

# ANALYZING ELEMENTS OF HUMOUR, IRONY AND SARCASM IN FRITZ KARINTHY'S REFUND

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## ABSTRACT

*Refund by Fritz Karinty is a farcical one-act play, a comedy of extravagant humour and improbable situations. It is full of humour which deals with an extraordinarily ludicrous situation. The play is about disgruntled protagonist Wasserkopf who is fit for nothing, jobless and does not have any money so he goes to the school to get his tuitions fees refunded as had not learnt anything worthwhile in his student life. The play is a satirical exposure of the inadequacies of the system of education that teaches only for degree but fails to inculcate the skills of practical application of knowledge. The play accepts an outdated system of education which in its endeavors to hold on to it weakens any pretensions to a change for the better. Using elements of humour and irony, the play exposes the inadequacy of the teaching methods and system. The play forces us to ponder our concept of the normal and the abnormal. The paper aims to analyse elements of humour, irony and sarcasm used by the author to emphasize the play's underlying critique of education system.*

**Key words:** humour, irony, satire, education

## Introduction

Drama is a multiple art wherein various other art forms converge: words, gestures, music, dance, scenery and stagecraft. It is this performative dimension present in drama that elevates it beyond being merely a part of literature.

One-act plays originated as preludes to full-length plays and were presented while latecomers were still arriving for the main entertainment. Soon some of these 'curtain raisers' proved to be an interesting as what followed, occasionally receiving more acclaim from the audience. Eventually they stood on their own and became a separate form of entertainment. Refund by Fritz Karinty is a farcical one-act play, a comedy of extravagant humour and improbable situations. It is full of humour which deals with an extraordinarily ludicrous situation. The play is about disgruntled protagonist Wasserkopf who was fit for nothing, jobless and didn't have any money so he went to the school to get his tuitions fees refunded as had not learnt anything worthwhile in his student life. The paper aims to analyse elements of humour, irony and sarcasm used by the author to emphasize the play's underlying critique of education system.

## About the Author

A poet and playwright, Fritz Karinty was a prominent figure in modern Hungarian literature. He was a great humorist as well. He studied to be a teacher but became a journalist. Karinty was primarily concerned with the quality of human life. His skill as a humorist in works like *Tou Write Like This*, *A Trip Around My Skull* and *Professor, Please* won him popular recognition as well as critical acclaim.

The play *Refund* brings out the best in Karinty's literary art: his wit, word play and extraordinary sense of parody. It deals with the humorous situation of a student named Wasserkopf, demanding a refund of his tuition fees from his school on grounds of useless and normless education given to him. The principal decides to humour him instead by pretending to entertain his claim. A battle of wits ensues in which the History, Geography and Physics masters manage to pass Wasserkopf with distinction, despite his preposterous answers calculated to make himself fail. The Mathematics Master tricks Wasserkopf into giving the 'right' answer and is thrown out in disgrace as if he was an object.

## Method

Using a qualitative method, the researcher has analyzed the form of words and sentences. The primary data source of this research was taken by the one-act play *Refund* script written by Fritz Karinthy. The play was adapted by American playwright Percival Wilde for a general audience. To obtain the necessary data in this study the researcher read the whole of the *Refund* script and analysed in detail the elements of humour, irony and sarcasm used in the play to satirise education system of his times.

- **Humour:** Humour simply evokes laughter and provides amusement as an end. It is the greatest blessing of human beings, it may enhance the primary body of communication, bring people cheerful and pleasant sensations, transform a person's mood, and even pave the way to a wonderful life (Hu Jintao, 2012). Humour consists predominantly in the recognition and expression of absurdities or peculiarities present in a situation or character.
- **Irony:** As a means to humour, irony is a rhetorical device used in literature. Ironist surprises the reader and thereby creates awareness in the mind of the reader. The essential feature of irony is the indirect presentation of a contradiction between an action or expression and the context in which it occurs. Using irony, author make his audience ponder about what has just been said, or to emphasize a central idea. Irony is an effective rhetorical tool as it allows readers to see the discrepancies the author is pointing out about humans or society. M. H. Abrams (1999:134-138) also explains type of irony, those are:
- **Verbal Irony:** Verbal irony is a use of language that explains the discrepancy between the statement and the truth. Verbal irony occurs when a speaker says something that contradicts what he or she is trying to say. It was purposefully created by the speaker and is at odds with how they feel and act. Simply told, it happens when a character says something that is not meant to be literal, which shows that the author used verbal irony (Abrams, 1999).

