
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Listening After Benjy: Auditory Recalibration in The Sound and the Fury

Jialin Zhao

Guilin University of Technology, College of Foreign Studies, Guilin, Guangxi, China

Corresponding Author: Jialin Zhao **E-mail:** mohunqiansha@163.com

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that *The Sound and the Fury* does not merely represent contrasting modes of hearing but reorganizes the reader's auditory position through a discontinuous sequence of exposure to Benjy's distributed, cross-modal auditory field and Quentin's auditory fixation. Building on recent scholarship on negative audition, auditory phenomenology, and listening as exposure, it develops the concept of sequential recalibration: the reorganization of readerly audition produced by the ordered encounter with differently structured modes of perception. The essay employs formal close reading of the novel's first four sections, combined with phenomenological and narratological analysis. Benjy's distributed auditory field establishes an auditory horizon in which sound emerges through recurrence, bodily sensation, memory, and absence. Quentin's subsequent fixation on clocks disrupts this horizon by concentrating attention on mechanical repetition and temporal pressure. Because Quentin's section retrospectively alters the interpretation of Benjy's earlier cries and sensory associations, recalibration is recursive rather than progressive. The fourth section tests the ethical limits of this process through its racially mediated representation of communal listening. The essay concludes that narrative sequence can reorganize auditory attention without guaranteeing ethical recognition.

KEYWORDS

William Faulkner; *The Sound and the Fury*; auditory studies; narrative sequence; readerly audition; negative audition

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1. Introduction

Recent criticism has increasingly approached sound in *The Sound and the Fury* not only as a thematic motif but also as a formal condition of perception, narrative relation, and readerly audition. Julie Beth Napolin argues that narrative theory has been founded on an exclusion of sound, posing "a missing counterpart to modernism's question 'who speaks?' in the hidden acoustical questions 'who hears?' and 'who listens?'" (Napolin, 2020, p. 6). Her coda on *The Sound and the Fury* specifically argues that literary history itself becomes audible as a form of miscegenating sound (Napolin, 2020, pp. 103–114). This essay builds on that insight but shifts the emphasis from the novel's acoustic thematics to the reader's sequential auditory position.

Yael Segalovitz's 2023 essay develops the concept of "negative audition" to describe the mode of readerly audition that Faulkner's novel cultivates—a mode that requires readers to "attune themselves to sounds that one is socially and bodily taught to register as inaudible" (Segalovitz, 2023, p. 417). Segalovitz demonstrates how Benjy's cry and Quentin's clock activate different forms of negative audition and how the first two sections of the novel work together to modulate the reader's auditory experience. Her account provides a powerful description of the kind of auditory attentiveness cultivated by the novel. This essay asks a more specifically narratological question: how does the order in which such auditory configurations are encountered shape the reader's subsequent apprehension of sound? The distinction, then, is not between negative audition and sequence, but between an attentional mode and the formal process through which that mode is reorganized across narrative sequence.

By "sequential recalibration," I mean the process by which the reader's auditory disposition—established by Benjy's distributed auditory field—is disrupted and refocalized by Quentin's compulsive temporal fixation, such that the reader is required to inhabit two incompatible auditory configurations, whose incompatibility becomes the object of reflection. Here "sequence" refers to the order of narrative presentation rather than to chronological succession within the story world. If negative audition names a mode

of readerly audition, sequential recalibration names the formal process through which narrative sequence reorganizes that attention. The former concerns what becomes audible; the latter concerns how previous audition conditions the apprehension of what comes next. Juxtaposition produces contrast; succession produces a perceptual history.

