as beings that hear, we always look to see what occurrence has produced a sound. (6)

Sound effects allowed suspenseful radio programs to claim a specific space within listeners' imaginations. This fantasy is the familiar result previously created by a hundred years or more of gothic literature. These literary effects, both on and off air, were an effort to captivate listeners in the narrative.

Often in 1960 *Suspense* episodes, there is an additional twist on disembodied

voices that produces a metacognitive experience for listeners. This occurs when characters featured on the program are also listening to the radio, which means that program listeners are listening to the radio along with the character on the program. This effect is seen in “Zero Hour” (Episode #834—aired Jan. 3, 1960) and “The Long Night” (Episode #835—aired Jan. 10, 1960). Both episodes feature a woman at home listening to the radio while completing household chores. The metacognitive experience of listening to fictional characters listening to the radio, and hearing the same radio programming the characters hear, creates a direct parallel between characters and listeners. The parallel situation becomes increasingly eerie if the program listeners at home are also women attending to household chores. Creating a dramatic parallel between fiction and real life through the use of disembodied voices adds an additional layer to the total immersion of drama. However, disembodied voices were just an aspect of a complete narrative of sound, a tactic that *Suspense* mastered by the 1960 season.

In addition to disembodied voices, the second crucial sound effect I will analyze is audiopositioning, a phrase coined by Neil Verma to represent a three-dimensional sound environment by using sound as a rhetorical tool. Creating a total dramatic effect is one of the many reasons that the *Suspense* program aired for more than twenty years. Neil Verma explains that the trick to audiopositioning is letting the listener feel like their mental picture “is his or her own invention” (37). Verma writes that William Robson, Norman MacDonnell, and Elliot Lewis “coaxed listeners to become invested in dramatic outcomes by first establishing audioposition alongside a character in distress and then introducing menacing sounds from the outer edge of earshot” (37). Audiopositioning

allowed *Suspense* producers to replicate gothic creaky houses and groaning turrets to create live versions of horror.

Audiopositioning allowed producers to create an imagined space with what Neil Verma calls “psychological sound effects,” a method that listeners had not experienced before *Suspense*. To explore this topic, Verma analyzes Lucille Fletcher and her acclaimed work as a writer and sound effect artist for *Suspense*. Rather than using sound for simple signals like a door opening or a horse running, Fletcher explored the psychology of sound and how listeners interpret it. He describes audiopositioning effects when he writes that “directors no longer used effects just to set scenes, but also for more challenging purposes, like using oscillations to signify that a character felt faint or seasick” (91). The oscillations, which can otherwise be seen as speaking through an electric fan, creates a feeling of claustrophobia or unease for listeners. In this way, sound not only creates action, but also an emotional effect as well. These sounds then become signals that explore not only the script, but also express how listeners should feel while experiencing the horror of the program. Using household items as sound effects represents just one of the ways that *Suspense* producers learned that they could “use sound effects to explore interiority” and “draw pictures of the mind in the mind” (Verma 91-92). What initially began as simple footsteps up the stairs in “The Lodger” became terrifying sounds of crackling flames and air raid alarms in “Zero Hour” (Episode #834—aired Jan. 3, 1960) twenty years later.

Sound effects heard on the *Suspense* program created a depth and atmosphere of horror that other programs like *Inner Sanctum* and *The Witching Hour* could not offer. Many programs tried but could not match the intensity of the *Suspense* program. For

example, “Zero Hour” (Episode #834—aired Jan. 3, 1960), an adaptation of a Ray Bradbury story, takes place in a suburban home where Mrs. Morris and her daughter are enjoying an average summer day similar to what we would expect to see on *The Aldrich Family* or *Father Knows Best*. Radio listeners can hear neighborhood children laughing and playing in the yard. The children are playing a game called invasion, which confuses Mrs. Morris. While Mrs. Morris is on the phone long-distance, radio listeners hear the disembodied voice of another mother who explains that her children are also playing invasion. Mrs. Morris is concerned, but excuses the children’s behavior until her daughter informs her that the invasion will take place at five o’clock. Mrs. Morris becomes very concerned and repeatedly calls information to check the time. At this point, listeners hear the disembodied voice of the operator counting down the seconds until the invasion is scheduled to begin. As Mrs. Morris then hears the clock strike five times followed by a distant humming that gets louder as the threat approaches, she is placed in an uncanny situation where her rational mind excuses the irrational threat. What comes next is a sensory onslaught of confusion and fear as the children’s invasion results in an alien attack who are determined to rid the world of all adults. Sounds effects used by “Zero Hour” enhance the terror of an alien invasion in ways unheard of on the radio at the time. In this shining moment in 1960, *Suspense* officially rivals what the world heard from Orson Welles so many years before. “Zero Hour” sound effects included loud emergency sirens, oscillating voices, and sounds of children in the distance to create the ultimate atmosphere of terror. The importance of sound is visible by analyzing the “Zero Hour” script. For example, in the 22-minute program, the word “hear” is said eleven times. The

script also features 46 separate instances of sound effects, signaled by the use of the off screen signal F/X.

Domestic Space as Setting

In the 1960 season, *Suspense* sound effects were considered groundbreaking achievements, especially when added to familiar, domestic spaces that radio listeners were accustomed to. Through these methods, the program genuinely exploited the gothic spirit. *Suspense* producers mastered sound effects; however, these sounds worked best in a setting familiar to listeners, who would lose interest if forced to conjure space, action, and sound all at once. Producers discovered that to truly create what Neil Verma calls “theater of the mind,” producers must rely on a familiar setting, which is exactly why William Spier insisted that the program must feature average people with average problems in an average setting. *Suspense* producers often chose the domestic household as a setting, which then became a favorite for *Suspense* writers during the 1960 season.