There are three types of irony in the literary genre:

- **Situational irony:** Situational irony arises when there is a difference between what is expected to happen and what happens. In movies, situational irony is a pretty great way to deceive the audience. For example, the audience thinks that the character played in a movie has a stupid character but is smart (Keraf, 2009).
- **Dramatic Irony:** In dramatic irony, the audience knows more than the characters. The characters' actions have a different meaning for them than they do for the audience, which creates tension and suspense.

If the intent of the irony is to mock, it is known as sarcasm. Sarcasm is a form of irony that is directed at a person, with the intent to criticise.

- **Sarcasm:** Sarcasm is a literary device and a rhetorical device meant to mock someone or something by saying something different than what the speaker really means. Therefore, it carries with it a negative connotation. Since sarcastic statements run contradictory to the speaker's intent, they can often be difficult to identify in written English and usually rely on spoken-word verbal cues (such as a mocking tone of voice for emphatic effect) and context. Sarcasm is more aggressive and cleverer than irony. Authors incorporate sarcasm to provide indirect characterization that highlights a character's beliefs and/or attitudes.

As a literary device, sarcasm allows an author to illustrate a character's feelings of frustration, anger, or ridicule, which is usually clandestine by either humor or irony. When used in literature,

sarcasm can invoke humour and demonstrate cynicism. When sarcasm is used throughout an entire piece of writing it is classified as satire.

- **Satire:** Satire is a type of wit that is meant to mock or ridicule to expose human vices or follies by use of hyperbole, understatement, sarcasm, and irony. Writers most commonly use this form of humor to expose social inadequacies in everyday life with an aim of inspiring change. Satire is usually meant to be funny but at a deeper level it aims to constructive social criticism.
- A paradox is a statement that contradicts itself but may also contain a kernel of truth. It is like oxymoron, in which two words are seemingly contradictory but somehow true. Using paradox, the writer resolves to reveal a deeper meaning behind a contradiction.

## Findings and Discussion

Refund is a play with the predominating element of humour in it. The play opens with a servant announcing the visit of Wasserkopf at his old school. The principal shows an indifferent and casual attitude not interested in students. He becomes active only when Wasserkopf reveals his intention of demanding a refund and embarrassing the school authorities. He even threatens to go to the education minister if justice is denied to him. Wasserkopf got this idea of refund when his friend named Leaderer sarcastically told him that he had learned nothing from school and should therefore seek a refund of his tuition fees:

“Wasserkopf: Absurd, is it? It’s a good idea. It’s such a good idea that I didn’t get it out of my own head, thanks to the education I got here, which made nothing but an incompetent ass out of me. My old classmate Leaderer gave me the idea not half an hour ago.” (Refund, 25)

Wasserkopf is eager to get back his tuition fees by any fair means or foul. This clashes with the determination of the principal and the teachers to foil his intention and outwit him.

The mathematics teacher is a shrewd person to understand Wasserkopf’s demand and convinces his peers to let Wasserkopf pass the re-examination by asking simple questions.

Wasserkopf, on the other hand, is determined to prove himself to be a failure, one who has learnt nothing from the school, including reasonable behaviour befitting a gentleman.

In the course of his talk with the Principal Wasserkopf adopts an attitude of insolence and impudence having little respect for his teachers. He deliberately uses abusive words like ‘scoundrel’, ‘cannibal’, ‘loafers’, ‘old- stick in the mud’ to address his teachers and enrage them.

His offensive remarks are intended to humiliate the Masters. They also reflect the callous behaviour of the Masters in his school days. But despite as decided earlier unanimously by the teachers, he is graded 'excellent' in manners and physical culture:

“The staff (bowing, heartily): How do you do?

Waseerkopf: Who the hell are you? Sit down, you loafers! (He grins, waiting to be thrown out.) ...

The Mathematics Master: That is good of you, and I am sure my colleagues will agree that the pupil Wasserkopf, who appears before us for re-examination, need not be examined in what appertains to gentlemanliness. Instead we waive examination in that subject, and mark him ‘Excellent’.

