

Research on Sound Writing in Virginia Woolf's Novels: A Literature Review (2002-2022)

Lan Li^{1, a}

¹ College of International Languages and Cultures, Hohai University, Nanjing 211100, China

^a ll87616@163.com

Abstract

In recent years, there has been an auditory turn in literary studies as a result of concerns about the imbalance of the senses under the crush of visual centrism. In modernist literature, the sound writing in the classic works of the stream-of-consciousness novelist Virginia Woolf has become an important object of study, given the stream-of-consciousness novel's focus on various human perception. On the one hand, Woolf's sound writing conveys her social and humanistic concerns in a modern context, on the other hand, it contributes to the formal innovation of her novels and the organic fusion of form and theme, both of which are the manifestation of her modern works. This paper reviews the research on the sound writing in Woolf's novels over the past 20 years, starting from a review of domestic and abroad research on sound and hearing. The author argues that exploring the modernity of sound writing in Woolf's works can provide a new and reliable sample for the research of sound, and enrich the study of Woolf. At present, the theoretical terminology and research paths of sound and aural studies are still under construction, and many problems remain to be solved, leaving much space for research.

Keywords

Virginia Woolf, Sound writing, Literature review, Literary criticism.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the literary and art theorists at home and abroad have begun to work on restoring the balance between the visual and auditory senses, in response to the imbalance of the senses under the squeeze of visual centrism. At present, research on hearing from home and abroad covers many fields in the humanities and social sciences, with a wide range of studies. There are many research results that have been achieved, but in literary studies the theoretical terminology and research paths related to sound and hearing are still under construction, and many problems remain to be solved, leaving more space for research. Based on this situation, the writer believes that the re-examination of the sound writing and hearing in classical works can provide a new and more reliable sample for the study of sound.

Some Western critics have pointed out that sound and aural writing is of great importance in modernist literature because of its emphasis on the inner life, especially in the stream-of-consciousness fiction, which focuses on the complex variety of human perceptions. Therefore, sound and aural writing has developed considerably in stream-of-consciousness fiction. Virginia Woolf is considered as a representative of stream-of-consciousness fiction, a pioneer of feminist thought, and an "apocalyptic aesthete" [1], whose novels are worthy subjects of study. Her modernist conception of aesthetics and her artistic practice of fiction were heavily influenced by both visual and aural art, yet scholars have focused more on Woolf's visual art and less on aural art.

Virginia Woolf wrote a number of essays on sound, such as “Music in the Street”, “Opera”, and the essay “String Quartet”. Unfortunately, the writing of sound in his works has not received the attention it deserves, because research has mostly been conducted from a musicological perspective. But in fact, Woolf’s classic works now contain a huge sound library: the sounds of nature in the countryside, the sounds of people talking, the sounds of sound technology such as telephones and phonographs, the annoying mechanical noise, the air raid sirens of war, etc. These sounds together form the soundscape of the city. Woolf argues that the creative use of sound, drawing from the qualities of auditory affinity and acceptance, can point the way out of the crisis of the self and the crisis of relationships in the modern historical context. Specifically, the subject actively influences the external sounds he hears, using the three sound arts of silence, chanting and harmony to create a suitable way of being for the self in a broken modern society. Woolf envisages a mode of hearing in which the harmony of all things can be heard. In this mode, the communication between subject and object is two-way, so that one can bridge differences and communicate between self and other, thus realizing Woolf’s idea of harmony and unity. Therefore, the author believes that “re-listening” to Woolf’s works and exploring the modernity of sound writing in Woolf’s works can add to the study of sound, and at the same time can expand and enrich the study of the classic author Woolf.

2. A Critical Review on Sound Writing of Domestic and Overseas Studies

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the emergence of new sound technologies such as radio, sound recording, the phonograph, and there has been a gradual increase in scholarly research into sound issues, alongside the study of sound in literature. The term “soundscape” was first coined by the Canadian scholar Murray Schafer, who in 1968 combined the words sound and landscape into a new word, giving birth to a new concept, soundscape. Schafer opened up a new way of perceiving the world for academics, with sound, which always existed as a background, being foregrounded. Images are often thought of as the art of space, while sound is often thought of as the art of time, yet Schafer inspires us to notice that there is also a space for sound. Besides, the soundscape demands that we pay attention to the whole of all the sounds that make up the surroundings of human existence. Focusing on the Victorian soundscape, John Picker analyses in detail the sound in the works of writers such as George Eliot, Bram Stoker and Joseph Conrad, suggesting that “the impact on literature was a fine listening of the heightened interest” [2]. Steven Connor breaks a new ground by linking the study of auditory perception to the literature of 20th century. He understands the self as a “modern auditory I”, a self that is connected to the world through sound. [3]