This essay proceeds in four sections. The first examines Benjy's distributed auditory field and the relational attention it solicits. The second analyses Quentin's auditory captivity and his compulsive temporal fixation. The third develops the concept of sequential recalibration. The fourth tests the ethical limits of this process through the novel's racially mediated representation of communal listening. The argument does not equate cognitive disability with ethical receptivity; rather, it examines how Faulkner's representation of disabled perception reorganizes the reader's assumptions about attention, intelligibility, and communicative agency. In short, the essay asks how narrative sequence shapes auditory attention, argues that it does so through recursive recalibration, and thereby offers scholars a formal vocabulary for describing how listening becomes an ethical problem in Faulkner's novel.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws primarily on Don Ihde's phenomenological account of auditory intentionality, Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology of auditory exposure, and recent work in literary auditory studies that treats listening as a form of readerly audition structured by textual form (Leighton, 2018, pp. 1–30). This approach also aligns with recent narrative theory that treats auditory perception as an active, structural dimension of narrative rather than thematic content (Cuddy-Keane, 2005, pp. 382–398). Ihde's distinction between the "focus" of auditory attention and its "fringe" is especially useful: Quentin's attention is obsessively focused on the ticking watch while the rest of the auditory field—voices, cries, the sounds of the city—is relegated to an unheeded fringe (Ihde, 1976, pp. 72–83). By contrast, Benjy's auditory field is constituted through the coexistence of multiple sounds that do not compete for attention in the same way, a condition that resonates with Ihde's "polyphony of experience" in the auditory dimension (Ihde, 1976, pp. 117–131). Nancy's ontology of listening helps clarify the ethical dimension: for Nancy, listening is not mastery but exposure; to listen is "to be straining towards or in an approach to the self," but it is also "to be penetrated" by the sounds of the world (Nancy, 2007, pp. 6, 14). At the same time, "sound has no hidden face" (Nancy, 2007, p. 14). Listening, in this account, cannot be reduced to a subject–object relation in which the listener masters what is heard.

Existing scholarship has illuminated how sound structures individual sections or how particular characters experience auditory phenomena. Napolin has demonstrated that narrative theory has been founded on an exclusion of sound, and Segalovitz has shown how the novel cultivates a mode of "negative audition" that attunes readers to socially suppressed sound. Salmose has developed the concept of "cross-modal stylistics" to describe how sensory registers interweave in modernist fiction, and Chaloupka has examined how Benjy's "object attention" organizes his narrative. While these studies have illuminated how sound structures individual sections or how particular characters experience auditory phenomena, less attention has been paid to how the sequential placement of one section before another shapes the reader's subsequent mode of auditory attention. This essay addresses that gap by examining how reading Benjy's section first recalibrates the reader's auditory audition when entering Quentin's section, and what this sequential recalibration reveals about the ethical possibilities and limitations of listening in Faulkner's novel.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on the first four sections of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, using the 1984 corrected Vintage edition. The analysis proceeds sequentially: it first establishes the auditory expectations produced by Benjy's section, then traces how Quentin's section tests and reconfigures those expectations, and finally considers how the fourth section complicates the ethical implications of this recalibration. The reading examines auditory imagery, repeated sounds, footsteps, breathing, bells, clocks, voices, silence, temporal markers, and sensory transitions. It is informed by phenomenological and narratological accounts of auditory attention, particularly those of Ihde, Nancy, and Segalovitz, but the primary evidence remains the textual details of the novel.

4. Results

The analysis proceeds through four stages, beginning with Benjy's distributed auditory field as the initial horizon of readerly audition, then tracing how Quentin's section disrupts and refocalizes that horizon through temporal fixation, developing the concept of sequential recalibration to describe the formal process that links the two sections, and finally testing the ethical limits of this process through the novel's racially mediated representation of communal listening.

4.1 Benjy's Distributed Audition: Sensory Recurrence and Relational Attention

This section establishes the first term of the essay's sequential argument: Benjy's section as the auditory horizon against which Quentin's later fixation becomes legible. It argues that Benjy's narration presents a form of auditory receptivity organized through recurrent sensory cues that function as anchors for experience. This receptivity—while not a consciously achieved ethics—constitutes an ethical potential because it exposes the limits of interpretive mastery. The section also prepares for the

next by showing what will later be narrowed: a distributed, cross-modal auditory field in which sound is entangled with presence, memory, bodily affect, and absence.