The Principal (understanding at once): Quite right! Quite right! (He writes) ‘Manners: Excellent’.” (Karinthy, 29)

Humour also arises when in response to such derogatory addresses to his teachers, Wasserkopf was addressed by them as 'Herr Wasserkopf':

"The History Master (moving to the centre of the table and indicating a chair facing it): Herr Wasserkopf, won't you be seated?

Wasserkopf (staring at him insolently, arms akimbo): To hell with a seat! I'll stand.

(The History Master is disconcerted, and shows it, but The Mathematics Master leaps into the breach.)

The Mathematics Master: Bravo! Excellent! Herr Wasserkopf wishes us to understand two things. He will dispense with a formal written examination and will answer orally. Good! He will not be seated; he will stand. Also, good. It follows that his physical condition is splendid, and I take it upon myself to award him an 'Excellent' in physical culture." (Karinthy, 30)

The roles have been reversed. The masters are ridiculously eager to please and accommodate Wasserkopf while the ex-student is determined to be as offensive as possible.

So, he matches the masters' strategy of not failing him by his own clever strategy. The irony is in the fact that Wasserkopf deserves to be passed for his sharpness despite his absurd answers that entitle him to be a failure. Yet it is these very answers that win him a pass.

The battle of wits arises in which the History, Geography and Physics masters manage to pass Wasserkopf with flying colours, despite his absurd answers calculated to make himself fail. Wasserkopf gives patently ridiculous answers. He is smugly sure that he will outsmart the masters in their game and so become eligible to get his money back. This ensues irony in the play at this point.

Much of the humour and irony arises out of the incongruity and preposterousness of the situation. Humour is also produced by the deliberately puerile questions and Wasserkopf's blatantly absurd answers. The ingenuity and efforts that have been made by both the student and his teachers into the framing of questions and answers also generates humour.

When the re-examination begins and Wasserkopf is questioned by the History Master on how many years the 'Thirty Years War' lasted. Even though the answer is there within the question, Wasserkopf says that the war lasted for seven meters. When the history master is unable to prove his wrong answer right, mathematics master aids him. He argues that according to Einstein's relativity theory years can be represented in terms of meter and the actual war took place only for seven years. Further the History master elaborates:

"The History Master: Because actual warfare took place only during half of each day - that is to say, twelve hours out of the twenty-four - and the thirty years at once become fifteen. But not even fifteen years were given up to incessant fighting, for the combatants had to eat - three hours a day, reducing our fifteen years to twelve. And if from this we deduct the hours given up to noonday siestas, to peaceful diversions, to non-warlike activities - [He wipes his brow.]" (Karinthy, 32)

The humour continues when next, the physics master asks him whether clocks in the church become smaller if one walks away from it or is it because of optical illusion. Wasserkopf calls the master as an ass in answer. But the answer is accepted by the master as the correct one. Because an ass doesn't have any imaginative powers as it is a sad creature. So, it must have an optical illusion and Wasserkopf has given a metaphorical answer:

"The candidate has given us a most excellent answer in calling our attention to an animal whose expression is melancholy because its senses are deceptive; or, to put it in another way: because the

apparent decrease in size of an object, in this case a clock, is to be ascribed to optical illusion. The answer was correct. I certify, therefore, that the candidate may be given 'Very Good' in physics.

The Principal [writing]: 'Physics: Very Good.' (Karinthy, 34)

The same humour continues when the geography master asks him to name the capital city of the same name Brunswick, a German province. Wasserkopf answers as 'same'. The master proves the answer to be the correct one by claiming the city has another name as 'Same':

"The Geography Master: The answer is correct. The name of the city is 'Same.' Gentlemen, the candidate shows exceptional knowledge of the history of the city of Brunswick. There is a legend that om, as the Emperor Barbarossa was riding into the city, he met a young peasant girl who was munching a bun, and whose mouth was full. He called out to her, 'God bless you. What is the name of this city?' and the peasant girl answered, 'Same to you, sir.' Then she stopped, because her mouth was full, and the Emperor laughed, and said 'Ho, ho! So, the name of the city is "Same"?' And for many years, thereafter, he never referred to Brunswick except by that title.