Suspense excelled at showcasing tales of everyday terror set in the suburban American home. This theme, taken from gothic literature, orients listeners within a domestic living space only to disorient them through the events that occur within a familiar location. *Suspense* producers believed in “staying close to home, with realistic themes and common-man heroes” (Dunning 585). However, when combined with gothic characteristics, *Suspense* reaches through the airwaves to inhabit the homes of radio listeners by giving each location agency. In 1960, almost half of the episodes take place in a domestic setting and feature middle-class American families.

Suspense producers had long known that great gothic tales often included a

location that represents the romance and horror of the story. However, this gothic characteristic would take a new direction for the 1960 season. In gothic literature, whether it is a castle or a bedroom, there must be a place of fear to ground the narration. While gothic locations were often extravagant, *Suspense* producers decided to experiment with what would occur if the gothic appeared in the average American home. Whether it is the *Castle of Otranto*, *Castle of Wolfenbach*, or *Wuthering Heights*, architecture is a crucial element to the gothic genre. *Suspense* borrows this element from gothic literature, while also developing a modern twist to create thrilling terrors grounded in the American home. By creating a scene listeners are familiar with, producers are able to instantly immerse the audience in narrative rather than providing elaborate backstories.

Suspense producers revived and then inhabited the gothic castle/home as a method of fear for the 1960 season while wreaking havoc on the stereotypical American family. For an example of this gothic characteristic, we can return to “Sorry Wrong Number” (Episode #840—aired Feb. 14, 1960). The entire drama takes place in Mrs. Stevenson’s living room between the telephone and radio. For another example of domestic place as setting we can return to “Zero Hour” (Episode #834—aired Jan. 3, 1960) where an average home is invaded by aliens through help from the neighborhood children. Yet another example is the episode “Sleep is for Children” (Episode #843—aired Mar. 6, 1960) when a mother and child are alone in their home when a serial killer enters their domestic space. They must use the tools available to them within the home for their survival. In all three of these episodes, the woman of the house is left home alone, both with children and without, while her husband is away at work.

Featuring female protagonists was not a happy accident. *Suspense* specifically

targeted the middle-class demographic, which usually consisted of women home alone during the day while husbands were away at work. Allison McCracken analyzes *Suspense*'s focus on the domestic home in her essay "Scary Women and Scared Men." McCracken analyzes the connection between the household and women's influence in the terror genre. She writes "the majority of radio listeners had always been assumed by advertisers to be women," which lead to *Suspense* programs increasingly being "set within the home" through the later years of the program (187). She continues, "The home becomes a place of terror" (187). By placing narratives of fear in an average American household, *Suspense* producers were able to not only inhabit the location where the episodes were being heard, but also manipulate the safety felt in this setting. By reaching the heights of fear, *Suspense* was able to evoke a type of emotional renewal for listeners.

CONCLUSION

Suspense producers adopted traditionally gothic characteristics of sound effects and domestic space as setting to create the uncanny in the 1960 season. Producers did so to push the limits of radio drama and create an unparalleled program of fear. Through these methods, *Suspense* found the formula to succeed for twenty years to become what Jim Cox calls “spine-tingling drama with just the right edge for it to be believable” (159). The frightening routine created by *Suspense* for American listeners became more than entertainment. The *Suspense* program created a cathartic outlet for those listeners who were especially troubled in the 1960s. Changing times created an environment where *Suspense* had to adapt or face cancelation as popular radio programs made it to the television screen. However, the best programs, including *Suspense*, dominated radio for a few more years. Because of the changing entertainment sector, *Suspense* was left in seclusion on the radio with room to excel.

Creating a program like *Suspense* to challenge the American stereotypes is an achievement in itself; however, when acknowledging the success of *Suspense* in 1960, we can begin to see how special the program was. By analyzing the *Suspense* content, themes, and success, I argue that *Suspense* was not a run-of-the-mill thriller series. Something more was happening when listeners tuned in each week. The gothic characteristics outlined created a perfect storm of psychological events to explore, reveal, and release the fears faced by Americans in 1960. The American family was facing uncertainty and this anxiety was represented in *Suspense* episode content. Listeners were captivated by the socially unacceptable topics because they represented the fears felt

within their own homes. Horror that captured the imagination through fantastic endings proved that the darker side of domestic concerns could be seen as a catharsis, or a healthy outlet for fear.

Throughout this argument it has been my intention to showcase the power and importance of *Suspense* and other radio dramas, both in 1960 and the twenty years prior. The few scholars who have addressed radio horror have stated that these brilliant radio programs are worthy of additional scholarship. For example, Alison McCracken introduces her essay “Scary Women and Scared Men” with a caveat expressing the importance of radio thrillers. She writes,

Thrillers were the fastest-growing radio genre during the war, and they dominated postwar radio; their popularity was rivaled only by radio’s top comedy-variety shows. These programs and stars, almost entirely neglected by scholars, provide rich sources of cultural information. (183)

J. Fred MacDonald echoes these sentiments when he writes, “Audio broadcasting has not received the scholarly attention its popularity and endurance merit” (304). Through my work, and the work of others, it is my hope that more scholarship will be done to explore the dominance of radio during these crucial years of our nation’s development. From 1930-1962, America was experiencing some of its most tumultuous and rewarding events, and radio was the means of exposure to current events as well as entertainment. The anxieties felt by radio listeners can be seen by analyzing radio programs from the time. It has been said that art imitates life, and radio programs are a great example of this idea at work.

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