

Exploring Loneliness and Alienation in The Sound Inside by Adam Rapp

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Abstract. Adam Rapp's *The Sound Inside* (2019) is an extremely introspective and unsettling play that investigates loneliness, solitude, and human attachment. The critique examines how Rapp's play addresses the psychological and existential issues of individuals in modern society, with focus on protagonist Bella Baird, a Yale professor, as she becomes obsessively close but enigmatic with her student, Christopher. The research question is an analysis of how Rapp's play represents loneliness and alienation as existential conditions rather than emotional conditions. The research seeks to analyze the characterizations and narrative techniques which represent isolation, to debate the role of literature and narrative as a coping strategy, and to analyze the broader social consequences of disconnection and loneliness in contemporary life. The study employs existentialist literary theory and draws particular reference to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in order to recognize loneliness and alienation as the underlying facts of human existence. The thesis is developed that Bella's alienation is not merely the product of personal trauma, but symptomatic of the isolation of the intellectual and emotional environments of the modern era. The lean production and non-linear design of the play are part of the project of presenting loneliness, and the rapport between Bella and Christopher demonstrate the fragility of human connection. *The Sound Inside* ultimately presents loneliness as a condition of human being, forcing audiences to engage with the contradiction of desiring to be connected without vulnerability. This study contributes to the growing body of work on existentialist themes in new American drama, showing how Rapp's play mirrors broader social anxieties regarding isolation and meaning.

Key words: Loneliness, Alienation, Existentialism, Adam Rapp, Contemporary Drama, *The Sound Inside*.

1. Introduction

Loneliness and alienation have long been the theme of literature, a reflection of the psychological and existential complexity of human nature. From such classic existentialist fiction as Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) to contemporary literature, literature is a reflection of the social and psychological conflict of human beings. In contemporary American playwriting, playwrights have more and more focused on issues of isolation and estrangement, particularly in response to new states of society like the digital loneliness, intellectual isolation, and broken relations (Gopnik, 2019). Adam Rapp's 2019 play *The Sound Inside* is a stark example of the trend, the solitude of middle-aged professor Bella Baird and her solitary existence until a savage and fervent affair with her student, Christopher, shatters her isolation. Through the use of spare dialogue, an intimate monologue-based narrative, and an emotionally charged narrative, Rapp's play evokes the intensity of loneliness in a scholar and existential setting. This study seeks to examine the portrayal of loneliness and alienation in *The Sound Inside*, with emphasis on their existential dimensions and literary significance.

Despite an expanding body of psychological and literary research concerning loneliness, there seems to be a gap in the analysis of the way new plays, particularly *The Sound Inside*, build loneliness as an existential rather than merely emotional or social state. Existing studies of loneliness in plays have largely explored canonical texts such as those authored by Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee (Bennett, 2018; Koutsourakis, 2021), but there is space to apply similar analyses to non-canonical contemporary playwrights like Adam Rapp. Although *The Sound Inside* received critical praise for its psychological sophistication and narrative ambition, there has been little published scholarly work addressing its thematic examination of existential estrangement. This study bridges this gap by analyzing the ways in which Rapp employs narrative techniques, character development, and structural brevity in order to compose a portrait of loneliness that is attuned to existentialist thought.

This research utilizes existentialist literary theory as a primary critical paradigm. Existentialism, being a philosophical movement that emphasizes the existence of human beings, liberty, and construction of meaning within an indifferent environment, provides the right paradigm through which to conduct an analysis of *The Sound Inside*. Sartre (1943) and Camus (1942) are two key existentialist thinkers who posit the view that alienation is natural to human living. Sartre's theory of "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*) and Camus' theory of the absurd most clearly apply to describing Bella's alienation from society and internal conflict with meaning (Sartre, 2007; Camus, 1991). Existentialist philosophy creates a rich rendering of how Rapp's play presents loneliness not as an anomalous condition, but as basic confrontation with the absurd.