The study of sound writing in foreign countries has begun early in history and covers many fields. The breadth of research has reached a high level, with many theoretical achievements. However, the research on auditory narrative in the field of literature is not deep, and there is no real discursive framework or theoretical system for the study of auditory narrative. Therefore, there is not enough discussion of the sound landscape in literary works. In the last decade, the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary discussion of sound and listening in Western scholarship has involved many dimensions of human civilization, including sound technology, sound experience, sound control, sound editing, digital storage, aesthetic interpretation, etc. One of the most iconic events was the publication in 2012 of two anthologies of sound studies: the first, a book entitled *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne, professor of Art History at McGill University, Canada, and the other is *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, co-edited by Trevor Pinch, a sociologist at Cornell University, USA, and Karin Bijsterveld, a specialist in the history of science at Maastricht University, the Netherlands.

The boom of aural culture research in domestic literary circles has had a relatively small impact. From the year of 2003 to 2008, Lv Wenbin was the first scholar to raise the topic of aural issue

in China. In the last decade, scholar Fu Xiuyan was the first to launch theoretical research on auditory narrative in China, publishing his article “A Preliminary Exploration of Auditory Narrative” in 2013, which aimed to address the “deafness” in literary studies and guide people to discover the artistic value of auditory narrative. [4] His essay “On Soundscapes” [5] and “On Auscultation” [6] both provide a more detailed introduction to sound theory terminology abroad. In “A Theoretical Construct on Listening Narrative”, Fu focuses on three issues concerning listening narrative respectively, namely the historical origins and theoretical studies of listening narrative, the necessary conditions for realizing listening narrative and the feasible strategies for listening narrative. [7] In Wang Dun’s article, Wang clarifies the relationship and distinction between the study of sound and hearing, and points out that the most pressing issue in the study of auditory culture is the construction of a discursive framework. [8] In recent years, scholars have also discovered the rich interpretative space of sound in literary works. Fu Xiuyan examines the auditory narrative in Calvino’s novel *The King Listens* and affirms the idea of “phonetic uniqueness”. [9] Li Jing analyzes the sound imagery in Joseph Conrad’s novel *The Heart of Darkness*, arguing that the phonograph-like voice of the protagonist indicates Conrad’s anxiety about modern reproduction technology. [10]

All in all, there is a growing trend in the study of sound and aural issues in the humanities, both nationally and internationally. The scope of research extends from auditory culture, the history of sound culture and sound theory to auditory narratives, and it is applied to literary studies. Compared to the emphasis on sound studies abroad, the domestic tendency is towards aural culture studies, introducing aural narratives into literary studies and providing new perspectives for the interpretation of classic texts.

3. A Critical Review on Sound Writing in Woolf’s Novels of Overseas Studies

Foreign scholars have begun to study the sound in Woolf’s novels earlier, with a relatively broad vision and in-depth investigation, and the scope of research has extended to sound technology, auditory perception, musical characteristics and other aspects, but also made attempts and explorations on the political theme of sound criticism.

Firstly, the impact of developments in sound technology and the theoretical construction of aural narratives. Melba Cuddy-Keane published two essays affirming the positive impact of new sound technologies on Woolf’s writing. The essay “Virginia Woolf, Sound Technology and the New Hearing” analyses the physical nature of sound, noting that with the advent of recording technology, Woolf’s work demonstrated a new understanding of sound. [11] Combining this with the advent of new broadcasting technology in 1925, Keane suggests that Big Ben, which constantly echoes over London in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is in fact the equivalent of a broadcasting tower that transmits information in all directions. The thesis goes on to point out the parallel development of the sounds depicted by Woolf with the new methods evident in radio, sound recording and early experiments in musical synthesis. [11] His paper “Modernist Soundscapes and Intellectual Listening: A Narrative Study of Auditory Perception” uses Woolf’s short story *Kew Gardens* and the longer novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Years* and *Between the Acts* as examples to examine the function of the sense of hearing in modernist narrative, while at the same time it constructs an innovative theoretical terminology and methodology for the reproduction of sound in narrative. Keane suggests that the terms “auscultation, stethoscopy and stethoscopes” are used to study auditory narratives, parallel to the terms “focus, focusification and focuser” in visual narratives. [12] Angela Frattarola draws on developments in recording technology to examine the flow of sound portrayal in Woolf’s work. She introduces the musical term “Found Sound” Samples to Woolf’s novel to explain her sound writing. Gleaned sound sampling is an art form of recording that allows real sounds from the