To describe Benjy's auditory field as receptive is not to posit an unmediated or normatively superior consciousness. It is to identify a formal distribution of attention that emerges from the narrative representation of cognitive disability (Chaloupka, 2019, p. 370). Chaloupka's account of "object attention" focuses primarily on the visual and tactile registers of Benjy's narration; this essay extends his formal account to the auditory dimension by examining how recurrent sounds organize Benjy's sensory experiences.

Benjy's narration does not organize experiences according to a stable linear chronology. Instead, it follows an associative logic in which sensory cues—including sounds, smells, visual forms, and tactile impressions—trigger shifts between temporal moments. This is what Ihde describes as the "timeful" character of auditory experience: sound is experienced not as a discrete event located at a point on a timeline but as a duration that constitutes the present as already traversed by the past (Ihde, 1976, pp. 84–103). Benjy's section does not stabilize temporal succession in the conventional manner; recurrent sensory cues instead connect temporally distinct moments through associative transitions. He recognizes Caddy through a recurrent constellation of sensory cues, among which footsteps, voice, smell, and bodily presence are especially important. When Caddy is absent, her absence is registered as a sonic absence—a silence where her sounds should be. Benjy's bellowing after Caddy's departure is not simply an expression of grief but an attempt to fill the sonic absence with a sound of his own (Faulkner, 1984, pp. 48–49).

This form of listening has a major impact on how the reader understands attention and relationality in the novel. Benjy's attention to sounds is organized around recurrent auditory cues that function as anchors for his experience, rather than being subordinated to conceptual interpretation. Benjy's narration involves mediation—no perception is unmediated—but the mediation is less explicitly conceptual and more directly embodied. Salmose's concept of "cross-modal stylistics" is useful here: Benjy's narration exemplifies a mode of writing in which sensory registers—auditory, olfactory, and tactile—are not hierarchically separated but iconically interwoven (Salmose, 2020, pp. 321–335).

The phenomenon of Caddy's name is particularly instructive. For Benjy, the name "Caddy" often functions less as an abstract proposition than as a recurrent auditory cue bound to embodied memories of Caddy's presence. Caddy provides one of the clearest instances of relational listening in the novel: she consistently treats Benjy's nonverbal sounds as communicative rather than meaningless. "What is it, Benjy?" she says. "Tell Caddy. She'll do it. Try" (Faulkner, 1984, p. 48). When Caddy leaves the Compson household, this relational listening is strained; her departure reveals the limits placed on relational listening by family, gender, and social structures. Benjy's moans and cries at the gate can be read as a sonic response to an altered relational field: where Caddy's presence had once organized a recurrent constellation of voice, smell, movement, and touch, her absence leaves that constellation without its acoustic anchor.

It is important to emphasize that this potential is an ethical potential rather than a consciously achieved ethic. Benjy does not consciously choose to listen in this way; his receptivity is a condition of his perceptual and narrative orientation, not a deliberate ethical practice. The sounds of nature in Benjy's section also contribute to this potential: the rustling of trees, the singing of birds, and the lowing of cows enter the same associative field as voices, footsteps, smells, and bodily sensations. The buzzing of the trees that Benjy hears while Caddy climbs to look through the window is not subordinated to the visual scene but coexists with it as an auditory presence in its own right (Faulkner, 1984, p. 94). Benjy's section thus establishes an auditory horizon in which sound is entangled with presence, memory, bodily affect, and absence—a horizon that the reader will carry into Quentin's section, where it will be progressively narrowed and refocused.