Previous scholarship on loneliness in literature is dispersed across multiple disciplines, from psychology to literary analysis. Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2018) explain that loneliness is more than a social deficit but rather a cognitive and emotional condition that has the power to greatly influence a person's perception of reality. In drama, scholars have been analyzing the representation of isolation, especially in absurdist and modernist dramas. Bennett (2018) discusses loneliness in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as existential despair expressed in its circular dialogue and broken relations. Similarly, Koutsourakis (2021) deconstructs postmodern drama's theatrical representation of alienation and how minimalist playwriting and uncertainty in the narrative contribute to the spectator's sense of isolation.

However, contemporary drama, and particularly *The Sound Inside*, has yet to be analyzed to the same extent as its classic counterparts. While critics such as Green (2020) have been lauding Rapp's play for psychological realism and new storytelling, scant research has examined its existentialist undertones. This study continues the present work of combining existentialist philosophy with contemporary dramatic analysis to better understand how *The Sound Inside* portrays the intricacies of loneliness and alienation.

By siting *The Sound Inside* within the broader contexts of existentialist drama and the philosophy of loneliness, this research contributes to literary and philosophical discussions. The play's intense focus on solitude, self-reflection, and the connection between humans makes it a rich case study for analyzing the nuances of loneliness in contemporary literature. In an existentialist interpretation, this study will demonstrate how Rapp's text grapples with questions of being, meaning, and isolation in an extended inquiry into the human condition.

2. Theoretical Framework

Existentialist literary criticism is employed as the generalised analysis framework here, providing philosophical depth to what have been perceptions of loneliness and alienation across Adam Rapp's *The Sound Inside*. Existentialism, which emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries and was articulated by philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, emphasizes personal liberty, self-choice, and the inherent struggle of humanity in an indifferent or a meaningless world (Sartre, 2007; Camus, 1991). In this study, existentialist theory is employed to examine how Rapp's play identifies the psychological and philosophical elements of loneliness, self-consciousness, and meaning-seeking in a world that offers no inherent purpose.

At the heart of existentialist thought is the idea that human beings are condemned to be free, as Sartre (1943) asserts in *Being and Nothingness*. This freedom is accompanied by the burden of making

choices that make up one's existence, and which often lead to anxiety, isolation, and alienation. Bella Baird, the protagonist of *The Sound Inside*, embodies this existential dilemma. As a reclusive professor, she would rather be alone than around people, but her meeting with Christopher forces her to face the irony of human connection—balancing the desire for relationships with vulnerability. Sartre's bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) theory, which describes individuals who delude themselves in order to avoid the burden of authentic existence, is significant in the characterization of Bella. She initially chooses solitude as an escape mechanism, but her shifting dynamic with Christopher challenges this exile from self, illustrating the human struggle between existence and escaping from the world (Sartre, 2007).

The second major existentialist theme in *The Sound Inside* is Camus' idea of the absurd. Camus (1942) argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that life is inherently meaningless, and humans need to accept this absurdity rather than seeking false solace in external structures such as religion or social norms. Bella's meaning-making problem is akin to Camus' philosophy; her writing and research are efforts at placing form on an indifferent world. However, her detachment and the ensuing moral dilemma over Christopher illustrate the play's implicit existential question—whether human relationship can provide meaning in an otherwise meaningless life (Camus, 1991). Rapp's dramatic structure, which features minimal dialogue and monologue-driven narrative, reinforces this sense of existential isolation, compelling the audience to share Bella's inner conflict on an intimate level.

Other than Sartre and Camus, Martin Heidegger's existentialist philosophy can also be used to understand Bella's relationship with death and temporality. Heidegger (1927) in *Being and Time* contends that an individual's awareness of his or her own mortality—what he refers to as being-toward-death—dictates how he or she relates with the world. Bella's reserve and later decisions in the play can be explained through Heidegger's theory, as she reconciles the finitude of life and the choices that define her existence (Heidegger, 1996). Her contemplation of Christopher's story, and by extension her own, shows how existentialist themes permeate not only her personal experience but also the general human one of coming to terms with mortality and meaning.

