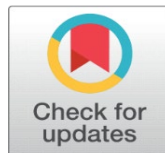


# PHILOSOPHICAL PARADOXES IN STOPPARD'S *THE REAL THING* AND *JUMPERS*: A STUDY OF EXISTENTIAL ABSURDITY AND IDENTITY

Raveendar Reddy Dhanda <sup>1</sup>✉, Prof S. D. Palwekar <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, PGTD of English, RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur-440033

<sup>2</sup> Research Supervisor, PGTD of English, RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur-440033



## Corresponding Author

Raveendar Reddy Dhanda,  
[raveerreddi@hotmail.com](mailto:raveerreddi@hotmail.com)

## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.4236](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.4236)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

Tom Stoppard's works have long been celebrated for their intricate interplay of intellectual thought and dramatic form. Two of his significant plays, *The Real Thing* (1982) and *Jumpers* (1972), engage deeply with existential themes, examining the complexities of human relationships, identity, and the search for meaning in an absurd world. In *The Real Thing*, Stoppard critiques the notion of "truth" in human interactions, presenting a world where personal integrity and love seem increasingly elusive. Meanwhile, *Jumpers* explores the collision between existential questions of morality, faith, and intellectual pursuit, dramatizing a world in which traditional values are called into question. This paper examines how both plays reflect existential concerns—identity, freedom, absurdity, and the quest for meaning—while also challenging the boundaries between philosophy, theatre, and the human experience. By analysing the existential dilemmas in *The Real Thing* and *Jumpers*, this paper underscores Stoppard's unique ability to weave philosophical inquiry into the fabric of modern theatre.

**Keywords:** Existence, Truth, Identity, Morality, Faith, Intellectual Pursuit

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tom Stoppard is renowned for his ability to fuse intellectual discourse with dramatic art, creating plays that not only entertain but also provoke deep philosophical reflection. In works like *The Real Thing* (1982) and *Jumpers* (1972), Stoppard explores existential questions that question the very nature of truth, love, and identity. Both plays present characters struggling with the absurdities of existence, challenging traditional narratives and philosophies while navigating the complexities of personal and intellectual lives. *The Real Thing* focuses on the interplay of love and fidelity, examining how human relationships often become arenas of self-deception, betrayal, and existential uncertainty. In contrast, *Jumpers* engages with broader moral and intellectual dilemmas, set against a world increasingly defined by the collision of intellectualism, violence, and the collapse of established values.

At the heart of both plays is a profound engagement with existential themes. Stoppard explores the paradoxes of existence: the tension between reason and emotion, the quest for authenticity, and the struggle to find meaning in a

world that seems indifferent to human suffering. Through these complex characters and the philosophical questions they grapple with, Stoppard crafts a theatre that reflects the anxieties of modern existence. This paper aims to examine the existential dilemmas present in *The Real Thing* and *Jumpers*, focusing on issues such as identity, love, and the absurdity of human life. Through a detailed analysis, we will explore how Stoppard's use of philosophical paradoxes in these works illuminates the characters' internal conflicts, highlighting the complexity of the human condition in the face of an unpredictable and often indifferent world.

### **The Existential Landscape in *The Real Thing*: Identity and the Fluidity of Truth**

In *The Real Thing*, Stoppard critiques the notion of fixed personal identity, portraying characters whose understandings of themselves and others are in constant flux. Henry, the playwright at the centre of the drama, faces a profound crisis of self-perception as he grapples with his personal life and the nature of his art. This crisis of identity is compounded by his relationships, particularly his marriage to Charlotte and his affair with Annie. These personal entanglements blur the lines between love, betrayal, and self-deception, forcing Henry to confront the discrepancies between his ideals of truth and the realities of human imperfection.

The fluidity of truth—both in his relationships and in the creative process—is a central theme. The play's exploration of truth is complex, suggesting that authenticity is elusive, shaped by both personal desires and external influences. Henry's artistic work, especially his writing, mirrors his struggles with personal honesty, as he questions the boundaries between artifice and reality. The characters are caught in a constant tug-of-war between the idealized versions of themselves and the messy, often painful truths of their existence. For Henry, this dynamic extends beyond personal relationships to the art of playwriting itself, where the search for truth becomes as elusive and complicated as the characters' understanding of their own selves.

