

# The Case for Sondheim as Existentialist

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By Alfie Kohn

THE ONE DISADVANTAGE of Stephen Sondheim's lyrical dexterity is that listeners may miss the substance behind the wordplay. His facility with the language, the way his songs are so perfectly constructed that they seem to rhyme by accident, has generated a following that helps to explain the existence of this magazine. But his insights into the human condition, his willingness to grapple with big ideas, don't always receive the attention they should. The truth is that Sondheim's lyrics belong not only on the syllabus of a course on the modern musical but in a course on existentialist philosophy.

Consider this excerpt from "Move On" in *Sunday in the Park with George*:  
I chose and my world was shaken  
So what?

The choice may have been mistaken,  
The choosing was not.

Forget Hammerstein: this is a passage that seems to have been influenced by Kierkegaard. The Danish theologian, in his 1843 book *Either/Or*, mused at some length on the value of the act of choosing, over and above that which is chosen. This is a distinction rarely made by philosophers, let alone by songwriters. "In choosing," Kierkegaard wrote, "it does not so much depend on choosing what is right, as on the energy, the seriousness, the pathos with which one chooses." Choice represented for him a way of transcending the purely "aesthetic" life – that is, one devoted to a succession of pleasurable experiences.

Again, Sondheim captures this point neatly. The Baker's wife, in *Into the Woods*, is nearly seduced by the escape from consequences and obligations represented by the woods, a place of "and" instead of "or." Wistfully, she sings:

Oh, if life were made of moments,  
Even now and then a bad one – !

Immediately, though, she understands what is lacking in this approach:

But if life were only moments,  
Then you'd never know you had one.

In other words, a series of discrete instants adds up to nothing. We need to create a context, to shape a story from our experiences, to remember and plan and reflect. Like Kierkegaard, Sondheim is telling us that there is a price to be paid for a life without continuity and perspective, lived entirely in the here and now.

Earlier in the same musical, Cinderella is faced with her "first big decision": whether to stay safely at home or move to a more appealing place where she knows she'll "never belong." Suddenly it dawns on her that there may be an easy escape from this choice. She'll transfer the burden to her suitor by leaving "him a clue: / For example, a shoe." Now she knows "what [her] decision is, / Which is not to decide."

It is a straight shot from a passage like that to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, another existentialist thinker, who, like Kierkegaard, was concerned with choices and consequences. Central to his philosophy was the notion that we are condemned to fashion ourselves by our decisions, even when we try to escape this terrifying responsibility. Deciding not to decide is nothing more than an exercise in self-deception, he argued: "I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing."

Because we are the sum of our choices, Sartre would have agreed with Harry in *Company* that we are "always wondering what might have been." To choose one place, one career, one lover, one way to spend a Sunday, is to exclude countless other possibilities, and this inevitably brings curiosity and regret. We may try to suppress these reactions, but, like the attempt to avoid deciding, we're unlikely to succeed. Hence, Ben (been?) in *Follies* is, by Sondheim's design, desperately unconvincing when he says:

One's life consists of either/or.

One has regrets  
Which one forgets,  
And as the years go on,  
The road you didn't take  
Hardly comes to mind,  
Does it?

\*

The case for Sondheim-as-existentialist is not limited to his musings on choice. For example, writers associated with this school of thought also wrestle with the tangle of human relationships, the challenge of being with others. But why crawl through the dense prose of Sartre or Heidegger when some of their key insights are available in rhyming form? Plenty of songs – maybe even most songs – are about love desired, love denied, love lost, or the remarkable characteristics of the beloved. But Sondheim understands the deeper sense in which "it takes two."

Just as we need some vantage point from which to reflect (as opposed to surfing from one moment to the next), so we need other people to help us gain perspective:

Though you swear to change,  
Who can tell if you do?  
It takes two.

But there's even more to it than that. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm once wrote that the deepest need of each human being "is the need to overcome his separateness." Our yearning to connect with others has to be understood in the context of our existential predicament – the human struggle for meaning in the face of loss and in the absence of any larger purpose for our lives.