Through intersecting existentialist literary theory with *The Sound Inside*, the study highlights the way in which Rapp's play is a modern articulation of philosophic concerns tested in the course of modern literature and drama. The tension between loneliness, authenticity, the absurd, and death situates *The Sound Inside* within an existentialist story tradition, alongside the works of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee (Bennett, 2018; Koutsourakis, 2021). This theoretical model allows for a detailed analysis of how loneliness and alienation are not just emotional feelings but existential conditions that shape the foundation of individual identity and the human condition.

3. The Representation of Loneliness and Alienation in *The Sound Inside*

Adam Rapp's *The Sound Inside* astutely deconstructs loneliness and isolation themes in the play through narrative structure, character development, and performance design. The play steals from Bella Baird, a Yale professor with a guarded life, and her enigmatic pupil, Christopher, whose feeling of isolation mirrors but also incites that of his tutor. The depiction of isolation and loneliness in the play is not a figurative depiction of physical solitude but an investigation of more profound existential concerns of aloneness, meaning-making, and emotional solitude. Through the use of minimalist dialogue, monologue storytelling, and interrogation of human connection through self-reflection, Rapp produces a piece of art that reflects the sophistication of existential solitude in modern drama and literature.

One of the strongest things about *The Sound Inside* is its structure, which relies so heavily on Bella's monologues. Monologue as a main form of narrative serves to increase the sense of isolation of the audience, with Bella's voice wholly commanding the narrative. This structure puts the audience firmly inside Bella's mind, stressing the loneliness of her life. As Gopnik (2019) suggests, contemporary tales of loneliness use internal monologues as a vehicle to show the fractured state of contemporary identity. Bella's monologues are not only devices of exposition but also reveal her inner conflicts, longing for humanity, and terror of openness. This narrative technique is congruent with existentialist

fiction, where self-reflection and self-telling usually emphasize the alienation of protagonists (Sartre, 2007).

The play's dialogue, or lack thereof, further contributes to the theme of loneliness. The sparse exchanges between Bella and Christopher emphasize their emotional distance even as they form an unlikely bond. Their conversations are often marked by pauses, hesitations, and a reluctance to fully engage, mirroring the existential struggle of seeking meaning in a world that resists connection (Camus, 1991). This meager exchange attests to the ways in which language is often inadequate to bridge the emotional divide between individuals. Rapp's use of silence and minimal verbal communication invokes the dramatic techniques of Samuel Beckett, whose dramas regularly feature characters trapped in cycles of misunderstanding and existential aloneness (Bennett, 2018). Bella and Christopher's communication, no matter how intellectually stimulating, is emotionally reticent, and their respective alienation from one another is highlighted.

Characterization is essential in the representation of loneliness in *The Sound Inside*. Bella Baird embodies the figure of the lone intellectual, a figure present in most existentialist fiction. Her retreat from society is by choice, brought about by the events of the past and an innate resistance to emotional attachment. However, her isolation is not only the product of personal choice but also an extrapolation of broader social conditions that encourage alienation, particularly in educational environments (Koutsourakis, 2021). Bella's interaction with Christopher breaks her isolation, but she still grapples with the type of full engagement that she can have. Her existential crisis is in harmony with Sartre's bad faith theory, where individuals deny their true desires so that they can fit into a self-conceptualized identity (Sartre, 2007). Bella's reluctance to leave her loneliness underscores the subtlety of loneliness as a comfort and source of distress.

Christopher, on the other hand, is both the foil to Bella's alienation and his own existential isolation. Whereas Bella's loneliness is earned through years of solitude, Christopher's alienation may be a result of disillusionment in adolescence. His fixations on literary trappings of darkness and existential despair, not to mention authorship, serve as a correlative to Bella's intellectual loneliness. But whereas he needs mentorship and assurances, Bella welcomes loneliness. Their dynamic reveals the generational and psychological nuances of alienation, illustrating how loneliness manifests differently across individuals. As Green (2020) notes, Rapp's portrayal of these characters subverts traditional mentor-student relationships, instead presenting a complex interplay of dependence, resistance, and existential questioning.