4.2 Quentin's Auditory Captivity: The Clock and Temporal Fixation

Building on the auditory horizon established in Benjy's section, this section turns to Quentin. If Benjy's section organizes sound through distributed sensory recurrence, Quentin's section disrupts and refocuses that horizon by concentrating auditory attention on mechanical repetition and temporal pressure. Gleeson-White has shown that Faulkner's narrative art consistently stages auditory exposure as a condition in which sound arrives without the subject's consent (Gleeson-White, 2013, pp. 87–100); Quentin's captivity can be understood as a particularly intense dramatization of this condition. The section argues that Quentin's narration dramatizes an inability to regulate the temporal and affective pressures that recurrent sounds make perceptible and that his auditory captivity becomes fully legible only against the background of Benjy's distributed auditory field.

Quentin Compson's section of *The Sound and the Fury* is organized around a fundamental tension: Quentin hears sounds that he desperately wishes not to hear, and his narration repeatedly moves between the registers of listening and mere hearing. The most notable sounds are the ticking of Quentin's watch and the striking of the clocks that mark his day. The scene at the jeweller's window, where Quentin watches the clocks "in a sort of terror" and hears them strike, is the section's most concentrated dramatization of auditory temporal exposure (Faulkner, 1984, pp. 104–105). Quentin's father gave him the watch with a warning that echoes throughout his section: "I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it" (Faulkner, 1984, p. 76). The father's injunction, when translated into the register of auditory attention, names precisely the mode of listening Quentin cannot achieve. To "forget" time would mean allowing sound to pass through without converting it into an object of interpretation; to "conquer" it

means subjecting every sound to the mastery of a listening consciousness. Quentin can do neither: he cannot forget because sound persists, and he cannot conquer because sound has no hidden face to be mastered.

His act of removing the hands from his father's watch is an attempt to interrupt the auditory manifestation of temporal succession—to separate the audible continuity of ticking from the watch's conventional visual index of chronological time. Quentin hears it even after he has removed its hands: "The watch ticked steadily, its face checked and handsless" (Faulkner, 1984, p. 87). The handslessness of the watch makes perceptible the autonomy of sound: the tick persists without the visual representation that would make it legible as time. What Quentin discovers is not that time can be silenced by removing its visual sign, but that sound continues to mark time even when it can no longer be seen.

Quentin's narration explicitly thematizes the distinction between voluntary and involuntary audition when he writes, "I lay there, listening to it. Hearing it, that is. I don't suppose anybody ever deliberately listens to a watch or a clock. You don't have to" (Faulkner, 1984, p. 76). Quentin initially describes his relation to the watch as "listening," only to retract the term and redefine the experience as involuntary "hearing." The self-correction registers not the achievement of auditory agency but the recognition of a sound that persists beyond his intention. Segalovitz has analyzed this passage as evidence of Quentin's loss of agency, but it also marks a phenomenological structure that the novel makes available to readers (Segalovitz, 2023, p. 424).

The most significant of these intrusions is the sound of Caddy's name. For Quentin, "Caddy" operates simultaneously as a name, a remembered voice, and an acoustic trace of an absent relation. Caddy is not merely a remembered character in Quentin's section; her voice and name become an auditory trace of a relation whose presence is structurally incomplete. Read through Nancy's account of resonance, Caddy's name can be understood not as a stable semantic object but as a recurring acoustic trace—a "rebound" that never completes itself (Nancy, 2007, pp. 5, 21). When he remembers Caddy's voice, he hears it as something simultaneously present and irrecoverably absent: "Caddy held me, and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell. And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing" (Faulkner, 1984, p. 94). The synesthetic fusion of voice, darkness, and smell refuses the sensory segregation that Quentin's later auditory fixation will impose. What is at stake is not simply a difference between two modes of perception but a difference between two modes of organizing auditory attention—one in which sound remains entangled with other sensory registers, and one in which sound is increasingly isolated as an object of temporal pressure.

