

Paul Tolliver Brown, “Quantum Theory and Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*.”
Configurations 29. 3 (2021): 241 – 265.

Paul Tolliver Brown’s article grapples with the relationship between the writings of Samuel Beckett and the principles of quantum physics. He argues that multiple works of Beckett interact with ideas emanating from the field of quantum physics, portraying the underlying failure of ontology and the fault lines in totalising systems. He establishes that Beckett was well versed with the contemporary developments of quantum physics, which impacted his literary imagination. The article focuses on Beckett’s *Endgame* and also inspects parts from his other works, namely *Murphy* (1938), *Molloy* (1951), *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Watt* (1953), and *The Unnameable* (1953). The article examines the representation of the ideas and principles of quantum physics as laid down by Werner Heisenberg, Neils Bohr and Erwin Schrödinger.

Brown highlights the failure of ontology in *Endgame*. Hamm and Clov, the lead characters of the play, cannot speak clearly about their condition. They have difficulty understanding their existence and the reality of the world they live in. Brown demonstrates how the play exposes the futility of the readers’ and the characters’ comprehension of being and identity. The varied possibilities in the plot portray the characters’ lack of factual determination. Relating such experiences to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and Niels Bohr’s theory of complementarity, the article highlights the “objectless condition and limitations of language” (248). Brown points out Beckett’s attempt to mock “traditional totalising systems” (244). The peculiarly abrupt dialogues portray the shortcomings of language systems. The lead characters see the manifestation of an anti-realist universe as the perceived reality around them disappears.

The uncertain existence of Hamm and Clov is compared to that of Erwin Schrodinger’s cat. Brown asserts that both quantum physicists and Beckett ironically have to rely on traditional formalist structures to portray the breakdown of these same structures. In a Derridean sense, Beckett relies on the narrative structure to critique it, and quantum physicists rely on principles of classical mechanics to critique the same. What both of these diverse fields have in common is the acceptance of limitations of over-arching totalising systems that these fields use to make sense of reality. The portrayal of the characters in the play mocks the idea of a stable reality and a linear series of events. In the play, Hamm constructs a grand narrative to anchor his existence to his perceived reality, but incalculable possibilities hamper his quest for order and meaning. The conversations between the characters strike at the core of our understanding of identity and the ability of language. The article demonstrates Beckett’s use of parody to showcase the limitations of speech and religion as ordered institutions. Beckett uses abrupt shifts in dialogue to point out the play’s discontinuity of time and narrative. The stage direction “pause” is used three hundred and sixty-six times to achieve discontinuity not only in content but also in form. Brown explains, “Each recurrence [of pause] creates fissures in the whole, discrete self-contained moments that consistently break up the action and disrupt the audience’s suspension of disbelief.” (259)

Brown describes the play as non-linear and chaotic, and foregrounds how the plot becomes stationary for a while before jumping to a new state of energy. This process repeats over and over again. The article describes the character pairs of Hamm – Clov and Nagg – Nell as acting like electrons in an atom; they are “for

audience members...a vivid physical manifestation of discontinuity” (260). The character pairs are also an allusion to Bohr’s theory of complementarity. Uncertainty is prominent throughout the play as Hamm and Clov are uncertain of their existence and survival. The discontinuous structure of the play complements this uncertainty. The play form itself provides a unique arena for examining the interaction of literature and quantum physics as they offer more avenues to experiment with content as well as form.

The article also highlights the interaction of quantum physics with the other works by Beckett. Brown focuses on the representation of the dual nature of particles and the discontinuity of events in *Watt*. *Molloy* reflects upon the properties of subatomic matter in a manner akin to the “virtual atomizing of the world” (245). The article details the allusions to discontinuous elements in *Murphy*. *The Unnameable* features an abrupt plot structure and discontinuous conversations, while *Waiting for Godot* explores the principle of complementarity and the breakdown of structures of meaning.

In the case of *Endgame*, Brown highlights the inability of traditional structures to bring order and meaning to the universe. He accurately comments that Beckett “creates fictional and dramatic worlds that are in remarkable accord with quantum mechanics” (264). Brown’s assessment of Beckett’s work is an important critical contribution to the field of literature and science. The interaction between the fields of quantum physics and literature demands more academic attention, and this article is an impactful scholarly contribution to the same.

Vaibhav Pathak

Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Mohali, India