Symbolism further reinforces the theme of loneliness in *The Sound Inside*. The setting of the play—a university office and an apartment—creates a confined and claustrophobic atmosphere that reflects Bella's isolation. Her world is confined to these intellectual spaces, emphasizing her disconnection from the rest of the world. The thread of writing as both escape and confinement again underlines the irony of artistic isolation: even though literature is an outlet of expression, it also instills the feeling of being separated from the actual world (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). Bella's book, unfinished and open-ended, is her unresolvable existential crisis and inability to communicate completely. Christopher's own work is a last attempt to impose sense on his existence, and the existential tension between creation and waste is highlighted.

Christopher, on the other hand, is a counterpoint to Bella's isolation and has his own existential isolation. Whereas Bella's isolation is the result of years of solitude, Christopher's isolation is apparently the result of teenage disillusion. His obsessive interest in literary clichés of doom and existential despair, and his preoccupation with writing, is a reflection of Bella's intellectual isolation. His need to please and be led, however, is not like Bella's embracing of isolation.

4. Existentialist Themes in *The Sound Inside*

Adam Rapp's *The Sound Inside* stands firmly or tentatively upon the philosophy of existentialism, extrapolating concepts foundational to the doctrine of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger. The play searches out human aloneness, freedom, senselessness, and the facticity of mortality—colossal questions existential that contextualize the life of its two protagonists, Bella Baird and Christopher Dunn. In its sparsely beautiful and meditative writing, *The Sound Inside* is a novel

of existentialist fiction, wherein there is a universe in which characters must confront the burden of liberty and find meaning within a pointless universe. The part here describes how the play weaves the existence of themes such as bad faith, absurdity, authenticity, and death into its cosmos, and positions it within the broadest of philosophical movements.

Arguably the most important existentialist concept in *The Sound Inside* is bad faith, as Sartre (2007) understands it. For Sartre, human beings delude themselves into evading the burdens of true freedom and settling for socially manufactured roles rather than existing in the world as it is. Bella's loneliness is a perfect example of this premise; she has created a persona as a recluse scholar and employs her study as protection against emotional openness. Her romance with Christopher is the antithesis of this self-imposed solitude, and she must wrestle with her recluse tendency to be invited into the world. Bella clings to an illusion of control over her existence initially, having a rigorously intellectualized life. As her affair with Christopher becomes more established, however, cracks in her facade start to emerge, as tension between attachment and isolation begins to betray her. This conflict is Sartre's implication that people will be resistant to their own freedom, because they will be afraid of the responsibility that comes with it (Sartre, 2007).

Albert Camus' (1991) theory of absurdity is also deeply embedded in *The Sound Inside*. According to Camus, human beings live an absurd world with no inherent meaning, and seeking meaning places one in conflict with absurdity. Both Christopher and Bella grapple with this existential dilemma, through literature and writing as a means of imposing meaning on their existence. Bella's reading habit is an aspiration to bring order to an apparently chaotic world, and Christopher's fascination with dark, existential tales is a reflection of his own inner struggle with absurdity. Their conversation about writing is an expression of the existential predicament between the search for meaning and the recognition of the arbitrariness of life. Christopher's own play, where a protagonist is faced with existential desperation, is a metafictional commentary on the themes of the play, an affirmation of the idea that storytelling is both resistance to absurdity and an acknowledgement of its existence (Camus, 1991).