Stoppard also uses the characters' interactions with one another to reveal the contradictions inherent in the pursuit of truth. As Henry reflects on fidelity and honesty, he finds that the "real" version of the truth in relationships is never absolute; it is constantly shifting, influenced by emotions, perceptions, and the passage of time. This philosophical ambiguity extends to the play's structure, which intertwines the personal and the theatrical, further blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. The tension between what is real and what is perceived becomes a central motif, leaving the audience to question whether any truth can truly be known or if it is always in flux, contingent upon perspective and interpretation.

Ultimately, *The Real Thing* suggests that identity and truth are not fixed entities but are fluid, shaped by the complexities of human relationships and the narratives we create about ourselves. In Stoppard's world, truth is not something to be discovered but something that is continually negotiated and reconstructed, revealing the inherent instability of human existence and the existential struggle to understand one's place in the world.

### **Love, Betrayal, and the Absurdity of Human Connections**

Love, often considered the ultimate form of human connection, is portrayed in *The Real Thing* as both an existential pursuit and a source of absurdity. The characters are trapped in cycles of infidelity and self-deception, where their search for meaning through romantic engagement leads them to moments of intense alienation. Stoppard's treatment of love as an absurd endeavour reflects existentialist critiques of the search for authentic meaning in an indifferent world. The failures and betrayals within relationships highlight the futility of attempting to construct meaning out of transient, often superficial, connections.

For Henry and Annie, the notion of love is simultaneously idealized and disillusioned, reflecting an on-going tension between their desires for genuine connection and the reality of human frailty. Their affair, while initially full of passion and excitement, quickly unravels as both characters are forced to confront the contradictions and limitations of their emotions. Love, in this context, is not a redemptive force but an elusive and often painful pursuit. Henry's multiple relationships reveal a pattern of repetition, where he continually seeks something "real" and "authentic," only to be confronted with the same existential dissatisfaction. Betrayal becomes a mechanism through which characters engage in self-deception, attempting to reconcile their longing for intimacy with their inability to truly know or trust one another.

Stoppard's portrayal of love as absurd underscores the existentialist belief that human relationships, much like the quest for meaning in life, are marked by an inherent lack of certainty. The search for authentic love in *The Real Thing* is fraught with contradictions, as characters oscillate between genuine affection and the inevitable disillusionment that follows. Their interactions reveal the absurdity of attempting to find lasting meaning in a world where relationships are fleeting and often based on illusions. The existential challenge is not only about confronting the alienation within

relationships but also about recognizing that the pursuit of meaningful connection is itself a paradox—constantly sought but never fully realized.

Through the lens of existentialism, love in *The Real Thing* becomes a metaphor for the absurdity of human existence. The characters' efforts to find meaning in romantic entanglements are continually thwarted by the complexities of desire, betrayal, and personal limitation. Ultimately, Stoppard's exploration of love in the play reveals that human connections, while deeply desired, are often fragile and ephemeral, leaving individuals to confront the existential truth that meaning may not be found in others but must be created from within.

### **The Nature of Freedom and Choice**

Stoppard's treatment of freedom in *The Real Thing* is layered with ambiguity, reflecting the complex interplay between individual agency and external constraints. The characters' choices—whether in relationships, art, or life—are often driven by emotional impulses, societal expectations, and the limitations of their own understanding of what constitutes a meaningful existence. While Stoppard explores the freedom of the individual to choose their path, he simultaneously illustrates how those choices are constrained by the very nature of human relationships and the illusion of control.

The tension between freedom and fate is palpable throughout the play, as characters like Henry and Annie struggle to reconcile their desires for autonomy with the inevitable consequences of their actions. Henry, for instance, experiences a deep sense of existential dissatisfaction despite his personal freedom, leading him to question the significance of the choices he makes. In the realm of love and fidelity, his decisions—driven by both passion and rationality—serve only to entangle him further in a web of confusion and betrayal. His ability to choose his partner or his actions seems limitless, yet each choice brings him further from the sense of fulfilment or authenticity he seeks.

The play also reveals how the characters' emotional impulses and past experiences restrict their ability to make free, unencumbered decisions. Henry's relationships, for example, are constantly shaped by the echoes of his previous encounters—both romantic and professional—suggesting that freedom of choice is never fully free from the burdens of past decisions and societal conditioning. The characters' pursuit of happiness or meaning through choice often leads to self-deception, where the freedom to choose becomes entangled with the illusion of control.