real world (e.g. sirens, rain, roaring cars, street conversations, etc.) to be transformed into music. According to Frattarolla, Woolf's depiction of sound evolved from the conceptual description of sound in her early works to the reproduction of sound "in itself" in her later works, such as the repetition of pictographs, "ding" and "thud". [13]

Secondly, thematic critical studies. Rishona Zimring's "Suggestions of Other Worlds: The Art of Sound in *The Years*" focuses on the conflicting and dissonant sounds in *The Years*, calling it "a novel about urban heterogeneity" and noting that in this novel "it is the auditory rather than the visual that connects the reader to a pluralistic world" [14].

Thirdly, the study of musical influences. Elicia Clements published two papers in 2005 examining the musical influences in Woolf's writing. In contrast to the use of music theory to analyze Woolf's work, "Transforming Musical Sounds into Words" focuses on the correspondence between specific musical works and their compositions. [15] The paper meticulously compares Beethoven's late work String Quartet No. 130 in B flat major with the specific process of Woolf's composition of *The Waves*. It suggests that the quartet provided Woolf with a new form of fictional composition, thus allowing Woolf to reconstruct the concept of character. "Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth, and Music: Listening as a Productive Mode of Social Interaction" examines the influence of composer Ethel Smith's close association with Woolf on the musical performance of her work, focusing on the musical writing in *Between the Acts*, starting with Woolf's interpersonal interactions. [16]

Fourthly, a comparative study. Angela Frattarola's article "Developing an Ear for the Modernist Novel: Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce", examines the sound writing of three of the more representative writers in modernist literature, arguing that modernist writers draw on auditory experience to subvert traditional notions of self and narrative, while comparing the three writers' different auditory themes and narrative strategies. [17]

Foreign research on Woolf's voice and aural aspects began early and has become more advanced and innovative. Foreign scholars have been keenly aware of the parallel between new technological developments and Woolf's sound writing. Besides, their research has ranged from musical influences, aural narratives, and thematic criticism to the reproduction of real sounds, opening up a new path for Woolf's research. However, there is still room for progress. For example, the studies are mostly focused on one work and the number of studies in the last decade is relatively small. Many scholars abroad have taken either an optimistic or a negative view of the theme of sound as expressed in Woolf's work. In fact, many studies have hinted at Woolf's ambivalence towards sound, but no research has been conducted in this area. While modernist works tend to have a negative attitude towards technological advances and the alienation of people in the face of materialism, and the urban noise in Woolf's works presents the theme of emancipation of the character's minds. The characters' auditory perception of sound in Woolf's work, which is both positive and negative, corresponds to the dual experience that the modernization process had brought to human.

4. A Critical Review on Sound Writing in Woolf's Novels of Domestic Studies

Through the collection of the main research materials at home and abroad, the author found that the domestic Woolf-related studies have mainly studied the musicalized forms and themes of Woolf's works from the perspective of musicology, and some achievements have been made in this area. However, the research texts are mainly limited to the two novels, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, and there is much repetition of views. There are also a few papers that interpret other themes in Woolf's work, such as feminism and historical perspectives, in terms of the discourse embodied by sound, but these studies do not take sound ontology as their main focus.

In contrast to the foreign research community's focus on the sound and aural dimensions of Woolf's work, domestic academic research has mainly focused on the musicological aspects. The earliest relevant study in China was that in 1987 Qu Shijing had the insight to point out that Woolf's works made use of a combination of artistic elements such as music, painting and film. Unfortunately, research on the musical qualities of Woolf's novels was relatively rare for the next 11 years. It was only after 2000 that the musical characteristics of Woolf's works began to attract attention. From 2000 to 2010, in the decade, research on the musical arts in Woolf's works gradually heated up. Yu Bing argues that Woolf draws on the form of musical works to construct a place of dependence for his work. [18] In 2004, Dong Xiaohang's Master's thesis, "Stream of Consciousness, Poeticization and Musicality: On the Art of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*" has a special chapter on the musical art in *To the Lighthouse*, but unfortunately, it is only an expansion of Yu Bing's views and does not present any new ideas. [19] Chen Kaimei's Master's thesis, "A Study of Features of Music in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*" shifts the research perspective to the interpretation of *The Waves*. She explores the musical characteristics of the novel from four aspects, structure, content, imagery and language, and concludes that the novel *The Waves* has an overture-like introduction, a polyphonic narrative and a sonata-like internal structure. [20]