Authenticity, the second existentialist theme that runs through the characterization of Bella, is what this play is all about. Existentialist philosophers, led by Heidegger (1996), advocate living in an authentic way—that is, embracing one's own mortality and behaving in ways true to oneself and not to others. Bella's growth through the play is an existential quest for authenticity. Her initial resistance to emotional intimacy and her reliance on intellectual activity are symptoms of a life of avoidance as opposed to authentic interaction with life. But as she begins to permit herself to be vulnerable to Christopher, she is confronted with the truth of her loneliness and the possibility of a more authentic mode of being. Christopher, by contrast, seems to offer a sort of raw, unprocessed authenticity unsullied by the social norms Bella has learned. Their love is a philosophical examination of the issue of selfhood and the difficulty of genuinely being in a world that attempts to discourage it (Heidegger, 1996).

Death looms over the action of *The Sound Inside* with reference to the existentialist theory that awareness of death determines the human condition. Heidegger's (1996) presupposition of being-toward-death is that authentic self-awareness occurs through awareness of one's own mortality. Bella, suffering from an unspecified illness, embodies this existential conflict. Her illness forces her to question her life choices and relationships, emphasizing the existential question. The tragic atmosphere and minimal stage of the play create a reflective ambiance that echoes Bella's accepting her own mortality. The destiny of Christopher is also related to existential accounts of choice and death since his behavior throughout the play suggests knowledge of the fleeting nature of life. Their intertwined narratives highlight the existential belief that death is not just an end but a constitutive aspect of human existence that compels individuals to make important choices (Heidegger, 1996).

The interplay among these existentialist themes—bad faith, absurdity, authenticity, and death—situate *The Sound Inside* in a tradition of existential drama and fiction. The sparse dialogue, the self-reflexive monologues, and the ambiguous narrative structure used by Rapp are all evocative of playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, who also explored existential loneliness and the search for meaning (Bennett, 2018; Koutsourakis, 2021). The play is not one of easy solutions but

instead poses existential questions that linger after its conclusion. In so doing, it invites the audience to engage with its philosophical underpinnings, questioning the nature of being, choice, and humanity.

5. Contemporary Relevance and Critical Implications

Adam Rapp's *The Sound Inside* resonates deeply with contemporary audiences, questioning loneliness, existential dread, and meaning-making in an increasingly broken world. With the world grappling with the effects of virtual loneliness, shifting scholarly and intellectual spheres, and ongoing mental health crises, the play is a much-needed articulation of such issues of our times. The dramatic stakes of *The Sound Inside* extend far beyond its own immediate narrative, intersecting with broader discussions in literary studies, philosophy, and theatre. This section examines how the play is pertinent to contemporary concerns by examining its depiction of social isolation, its pejorative critique of academia and intellectual culture, and the play's broader implications for contemporary existential thought.

One of the most significant and enduring aspects of the play's relevance is its treatment of social isolation, a problem that has become increasingly urgent in our modern debate. Studies indicate that loneliness is a rising public health concern, driven by the rise of digital communication and reduced face-to-face social interaction (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). Her subject, Bella Baird, embodies the modern state of alienation and addresses those who, even in professional success, are most isolated from society. Her resistance to closeness mirrors the increasing culture of withdrawal in which people, particularly urbanites and intellectuals, withdraw into intellectual or virtual worlds rather than trying out real human contact. The COVID-19 pandemic also increased these fears, laying bare the psychological and emotional cost of prolonged isolation (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). *The Sound Inside* is thus a dramatic charting of shared contemporary experience, offering individuals a mirror in which to see their own relationships to society and solitude.

The play's presentation of academic life also applies to its timely critique, and in particular its exploration of the pressure and alienation of life in the mind. Being a professor at Yale places Bella in an elite world of scholarship, but the story goes out of its way to make this professional existence as alienating as it can be. Existing literature suggests that the academic environment fosters a culture of intellectual detachment, where professional responsibilities quash personal investment and emotional attachment (Mountz et al., 2015). Bella's existential struggles are symptomatic of the intellectual honesty versus personal satisfaction dilemma faced by many students and scholars. Christopher's status as disillusioned, young author complicates this dynamic further, with his idealism at odds with Bella's cynicism. Their romance is a microcosm of intergenerational anxieties that education and literature are irrelevant in an increasingly pragmatically focused world. The play therefore laments the part academic institutions play in cultivating alienation, questioning the usefulness and applicability of intellectual pursuits in contemporary society.