[He turns, to wink solemnly at his colleagues.] The answer is excellent. The candidate is entitled to a grade of 'Excellent' in geography." (Karinthy, 35)

Mathematics Master emerges as the master mind behind the scheme to checkmate Wasserkopf. He sets up the final 'trap' for Wasserkopf. He asks one easy question to which Wasserkopf responds intentionally with a ridiculous answer. The teacher declares that as the given answer is wrong and he has failed, he become eligible for his refund. Wasserkopf is asked to calculate the amount due to him. He is right to the smallest detail. The tables are finally turned on Wasserkopf with the shrewd Mathematics Master congratulating Wasserkopf for his accurate calculation as he declares "That was my difficult question".

One can notice paradox in the outcome of the re-examination. Wasserkopf has failed the real exam that demanded vigilance and quick-wittedness on his part. He is passed for his ability to do arithmetical calculation but he fails to calculate the Master's mind. He is passed for what he does not possess-common-sense and attentiveness. He fails because he is good at calculation.

Wasserkopf is unceremoniously dismissed from the school and thrown out in disgrace as if he was an object. The Principal and Masters congratulate themselves on their shrewdness. There is a dash of irony and sarcasm in this last statement-

"In the future it will be our proudest boast that in this school a pupil simply cannot fail!" (Karinthy, 39)

This statement reveals completely distorted values. The teachers are not at all concerned with the quality of education they impart. They are totally uncritical of the value of what they teach and whether it really serves the students to face life. This reflects the superficiality of their aims which consists in simply maintaining the apparently excellent record of all students passing all examinations. This concluding remark underlines the hollowness of the entire system where the ability to outsmart others has replaced any meaningful functioning.

## Conclusion

The play satirically exposes the inadequacies of the system of education that teaches only for degree but fails to inculcate the skills of practical application of knowledge. It showcases teachers' wit and unity in the face of an ill-natured old pupil Wasserkopf who returns to his old school with an absurd demand. The teachers do not emerge as the guardians or torch bearers of sound academic values. They are not at all concerned with the quality of education they impart. They are totally uncritical of the value of what they

teach and whether it really serves the students to face life. They ignore the shortcomings in themselves and the educational system. They are only interested in outsmarting their opponent. The final irony of the play is that while Wasserkopf is humiliated, the readers feel no satisfaction in the victory of the teachers, either.

The play accepts an outdated system of education which in its endeavors to hold on to it weakens any pretensions to a change for the better. Using elements of humour and irony, the play exposes the inadequacy of the teaching methods and system. In *Refund*, Fritz Karinthy deftly blends humor, irony, and sarcasm to ridicule the educational system. The humor in the play rises from its absurd premise—Wasserkopf. Wasserkopf is an ex-student who returns to his old school demanding a refund for his tuition fees on the basis of worthless education received from school. His exaggerated incompetence, combined with the teachers' quick-witted responses, creates a series of comedic exchanges that keep the audience engaged.

The situational comedy is heightened by the exaggerated behavior of the characters. Wasserkopf desperately tries to prove his own ignorance to get the tuition fees back. On the other hand, the teachers' also plot clever scheme to outwit him and prove him intelligent.

Irony is evident in the reversal of expectations—rather than failing Wasserkopf as he desires, the teachers manipulate their questioning to ensure he passes with flying colors.

Irony plays a significant role in shaping the play's message and comedic effect. Irony is evident in the reversal of expectations. Wasserkopf, expecting to fail, is instead declared highly intelligent by the very teachers whose education he dismisses as useless. The teachers cleverly manipulate their questioning and give him full marks for absurd and incorrect answers. Instead of refunding his fees, the teachers rather make sure that Wasserkopf passes with flying colors. Furthermore, dramatic irony is present, as the audience is aware of the teachers' plan to outsmart Wasserkopf while he remains unaware to their malice intentions.

Another key element, Sarcasm, is woven throughout the dialogue in the play. Sarcasm is evident in the teachers' exaggerated politeness and mock-serious tones as they authenticate Wasserkopf's ridiculous answers to declare him pass. Their false admiration for his nonsensical answers adds a layer of sharp wit to the dialogue. The school authorities do not outrightly reject Wasserkopf's demand but, through sarcasm and calculated reasoning, turn the table to their advantage. The play forces us to ponder our concept of the normal and the abnormal. At a deeper level in the play, Karinthy actually parodies the education system that can neither evaluate true merit, nor prepare its pupils for life. Through these elements, Karinthy not only entertains the audience but also subtly critiques educational system and the value of formal education, leaving a lasting impression of wit and satire. Though written hundred years ago, the play *Refund* remains a timeless and entertaining piece that resonates with audiences even today.

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