Lots of musicals celebrate true love; only one presents love as an expression of the human need for company, a bond between individuals who ultimately share a terror of "being alive."

The existentialists' motto might be, "Nothing is ever simple." We construct meaning in the face of ultimate meaninglessness. We choose our lives and yet we cannot overcome many of the constraints that define human existence. We manage to love – and, if we're lucky, to be loved – yet our solitude is never entirely dissolved. On this last contradiction, Heidegger has nothing on Sondheim. From *Into the Woods*:

You decide what's good.  
You decide alone.

But no one is alone.

And earlier, in *Company*:

You hold her, thinking, "I'm not alone."  
You're still alone. . . .

You always are what you always were,

Which has nothing to do with – all to do with – her.

This song, "Sorry-Grateful," not only touches on a key existential theme but captures a fact that has eluded most songwriters: we humans are an ambivalent lot. We are more often

"regretful/happy" than just one or the other. To be involved in a serious relationship is to be simultaneously scared she's starting to drift away

And scared she'll stay.

Sondheim once told an interviewer that ambivalence is his "favorite thing to write about, because it's the way I feel, and I think the way most people feel." Partly this reflects his penchant for paradox, the illuminating and often amusing way he has of juxtaposing what appear to be opposites but actually are not mutually exclusive at all. Thus, a juvenile delinquent in *West Side Story* is explained with the line "The trouble is he's growing," prompting the retort, "The trouble is he's grown." In *A Little Night Music*, Fredrik is rueful precisely because the woman he

desires is, well, desirable:  
If she'd only been perfectly awful,  
It would have been wonderful..  
But the woman was perfection,  
To my deepest dismay.

And of course there is the neurotic paradox belted out in an ironically upbeat number in *Follies*:

I've got those  
"God-why-don't-you-love-me-oh-you-do-I'll-see-you-later"  
Blues,  
That

"Long-as-you-ignore-me-you're-the-only-thing-that-matters"  
Feeling

Once again, what at first seems no more than cleverness resonates not only with psychological truth but with deeper philosophical themes. Existentialism began, it might be said, with a furious assault on a philosophy (associated with Hegel) that was all airless abstraction as it viewed human life "from the perspective of eternity." For Kierkegaard, and like-minded twentieth-century thinkers, the perspective that matters is that of the concrete reality of the human. Issues like freedom and death and meaning must be seen from the point of view of each experiencing person. It follows from this that perfection is not just unobtainable but undesirable.

This novel and paradoxical idea, that perfection is itself imperfect, shows up in several Sondheim songs. In *Sunday in the Park with George*, which rejects the notion of static perfection as incompatible with art – even the characters in the painting get hot and fidgety after a while – Dot sings the praises of Louis the baker. He is lovable, generous, fair, and kind, she tells us:

Everybody gets along with him  
and then pauses to reflect:  
That's the trouble, nothing's wrong with him.

Elsewhere, the futile desire for perfection takes the form of two parent figures (interestingly, not real parents) who want to protect the children under their control from being contaminated by the real world. The Judge in *Sweeney Todd* vows to Johanna that

The world will never touch you..  
I'll hold you here forever then,  
You'll keep away from windows.

– exactly as the Witch in *Into the Woods* keeps Rapunzel in a tower, dismissing the latter's desire to see the world:

Don't you know what's out there in the world?  
Someone has to shield you from the world..  
The world is dark and wild.

To this sentiment, Sondheim, echoing the existentialists, seems to say, Yes, the world is indeed frightening. It is soiled and spoiled. "Put your dimple down": There are countless instances of pointless suffering (*Into the Woods*), poisonous vengeance (*Sweeney Todd*) and shattered dreams (*Follies*, *Merrily We Roll Along*). Even in its most prosaic particulars, our lives may be unsatisfying and alienating to the point that every day brings "a little death." However, it is the only world we have and an authentic life is one lived in the face of that reality. We have no home except the dark. Fortunately, the emphasis is on "we":

Into the woods  
And through the fear,  
You have to take the journey..  
The way is dark,  
The light is dim,  
But now there's you,  
Me, her, and him.

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