Moreover, Stoppard emphasizes that true freedom may not necessarily lead to fulfilment or authenticity. The more the characters seek freedom in their personal and professional lives, the more they are confronted with the futility of their pursuits. Stoppard uses these moments to underline the existential idea that the search for meaning is often an exercise in futility, as individuals cannot escape the inherent contradictions of their desires, choices, and the circumstances that shape them. In this sense, freedom in *The Real Thing* is not a path to self-actualization but a reminder of the limitations and existential confusion that define the human condition.

Ultimately, *The Real Thing* explores the paradox that personal freedom, while seemingly a path to authenticity and fulfilment, and is often constrained by forces beyond the individual's control, whether emotional, relational, or societal. The characters' constant reassessments of their lives underscore the idea that freedom is not necessarily a route to genuine fulfilment, and that the nature of choice is inseparable from the absurdity of human existence.

### **Existentialism and Moral Inquiry in *Jumpers***

#### **The Role of Philosophy and Faith in the Postmodern World**

In *Jumpers*, Stoppard tackles the existential tension between reason, faith, and morality, drawing attention to the complexities and contradictions inherent in postmodern life. The play's central character, George, a former philosopher-turned-murderer, grapples with profound questions of moral certainty in a world where traditional values are breaking down and philosophical discourse appears increasingly disconnected from real-world action. George's personal turmoil reflects the broader existential dilemma of a society caught between intellectualism and the emotional, physical realities of existence.

George's intellectual background as a philosopher, steeped in the analysis of moral certainty and ethical theory, stands in stark contrast to the brutal act of murder he commits. This disjunction between reason and action is symbolic of a broader philosophical crisis in the postmodern world, where traditional systems of belief—whether philosophical or religious—are no longer sufficient to guide individuals through the complexities of modern existence. The play highlights the disintegration of traditional moral frameworks, leaving George, and by extension society, to confront the problem of morality in a world where absolute truths and certainties are increasingly unattainable.

The intellectual confusion and moral disintegration that characterize George's life in *Jumpers* mirror the postmodern existential crisis. His attempts to reconcile the philosophical ideals of reason and ethics with the chaotic realities of violence and human suffering are ultimately futile. The collision of George's philosophical convictions with the physical violence he commits underscores the absurdity of searching for meaning and moral clarity in a world that seems indifferent to human suffering and devoid of universal moral truths. The existential conflict in *Jumpers* thus centers on the failure of traditional modes of understanding—whether through reason or faith—to provide guidance in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world.

Stoppard uses the figure of George to explore how intellectual inquiry and faith, which were once seen as complementary, now stand in opposition, leaving individuals to confront a moral void. The play critiques the notion that philosophy alone can offer answers to the deeper questions of human existence, suggesting that reason and intellect are insufficient without a corresponding moral or emotional understanding. George's inability to reconcile his intellectual beliefs with his actions highlights the absurdity and disillusionment that often accompany the search for meaning in an irrational world.

In *Jumpers*, Stoppard invites the audience to consider how the erosion of moral and philosophical certainties has led to a moral and existential paralysis, where individuals are left to navigate a world of shifting values and unanswerable questions. Through George's internal struggles, the play critiques the postmodern condition, suggesting that the quest for meaning and morality is fraught with contradictions, and that in the absence of stable moral or philosophical frameworks, individuals are left to confront the chaos of existence alone.

### **The Question of Meaning in a World of Absurdity**

*Jumpers* underscores the absurdity of trying to derive meaning from a universe that seems indifferent to human suffering, reflecting the existential perspective that meaning cannot be found through traditional intellectual or moral systems. As the characters grapple with their moral and intellectual crises, their actions increasingly appear to be dictated by a chaotic blend of instincts, desires, and disillusionment. Stoppard uses the metaphor of the "jumper"—a person on the edge of a building, contemplating a leap—to symbolize the existential vertigo and disorientation that accompanies the search for meaning in an absurd and indifferent world. The characters, particularly George, are caught in a state of perpetual uncertainty, unable to find solid ground on which to stand.

The play's intellectual pursuits—ranging from philosophy to science and religion—serve as futile attempts to impose structure and meaning on a chaotic existence. While these fields once promised answers to the great questions of existence, in *Jumpers*, they provide no resolution or clarity. George's philosophical background, for instance, is rendered impotent in the face of his personal crisis, demonstrating the impotence of intellectualism when confronted with the irrationality and unpredictability of life. His transition from philosopher to murderer illustrates the disconnection between abstract reasoning and the messy, unpredictable nature of human experience.