Quentin's memories of conversations with his father further reveal the ethical stakes of his auditory captivity. Mr. Compson's voice, as Quentin recalls it, is characterized by a "cynical, kindly wisdom" that reduces all human striving to the meaningless repetition of biological and psychological patterns (Faulkner, 1984, p. 124). Quentin's drowning should not be treated as the literal endpoint of a struggle against sound. Rather, it represents the terminal point of a broader inability to regulate the temporal and affective pressures that recurrent sounds make perceptible. The auditory motifs of his section repeatedly dramatize his inability to establish a stable boundary between himself and the temporal world, which he experiences as inescapable. His section thus narrows and refocalizes the auditory horizon that Benjy's section had established—a narrowing that becomes perceptible only because the reader has first inhabited Benjy's distributed auditory field.

4.3 From Succession to Retroaction: Sequential Recalibration

Having examined Benjy's and Quentin's auditory fields separately, this section explains their sequential relation. It argues that the movement from Benjy to Quentin recalibrates the reader's auditory orientation by shifting the experience of sound from diffuse sensory association to compulsive temporal fixation. The contrast between the two sections is sharp and systematically developed. Sequence matters here not because juxtaposition creates difference, but because prior exposure changes the conditions under which subsequent sound is perceived. Juxtaposition produces contrast; succession produces a perceptual history. The section also introduces the retroactive dimension: Quentin's fixation changes how readers understand Benjy's earlier receptivity.

The counterfactual is instructive: if Quentin's section preceded Benjy's, the reader would encounter the ticking clock as an auditory event without a prior auditory horizon against which its narrowing could be measured. This counterfactual functions not as an empirical claim about actual readers but as a formal test of the significance of narrative order. It is the prior immersion in Benjy's polyphonic field that makes the narrowing of Quentin's auditory field perceptible. Without that prior immersion, the reader would have nothing against which to measure the foreclosure of a certain mode of auditory attention.

The textual evidence for recalibration lies in the way specific sounds reappear across the two sections with altered significance. Consider three repeated sound events: Caddy's name, the cry or moan, and the clock. In Benjy's section, Caddy's name is bound to a sensory constellation—voice, smell, movement, and bodily presence—and functions as a recurrent auditory anchor. In Quentin's section, the same name becomes detached from bodily presence and functions as an acoustic trace of absence, a "rebound" that never returns to its origin. The reader who has encountered the name in Benjy's sensory world hears its reappearance in Quentin's section differently from a reader who encountered Quentin first.

The cry or moan follows a similar trajectory. In Benjy's section, the bellowing that follows Caddy's departure is a bodily response to an altered relational field, an attempt to fill sonic absence with sound. In Quentin's section, the cry becomes a remembered sound that exerts psychological pressure, detached from the bodily immediacy of Benjy's world. When the reader encounters Quentin's Caddy memories after having inhabited Benjy's Caddy constellation, the earlier sensory fullness makes Quentin's

auditory absence more acutely perceptible—and vice versa: Quentin's fixation on absence retrospectively makes Benjy's sensory fullness appear less as simple presence than as a fragile relational achievement.

The clock operates differently from these first two sound events. It does not demonstrate sequence so much as it demonstrates narrowing. In Benjy's section, the clock is not thematized as a dominant focal object; it is one sound among many, often backgrounded within a distributed auditory field. In Quentin's section, by contrast, the clock becomes the dominant focal object of auditory attention. Its function in the essay's argument is, therefore, to provide the contrast against which Benjy's distributed auditory field can be recognized. Where Benjy's attention is distributed across multiple sensory cues that coexist without hierarchical subordination, Quentin's attention is compulsively focused on a single recurring sound. Ihde's concept of the "polyphony of experience" is useful here: Benjy's auditory field resonates with the coexistence of multiple sounds that do not compete for attention in the same way (Ihde, 1976, pp. 117–131). Quentin's compulsive fixation on particular sounds can be understood as an attempt to impose interpretive order on an auditory field that continually exceeds his control.