In addition to the study of Woolf's novels in terms of musical art, a small number of papers broaden the study of Woolf's sound writing from the perspective of the silence and discourse of female characters and the voice of "the other". They interpret other themes in Woolf's work, such as feminism and historical perspective, in terms of the discourse embodied by sound. These studies do not focus on the ontology of sound as their primary focus. However, examining the complex and varied portrayal of sound in Woolf's work can help readers understand the importance Woolf places on the subject's perceptual writing. Yu Zixun's "The 'Voice' of Silence: Constructing the Meaning of Women's Silence in *To the Lighthouse*" starts with the "silence" of the female characters in *To the Lighthouse*, arguing that silence subverts the negative meanings that have been reflected in the past. It is instead a reflection of the female characters' character and resistance, and the silence also plays a positive role in the novel's narrative. [21] Yu Li dissects the voices in *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of feminist narratology, finding that Woolf's strategy of compromise and concession to the hegemony of male discourse limits the transmission of a truly female voice. [22] He Dan's "The Voice of the Other: On the Reconstruction of History in *Between the Acts*" is an in-depth analysis of the "voiceless" "the other people" in *Between the Acts*, exploring the social and historical reasons behind the phenomenon of the voiceless Other and pointing out that Woolf hopes to reconstruct history through art. [23]

The only thesis in China that focuses on sound shows the reproduction of real sounds in Woolf's works from the perspective of "anthropomorphism", providing a more detailed and clear analysis of the sound and musical properties of Woolf's works. Zuo Lu's "Virginia Woolf's Vocal Writing: An Analysis of the Aural Dimension in Woolf's Three Novels" analyses the aural narratives of Woolf's three novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* by introducing the musical term "Found Sound" Sampling. She argues that Woolf incorporates the sounds of the real world into her novels. [24] She points out that Woolf is not satisfied with the description of sound, but rather reproduces the real sounds of nature through "anthropomorphism" (e.g. the sound of a car horn, the "da, da, da" of a gramophone, etc.). It can be said that this essay analyses the sound and musical properties of Woolf's work in some detail and clarity. However, it is the author's particular perspective on the reproduction of real sounds that makes the work unique, but also reveals the limitations of an inadequate study of sound. The author's analysis of the sonic dimension of Woolf's work is mainly limited to the real sound reproduction represented by the "onomatopoeia", while ignoring the literary imagination of

sound that is present in a large number of Woolf's works. The literary imagination of the voice involves the thought processes of the characters and the perception of the self, which is original.

5. Conclusion

Virginia Woolf had written ten novels in her lifetime. The sounds in Woolf's novels can be broadly divided into five categories: artificial sounds (i.e. technically created sounds), natural sounds, voices, music, and a particular form of sound, silence, which is expressed in the works as stillness or silence. Sounds such as artificial sounds, natural sounds and silence are the real sounds of the external world and are the main components of the soundscape. Words, music and silence, on the other hand, are sounds that require human influence to be produced and can be called sound art. The unique sound and aural aesthetics constructed in Woolf's novels are related to the historical period, social environment and personal situation she lived in. Her early life experiences related to music and acoustic technology, war noise experiences, music and other sounds had a strong influence on Woolf's life and creations. On the one hand, Woolf's sound writing conveys her social and humanistic concerns in a modern context, and on the other hand, it contributes to the formal innovation of her novels and the organic integration of form and theme, and it is an important expression of the modernity of her work.