Similarly, Stoppard highlights the characters' attempts to find meaning in religion, science, and relationships, all of which ultimately fail to provide lasting answers or comfort. The characters' futile intellectual engagement with these systems reflects the existential belief that attempts to derive meaning through external frameworks are inherently absurd. The absurdity is not just in the lack of concrete answers but in the characters' continued search for meaning despite the evidence that such answers may never come. This continual striving for meaning in the face of absurdity mirrors the core tenets of existentialism, where human beings must confront the futility of their quests and yet persist in the search for significance.

The "jumper" metaphor, in its depiction of an individual suspended between life and death, becomes a powerful symbol of the existential condition. It embodies the precariousness of human existence—constantly teetering on the edge of meaninglessness, yet unable to fully let go. The characters in *Jumpers* are metaphorically and literally on the edge, unable to find a stable place in the world. Stoppard suggests that the attempt to impose meaning on an indifferent universe is itself absurd, yet it is an essential part of the human experience. Through George's philosophical struggles and his ultimate disillusionment, the play critiques the human inclination to find structure and purpose in a world that offers no assurances.

Ultimately, *Jumpers* portrays the existential dilemma of trying to make sense of a chaotic world. The play shows that while reason, science, religion, and philosophy may offer insights into the nature of existence, they do not provide definitive answers to the fundamental question of meaning. In this sense, Stoppard reveals the absurdity of the human condition: that we are driven to search for meaning, even when we know that it may never be found, and yet we are

unable to stop asking. This tension between the search for meaning and the recognition of its inherent futility defines the play's existential critique.

### **Violence and the Search for Truth**

The violent actions in *Jumpers*—including George's involvement in a murder—serve as a powerful symbol of the metaphysical and intellectual violence at the heart of existential thought. The play suggests that violence, both physical and intellectual, is an expression of the characters' deep existential frustration as they attempt to make sense of a chaotic, meaningless world. George's act of murder becomes a symbolic manifestation of his internal conflict, where his inability to reconcile his philosophical beliefs with his lived experience leads him to violent action as an ultimate response to the absurdity he perceives around him.

This metaphorical violence is not only physical but also intellectual and moral, as the characters—particularly George—struggle to align their reason and actions. In the face of an indifferent universe, their desperate search for meaning leads them to extremes, and violence becomes a way of asserting control or forcing some kind of understanding in a world that refuses to provide it. George, once a philosopher, seeks to apply reason and logic to an inherently illogical world, but as his life unravels, he is pushed toward actions that defy rational explanation. The act of murder, then, becomes a manifestation of the breakdown between intellectual reasoning and the real-world consequences of human action, a tragic demonstration of the absurdity of trying to find coherence in a fragmented reality.

Moreover, the play portrays violence as a metaphor for the existential violence that arises when the search for truth becomes entangled with personal disillusionment. The characters' philosophical pursuits—whether through the lens of reason, faith, or emotion—are ultimately shown to be unable to provide concrete answers to the questions that plague them. The failure of traditional moral frameworks, both intellectual and religious, heightens the characters' sense of disillusionment, leading to a breakdown of communication and a resorting to violence as an expression of this frustration. For George, his philosophical inquiries into truth and morality have not only failed to yield answers but have instead contributed to his moral degradation and the loss of his own humanity.

Stoppard's portrayal of violence as an attempt to assert meaning in a meaningless world emphasizes the absurdity of the human condition. The play critiques the idea that violence—whether intellectual, emotional, or physical—can be a legitimate means of reconciling the contradictions inherent in existence. Instead, *Jumpers* suggests that violence only deepens the existential divide between reason and morality, leaving the characters in an even more fragmented, disillusioned state. The play presents a grim reflection on the absurdity of attempting to use violence—whether as a solution or a symbol—to overcome the existential void.

Ultimately, violence in *Jumpers* becomes a metaphor for the characters' search for truth in a world where meaning is increasingly unattainable. The absurdity of their actions—rooted in a desperate desire to impose order or logic on an irrational universe—reflects the existential critique of human efforts to impose rationality on the chaos of existence. Stoppard's use of violence highlights the play's central existential themes, showing that while humans may try to force meaning upon the world through intellectual or physical means, such efforts are doomed to fail in the face of an indifferent, meaningless universe.