This process can be placed in dialogue with what Segalovitz calls "negative audition," but it is not identical with it (Segalovitz, 2023, pp. 417–443). Negative audition designates an attentional disposition toward socially and bodily suppressed sound; sequential recalibration designates the change in readerly position produced by the order of exposure. The distinction is not between a pre-existing disposition and a structural change but between a disposition that the novel cultivates and the recognition that this cultivation is itself sequenced. Negative audition, as Segalovitz describes it, is already a disposition that the novel cultivates—not a pre-existing capacity that readers bring to the text. What sequential recalibration adds is the recognition that this cultivation is not a single act but a structured sequence. If negative audition names a mode of readerly audition, sequential recalibration specifies one formal mechanism through which that mode is produced and revised across narrative sequence.

4.4 The Limits of Recalibration: *Shegog, Dilsey, and Racialized Listening*

The first three sections have developed a formal account of how narrative sequence recalibrates readerly audition. This fourth section tests rather than resolves that account. It argues that the communal listening represented in the Reverend Shegog scene is mediated by a racialized regime of narration and that Dilsey's response complicates rather than fulfills the model of ethical listening that the sermon appears to offer. The fourth section thus exposes the limits of recalibration: auditory attunement does not automatically produce ethical recognition.

The Reverend Shegog's sermon, with its "rich, timbrous quality" and its "chanting measures beyond the need for words," represents a form of collective listening that contrasts with the isolated listening of Benjy and Quentin (Faulkner, 1984, p. 293). Napolin's coda on the novel argues that literary history itself becomes audible as a form of miscegenating sound (Napolin, 2020, pp. 103–114). The narrator's emphasis on the material and musical qualities of Shegog's voice places sonic force alongside, and at moments seemingly before, propositional meaning. Because this description occurs within the novel's racialized representation of Black speech and worship, the scene raises the question of whether auditory appreciation can be separated from the representational structures through which that voice is made legible. The narrator's description does not merely report the sound of the sermon; it attributes to that sound a sonic force that the narrator figures as exceeding propositional meaning, one that the narrator simultaneously celebrates and distances.

Dilsey's response—"I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (Faulkner, 1984, p. 297)—is a private revelation that differentiates her listening from the congregation's collective auditory experience. Dilsey's utterance is not exhausted by its propositional content; its significance also lies in the embodied and affective context in which she hears and responds to the sermon. It functions as a sonorous event as well as a meaningful utterance. The narrative differentiates Dilsey's response from the congregation's collective auditory experience rather than presenting that congregation as a single, undifferentiated listening body. The fourth section's ethical challenge is not just what the congregation hears, but who narrates it and how.

The fourth section thus leaves the reader with an unresolved ethical demand: to remain attentive to the unstable relationship between hearing, interpretation, and response, without converting that attention into a mastery of the other. The recalibration that the first two sections produce—a heightened attention to how narrative order shapes auditory attention—does not guarantee ethical recognition, because listening remains mediated by race and narrative representation.

5. Conclusion

This essay has argued that *The Sound and the Fury* makes listening a formal problem before it makes it an ethical one. In the novel, listening becomes an ethical question because narrative form first makes it a problem of attention. Through the sequential encounter with Benjy's and Quentin's sections, the novel modulates the reader's auditory orientation: Benjy's distributed auditory field establishes an initial auditory horizon, Quentin's compulsive temporal fixation is heard against that horizon, and the encounter changes not only Quentin's auditory field but also the reader's subsequent understanding of Benjy. Recalibration is recursive rather than progressive. The fourth section tests the ethical stakes of this process by showing that recalibrated attention does not guarantee ethical recognition, because listening remains mediated by race and narrative representation. The argument concerns the readerly position formally solicited by the novel rather than the empirically observable reader response. Neither character provides a stable model of ethical listening; the novel instead leaves the reader with a demand to remain attentive to the unstable relationship between hearing, interpretation, and response. The essay thus offers a formal vocabulary

for describing how listening becomes an ethical problem in Faulkner's novel without reducing that problem to a character's moral success or failure.

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