Through the collection of relevant research materials from home and abroad, the author found that foreign studies on sound, on the other hand, are mainly distributed in several aspects, such as the development of sound technology and Woolf's parallel writing, musical influences, biographical interactions, and political themes. However, they do not investigate the duality of Woolf's sound writing, which can embody the trajectory of the awakening and struggle of the subject realized by the novel's characters through auditory perception. The study of sound writing in Woolf's novels began earlier in foreign countries and covers a wider range of topics. Domestic critics have mainly studied the musicalized forms and themes of Woolf's novels from a musicological perspective, and research in this area has achieved some success and reached considerable depth. However, the texts studied are mainly confined to the two novels such as *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, and there is much repetition of views. A few papers have also interpreted other themes in Woolf's works, such as feminism and historical perspectives, in terms of the discourse embodied by sound. These studies, however, do not take voice ontology as their primary focus. In fact, the study of the complex and varied portrayal of sound in Woolf's works can help the reader understand the importance Woolf places on the subject's aural perception of writing. But the only domestic thesis that examines the aural dimension focuses on the presentation of real sound, that is, Woolf's technique of the "anodyne" writing. It lacks addressing the more complex aural perception processes, and the subject's creative imagination of sound, which have yet to be explored.

References

- [1] Bloom, H: *The Western Canon* (Trans Jiang Ningkang, Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House, China 2005). (In Chinese)
- [2] Picker, J: *Victorian Soundscape* (Oxford University Press, USA 2003).
- [3] Connor, S: *The Modern Auditory I. Rewriting the Self*, (2002) p.215-235.
- [4] Fu, Xiuyan: A First Look at Auditory Narrative. *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, (2013) No.2, p.220-231.
- [5] Fu, Xiuyan: A First Look at Auditory Narrative. *Foreign Literature Studies*, (2015) No.5, p.69-69.
- [6] Fu, Xiuyan: On Auscultation. *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, (2016) No.1, p.26-34.
- [7] Fu, Xiaoling: A Theoretical Construct on Auditory Narrative. *Academic Forum*, (2014) No.9, p.104-109.

- [8] Wang, Dun: "Sound" and "Hearing": The Discourse Construction of Auditory Culture Studies. *Academic Research*, (2015) No.12, p.151-158.
- [9] Fu, Xiuyan: What "You" Heard: Aural Writing and the Revelation of "Voice Uniqueness" in *The King is Listening*. *Tianjing Social Science*, (2017) No.4, p.108-124.
- [10] Lin, Jing: The Heart of Darkness: Sound Reproduction Metaphors and Conrad's Logos. *Foreign Language Education*, (2015) No.5, p.85-88.
- [11] Cuddy-Keane, M: Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality. *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Music, Cinema, Photography, and Popular Culture*, (2013) p.69-96.
- [12] Cuddy-Keane M: Modernist Soundscapes and the Intelligent Ear: An Approach to Narrative through Auditory Perception. *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, (2005), p.382-398.
- [13] Frattarola, A: Listening for "Found Sound" Samples in the Novels of Virginia Woolf. *Woolf Studies Annual*, (2005) No.2, p.133-159.
- [14] Zimring, R: Suggestions of Other Worlds: The Art of Sound in *The Years*. *Woolf Studies Annual*, (2002) No.8, p.127-156.
- [15] Clements, E: Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. *Narrative*, (2005) No.2, p.160-181.
- [16] Clements, E: Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth, and Music: Listening as a Productive Mode of Social Interaction. *College Literature*, (2005) No.3, p.51-71.
- [17] Frattarola, A: Developing an Ear for the Modernist Novel: Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, and James Joyce. *Journal of Modern Literature* 33 (2009) No.1, p.132-153.
- [18] Yu, Bing: Music as an Element of Form in Woolf's Novels Meaning in *To the Lighthouse*. *Yantai Normal University Journal (Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition)*, (2003) No.2, p.65-69.
- [19] Dong, Xiaohang: *Stream of Consciousness, Poeticization and Musicality: On the Art of Woolf's To the Lighthouse* (MS., Jilin University, China 2004).
- [20] Chen, Kaimei: *A Study of Features of Music in Virginia Woolf's The Waves* (MS., Nanchang University, China 2008).
- [21] Yu, Zixun: *Silent "Voices": Constructing the Meaning of Silence for Women in To the Lighthouse* (MS., Northeast Normal University, China 2007).
- [22] Yu, Li: Beautiful Visions Dissolved in Sound: Listen to the Sound in Woolf's Novel *To the Lighthouse*. *Gansu Social Sciences*, (2008) No.6, p.165-168.
- [23] He, Dan: *The Voice of the Other: On the Reconstruction of History in Between the Acts* (MS., Shandong University, China 2017).
- [24] Zuo, Lu: Virginia Woolf's Vocal Writing: An Analysis of the Aural Dimension in Woolf's Three Novels (MS., Jilin University, China 2007).