### **Existentialism and Moral Inquiry in *Jumpers***

#### **The Role of Philosophy and Faith in the Postmodern World**

In *Jumpers*, Stoppard tackles the existential tension between reason, faith, and morality. The play's central character, George, a former philosopher-turned-murderer, grapples with questions of moral certainty in a world where traditional values are breaking down. The clash between George's intellectual convictions and the physical violence he perpetrates symbolizes the broader conflict in postmodernity between intellectual and emotional modes of understanding. The search for meaning in *Jumpers* is characterized by intellectual confusion and moral disintegration, reflecting the play's existential critique of a world where certainty is increasingly unattainable.

#### **The Question of Meaning in a World of Absurdity**

The play underscores the absurdity of trying to derive meaning from a universe that seems indifferent to human suffering. As the characters in *Jumpers* face a moral and intellectual crisis, their actions seem dictated less by logical reasoning and more by a chaotic mix of instincts, desires, and disillusionment. Stoppard uses the "jumper" metaphor to depict the existential vertigo that comes with trying to find meaning in an absurd world. The intellectual pursuits of the characters, whether in philosophy, science, or religion, offer no concrete answers to the fundamental questions about existence.

## Violence and the Search for Truth

The violent actions in *Jumpers*—including George's involvement in a murder—serve as a powerful symbol of the metaphysical and intellectual violence at the heart of existential thought. The play portrays violence as a desperate attempt to make sense of a meaningless world. The characters' struggle to reconcile their philosophical beliefs with their actions highlights the absurdity of attempting to reconcile reason with morality in an increasingly fragmented world.

## Comparative Analysis of Existential Themes in *The Real Thing* and *Jumpers*

### Identity and Self-Perception in Both Plays

Both *The Real Thing* and *Jumpers* explore the fragility of personal identity, with characters who struggle to define themselves within the context of their relationships or intellectual pursuits. The sense of self is shown to be unstable, subject to external pressures and internal contradictions. In *The Real Thing*, the personal upheavals of the characters mirror the existential uncertainty they experience about their true selves. In *Jumpers*, the intellectual and moral confusion embodied by George reflects the deeper existential crisis at play—his fractured sense of self is an expression of the wider chaos surrounding him.

### Love, Betrayal, and the Absurd

Love is a central theme in both plays, but its treatment in each reflects different aspects of existentialism. In *The Real Thing*, love is explored as both a means of fulfillment and a source of existential frustration. Stoppard's critique of romantic relationships reflects the absurdity of human connections and the inability to reconcile idealized love with the reality of human imperfection. In contrast, *Jumpers* tackles existential absurdity through the moral dilemmas and intellectual struggles of its characters, portraying a world where love is neither straightforward nor capable of providing meaning or resolution.

### Philosophy, Faith, and the Absurd in a Changing World

The philosophical underpinnings of *Jumpers* contrast with the emotional depth of *The Real Thing*, but both plays depict the disillusionment that arises from seeking meaning in an increasingly meaningless world. Stoppard critiques the inability of both intellectualism and romanticism to provide definitive answers in the face of human suffering and confusion. Both plays offer a meditation on the absurdity of existence and the difficulty of navigating a world.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press, 1954.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien, Vintage International, 1991.
- Duffy, L. "Rethinking Identity and Love: An Existentialist Reading of Tom Stoppard's Plays." *Journal of Contemporary British Theatre*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2021, pp. 146-160.
- Duggan, M. *Philosophy and Theatre: From Plato to Stoppard*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Esslin, M. *The Theatre of the Absurd: A Critical Study*. Vintage Books, 2017.
- Fleming, D. "The Absurdity of Love and Life: Existentialism in Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* and *Jumpers*." *Journal of Modern Theatre Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2021, pp. 103-118.
- Gussow, M. *Stoppard: The Logic of Absurdity*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Merrill, R. *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard: Existential Themes and Moral Inquiry*. Routledge, 2018.
- Stanley, G. *Existential Themes in Modern Drama: Stoppard and Beyond*. Routledge, 2019.
- Stoppard, Tom. *Arcadia*. Faber and Faber, 1993.
- Williams, E. "Existential Dilemmas in Postmodern Drama: The Case of Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* and *The Real Thing*." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2022, pp. 255-272.
- Wright, S. *Absurdity, Identity, and Meaning in Tom Stoppard's Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Stoppard, Tom. *Professional Foul. Every Good Boy Deserves Favour and Professional Foul*. Grove Press, 1978.