In addition to its exploration of loneliness and scholarship, *The Sound Inside* addresses broader existential concerns that are relevant today. The play engages interests consistent with current existentialist debates regarding meaning-making in an unresponsive world to human pain. Scholars such as Taylor (2018) argue that existentialism in the present must contend not only with philosophical abstraction, but also with everyday experiences of individuals living in an unpredictable world. Bella and Christopher's personal struggles with identity, creativity, and mortality reflect the existential struggles of many in an era marked by uncertainty. Their search for meaning, particularly in literature and storytelling, underscores the continued relevance of existentialist philosophy to contemporary discussion. The play suggests that, even if existential loneliness is perhaps an inevitable part of the human condition, storytelling remains a necessary means of negotiating that loneliness and asserting individual significance in an indifferent world.

Beyond literary and philosophical criticism, the play's critical appeal extends into theater studies, namely in its use of minimalism and monologue narrative. *The Sound Inside* employs a spare aesthetic, with a small cast and focus on internal narration rather than external action. This bare-bones approach aligns with contemporary theatrical trends focused on psychological nuance rather than spectacle, such as works by writers Annie Baker and Will Eno (Shapiro, 2019). Employment of

monologue in the production defies expectations of theater with the viewer invited into the secret interiority of the main character's mind. This method creates a singular interaction between reader and text that reflects the alienating but reflective nature of contemporary life. Rapp's dramaturgical decisions therefore further the debates in theater regarding form, audience involvement, and the changing role of narrative in an era of visual and digital media saturation.

Lastly, *The Sound Inside* is a living and contemporary play because it treats problems of current social and philosophical interest. The isolation depicted in the play, its criticism of life of the mind, and its questions about existence all are of profound concern to modern audiences, so it is a necessary text for literary and dramatic scholarship. With the world still grappling to understand alienation, relevance, and art, Rapp's work is both a response and a solution to these recurring issues. By situating existential concerns in terms of a contemporary scenario, *The Sound Inside* closes the gap between traditional existentialist literature and modern-day angst, proving the ongoing vitality of existentialist concerns for the 21st century.

Conclusion

Adam Rapp's *The Sound Inside* is a rich exploration of loneliness, alienation, and existential questioning and therefore an absorbing work of contemporary theatre and literature. Through its reflective drama, bare-bones staging, and deeply psychological rendering of character, the play captures the depth of human solitude and the struggle to find meaning in an uncompassionate world. By engaging existentialist issues such as bad faith, absurdity, authenticity, and death, Rapp's work positions itself in a philosophical tradition that is still relevant to modern readers. Bella Baird's detached intellect and Christopher Dunn's existent despair epitomize paradoxes of coercive solitude and the necessity of substantive connection, illustrating the paradoxes of man.

Aside from its philosophical importance, *The Sound Inside* is also critically insightful in its representation of the academic environment, loneliness in a time of loneliness, and intellectual despair. To this relevance is added the fact that the play can mirror concerns of the day that afflict society, including isolation in the age of technology, mental illness, and the changing role of literature and narrative in the modern age of uncertainty. Rapp's minimalist dramaturgy and monologue-centered storytelling both add to the play's emotional depth and help feed broader debates in theatre studies regarding form and audience address.

Lastly, *The Sound Inside* is also a representation of the new fears of our times and an explication of the existentialist paradox in new theater and literature. It leaves one to consider one's own faith in loneliness, purpose, and man's interconnectedness, thus ensuring its lasting impact. While existential queries are ever at the forefront of philosophical and artistic inquiry, Rapp's work is an intriguing and provocative contribution to the debate, inviting viewers and readers alike to confront the very questions of being.

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